

MEL KEEGAN

NARC

4



APHELION

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PARC #4

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

APHELION

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PARC: APHELION

CHAPTER ONE

Stray shrapnel was everywhere, windmilling at high velocity as if it had been ejected from a geocannon, and catastrophe was only a matter of time. Jerry Stone glanced sidelong at his partner's face, which reflected the weird primary colors of the dock tug's instruments. The red master alarm lights had just winked on, and the slate gray eyes were filled with witchfires.

Before he and Jarrat had even registered the warning lights, they felt the deep bell-chime of collision through the whole airframe, and Stone smothered a curse. The ice-cold fist clenching on his belly might have been his own nerves tightening or Jarrat's, and with a deliberate effort he slammed the empathic shield up between them.

A klaxon howled deeper in the body of the tug, where the pilot had gone back to kill time with a cigarette and the vidfeed from GlobalNet. On the distorted edge of hearing, Stone picked up a voice bellowing, raw with animal fear. He might have hurried aft, shouting for the man to get back to the cab, get off the engine deck, but before he could even turn he heard the heavy *thud* of pressure doors sealing. He did not even know the pilot's name.

The clipper *Cygnus Stardust* was forty minutes overdue at the Mawson Dock, and she was still holding off, twenty kilometers out, while a swarm of Tactical squad flyers formed up between her and the docks. She was idling in high orbit, vulnerable as a sleeping whale. From the cramped cockpit of the dock tug she looked like a spaceborne carnival, a kilometer-wide display of lights flung across the spectrum.

An hour ago Jarrat and Stone had been aboard, and as red telltales winked on among the instruments before him, Stone swore softly. He and Jarrat would have been safer if they had stayed aboard, waited it out, but Central's orders were specific. Bill Dupre's impatience put them on this tug, shuttling over to the NARC docks — or not, Stone thought acidly. The NARC facility was on an orbit only slightly higher than the clipper dock, and with every Tactical squad standing by the *Stardust*, the lanes between the liner and both the platforms were a mess.

The lights of Venice glittered in the velvet darkness of the planet's night side. Dawn was two hours away in the city, and people would wake up to an unusual furor on GlobalNet. Every news feed was jammed with footage from the camera ships covering the protest. The screens in the transit lounge aboard the *Stardust* were busy with live video, and Stone had watched the pictures with a muted disgust as he and Jarrat waited for the tug.

Air traffic would continue to hold off the clipper until Tactical regained some semblance of control. The Cygnus Lines dock was blockaded by a fleet of gnat-sized civilian craft, and the danger of accident was massive, especially when Tactical deployed. A few pilots pulled out before they could be imaged and ID'd; bloody-minded determination seemed to consume others, and minor collisions were commonplace as transports refused to be moved along. A few deliberately rammed the Tactical squads.

Complete catastrophe had been imminent for long minutes, and Stone knew Tac Fire Control, Hazmat, and Search and Rescue would be scrambling to launch out of cities as far apart as Venice and Hudson. The protest vessels had abandoned the marked traffic lanes and milled about between the tocamac-shape of the clipper dock and the elongated spindle-and-discs form of the NARC docks; and framed in the screen as a GlobalNet remote camera zoomed for a grainy, long-range closeup, was the *Athena* herself.

"What the hell was *that* —?" Kevin Jarrat reached over the back of the empty copilot's seat and punched up a schematic of the tug. "Christ, I don't believe this, Stoney." He zoomed on the plot of the ship. "Look at this! We're depressurizing."

The preliminary damage report scrolled rapidly through one side of the screen while the other displayed a wide shot of the impact site. The tug had taken a forty-tonne chunk of white-hot, razor-prowed and radiotoxic shrapnel in the belly, the worst place she could be hit. Like any dock tug, she was all engines, with little superstructure, no real armor, and only a comparatively tiny cab module to accommodate a regular crew of four. Two pilots and two techs were normally aboard. On this flight she had been pressed into shuttle service, and a single standby pilot was dispatched to dawdle over to the *Stardust*, pick up the NARC officers and deliver them to the carrier. The task had looked trivial.

Pressure doors continued to slam and lock, and the flight computer was murmuring in its androgynous and infuriatingly calm tones. "Warning. Hull breach. Warning. Pressure seals 7 through 9 are enabled. Warning. Reactors are compromised. Spill in progress. Warning. Number 6 Engine is ruptured. Warning —"

"We better get out," Jarrat said tersely. "She'll be hot as hell in three minutes. The pressure doors are holding her, but we're leaking like a sieve from the port-side reactor."

Stone leaned closer to read the instruments. "We might be able to contain it, buy ourselves some time."

"See what you can do." Jarrat's voice was bleak. "I'll go back and prime a bug-out pod. If I can," he added in a rasp as he slipped a comset over his ear and stepped out of the cockpit. The body of the tug was lit in bloody hazard lights, and as Kevin vanished into the murk Stone heard him calling, "Tug 757 to NARC-*Athena*. This is 9.4, *Athena*, respond, goddamn it!"

He might have been talking to himself. No signal from the carrier was getting through, and Stone was not surprised. Space was a mess, and he

could only guess that the tug itself was off the air. The aerials were more than likely mangled, and Jarrat knew it. Still, he kept calling as he made his way aft, and Stone placed comm options a close second on his list of priorities.

The tug's whole airframe had twisted through a few degrees when the engine ruptured, and he was as keenly aware as Jarrat, the escape pods might be functional, yet jammed in their cradles. He swung out the pilot's seat, dropped into it, and settled a comset into his ear as he shifted the display into damage control mode.

Jarrat's voice whispered, just in his audio range, still hailing the carrier, but Stone did not need that small contact to know where his partner was. The empathic shield had slammed up, but the cutting edge of Jarrat's emotions and sensations scythed through it like shards of broken glass. With a deliberate effort he set the phantom sensations firmly into their own perspective and turned his attention to the instruments.

His eyes skimmed the meager resources he could access, and he swore again. Not nearly enough was available to secure the tug and wait for a pickup. The best he could hope for was to slow the rot, and keys pattered under his fingers as he launched the maintenance drones.

They had already auto-prepped in the instant of the collision, and their rudimentary brains were loaded with data from a mainframe that considered itself in dire jeopardy. Four industrial drones, each the size of a Skytruck, dropped out of the blister pods in the flanks of the beleaguered engine deck, and Stone saw green blips as their propulsion came online.

"Drones away," he said to the comm, "for what it's worth. Number 6 engine is bleeding coolant like the proverbial stuck pig ... we're starting to sizzle, Kevin, and there's not much I can do about it." His hands had splayed over the flight controls, like those of a musician. "I'm trying to get hold of maneuvering. Anything. We could have a lick of emergency thrust left."

It might be enough to shift the tug's attitude and set up a gentle drift, which would send the coolant streaming away into space rather than bathing the side of the wreck. On the aftscan CRT, he was watching the belches of incandescent gas from the ruptured engine. Insidious as silver-gray fog, they wreathed the rear of the cab module and crept into the cavities where the hull had peeled open like a can.

From the remaining seven engines, he saw only negative data. They had autoscrammed to save themselves when one of the three reactors overloaded and began to spill. All engines were locked down tight, and the two surviving Prometheus units had initiated self-preservation routines. The housings were constantly flooding and purging borex vapor, at the temperature of liquid nitrogen. The machines were nominally intelligent, with a tiny self-awareness. They knew they were in trouble, and they knew they were so close to the Venice civilian docks that any 'excursion' here would exact a horrific toll in human life. Their priority was to shut down fast and survive, and Stone did not even attempt to retask them.

He was concentrating on the emergency thrusters — one-shot, solid-fuel

engines which were pathetically underpowered, and the last resort the tug possessed. Every power system was fried crisp, and he hunted for almost a minute to find a route via which he could even access the thrusters. Jarrat was still hailing the carrier, and the edge in his voice was like a knife.

"How do the pods look?" Stone said softly to the comm.

"Lousy," Jarrat told him flatly. "Two are already contaminated. One's damaged, won't even boot up, and the only one that's working is jammed in the cradle." He paused, and Stone heard him breathing heavily over the comm, as if he were trying to physically rock the pod, loosen it. "No go," he said moments later, in a rasping voice. "You can forget the pods, Stoney. And the carrier's not answering."

"I don't think we're transmitting." Stone glanced at the telemetry from the drones. They were deep in the coolant stream, half-visible on the aftscan, and assessing the damage with machine speed, and the machine's carelessness of risk. All four would be destroyed, and if they could seal the rupture in Number 6's coolant lines, Stone would count the cost cheap. He was intent on the CRT at his elbow, and when the data he had been waiting for crawled into the screen — late and painfully slow — he took a sharp breath.

"I felt that," Jarrat said into the loop. "Stoney!"

"I can get us some emergency thrust," he said quickly. "Not enough to shunt us home, but enough to get us out of the spill and the coolant stream from 6. Buys us a few more minutes."

"Do it." Jarrat was panting, and Stone felt the push and pull of his muscles, the prickle of his sweat. "A few minutes might cover it."

The escape pods might be no good, but Jarrat was onto something. Stone held his breath as he jockeyed power to the thrusters and set the igniters. The tanks were full, the power couplings looked viable, and he threw a prayer into the void as he hit the igniters.

If he had been expecting the kick in the back of real acceleration, he was disappointed. The thrusters were rudimentary, a fallback to technology so ancient, malfunction was virtually impossible: simple trans-fluorine propellant in four high-pressure tanks, a reaction chamber, an engine bell, and the most primitive electrical igniter. Stone hit the master arm and hoped some soldier's god might be listening.

Green lights winking on among the flocks of red warnings were his only sign that the thrusters had come online. Four rockets were burning in the pods under the tug's crushed belly, and as he pushed up out of the seat his eyes were fixed on the attitude indicators.

The AI had stabilized the tug in the moments after the collision, before two out of three grav generators autoscrammed. The ship had been drifting toward the *Stardust* at a few kilometers per hour, and now she was rolling. She began to drift away from the liner as he watched. Despite the drones' best efforts, she was still spewing coolant and raw fuel, but the goutts of sizzling, corrosive vapor were now jetting away from the ruined hull. One of the drones spun about and applied itself to decontamination of the blasted

cavity. The effort was futile, but it bought Jarrat and Stone a few minutes, and Stone did not intend to waste them.

He was moving as Jarrat shouted over the comm. "Stoney, get back here! Move!"

"Moving," he said against the mic. "Where are you?"

"Forget about the pods," Jarrat told him. "I just pulled out the deck plates, and take a look what I found."

A shape was mobile before him in the bloody murk, and Stone headed toward it just as Jarrat stooped and turned on a pair of feeble worklights in the under-deck lockers.

"There's not a lot of power in the cells," he warned. "Whoever stored this kit didn't bother to recharge it ... which makes sense, when you look at the rest of this crap. You'd clean it down before you bothered to put it on charge. Thing is, nobody's gotten around to either job yet."

In the recess at his feet was a mass of kevlex plates, spattered and gouged, and Stone's nose wrinkled on the reeks of a dozen chemicals, some of them borderline hazardous. He recognized armor at once, and a moment later he made out two helmets, two pairs of gauntlets. The suits were well-used, dirty, battered. None of which mattered to Stone, so long as they were sound, and the packs showed useful levels of gas and power.

"Tug 757 to NARC-*Athena*," Jarrat repeated for the twentieth time. "Respond, please." Nothing. He gave Stone a hard look, and the weird shadows hollowed his face. "We're out of options."

"The thrusters came online," Stone said tersely as he reached for the gauntlets, picked them up with his fingertips and worked both hands into them before he touched anything else. "The drones are plugging the leaks and hosing us down with borex, but the truth is, we're probably starting to sizzle right now. We don't have long."

"And we're not transmitting," Jarrat added as he wriggled his own hands into the other pair of gauntlets and reached back for the armor's breastplate. "I'm guessing, the aerials are in bad shape."

"They could be gone," Stone speculated. "We could have a better chance if we're out. Run the suit broadcast to maximum, maybe call the *Stardust*, get them to bounce a signal to the carrier."

Jarrat's teeth bared in a grin that was closer to grimace. "We're on the same page," he muttered as he dumped down the breastplate and called up the pack's display. It lit, flickered, stabilized, and he gave a low whistle. "There's about twenty minutes left in this, if I'm lucky."

"Which is about twenty minutes longer than we've got if we stay aboard," Stone said grimly. He was peering at the other suit, and as the display steadied he read off, "Fifteen minutes dead. And I do mean, dead."

"Give me that suit," Jarrat said quietly. "Come on, Stoney, it makes sense. I don't have your body mass, not by fifteen kilos. Gives me an extra few minutes at the end ... which is all it takes, and you know I'm right."

For a split second, Stone knew, Kevin was back in an alley in the

spaceport city of Chell. Though the empathic shields were still up, he felt a rush of dread, white-hot pain, the primal fear of a man who recognized the face of death when he looked into it. Then Jarrat was in command again, the memories were locked down tight, and he was hauling out boots, helmets, backplates. Only Stone would ever be aware of the moment's flash of post trauma syndrome.

And Kevin was right — they had no time to waste, especially not in fretting over scenes that were long past. Stone did not even squander the time and breath it took to curse. In the back of his mind was a chrono, counting down, and by any calculations they were out of time already.

The suit was crude by comparison with riot armor, but it was sturdy. The joints were smart-sealed, like the riot armor, but the plates were much thicker, the helmet, gauntlets and boots comparatively clumsy, and every part of every surface was corroded, burned, pitted. This armor was probably as old as Jarrat and Stone were themselves, and it was not well cared for.

The seals self-formed around Stone's knees, hips, waist, elbows, and the display in the helmet blinked green each time, telling him he was secure. Jarrat hung the too-heavy shoulder plates for him, and the suit auto-pressurized with a serpent hiss of inert system gases.

With the helmet in his hands, Stone waited for Jarrat to finish suiting, and he breathed for the first time in a minute when he heard the same hiss, telling them the second suit was also secure. "Fifteen minutes," he warned.

"Maybe twenty," Jarrat argued. "You know you can never measure down to the last bar in a tank ... and like I said, I don't have the same body mass. You shove Gil Cronin into this suit and, damnit, he wouldn't last *twelve*." He tucked the oversized helmet under his arm. "Time we got out." He paused then, frowning at the engineers' suits. "These things might stop enough of the spill, keep us safe long enough for a pickup, if we stay aboard."

"Then again," Stone growled, "they might be as dodgy as they look. Given the choice, I wouldn't trust them."

"So we bug out," Jarrat agreed.

"And get a call through to the *Stardust*," Stone added. "God knows, there's enough Tactical squads in the air, standing by her."

They were moving even then, and as Stone had guessed, the airlock right behind the cockpit was the only one still operating. The mid-body 'locks had shut down when every power system in the tug fried itself, and the aft 'locks were behind the pressure doors, in the ruptured compartments. Stone had the helmet on, visor up, as they stepped into the last airlock, and his eyes skimmed swiftly over the instruments.

"Suit radio's okay," he mused, "I just don't have much power to boost it. They'll either hear or ... not."

"They'll hear," Jarrat said shortly. He was clipping a handful of cargo tie-downs to the tool bracket on his left thigh plate. "Gene knows which tug we were on, and they'll know she was hit. Have a little faith. Set our mass to twenty kilos?" Stone nodded, already configuring his own suit. Jarrat locked

the helmet down, and watched Stone drop his own visor. "Good to go?" His voice whispered over the helmet comm, and again Stone nodded. Jarrat held out his left hand; his right hovered over the 'purge' switch, and as Stone's gauntleted right hand clenched onto his armored forearm, he hit the control.

Blue spinners kicked on overhead, a siren wailed, but in seconds the 'lock was purged and any sound became vacuum silent. They poised on the lip of the airlock and, in tandem, kicked off hard and ramped the repulsion into overboost. The tug fell away beneath them, and Stone craned his neck, hunting for orientation while Jarrat secured the suits together at the ankle with the tiedowns.

Two meters of loose cable between them allowed them to maneuver individually, but they could not drift apart, and Stone approved. He had just looked at the fuel situation for his jets, and the story told by the gauges was as sorry as the rest of his suit. He and Kevin had no fuel, power or time to spare, chasing each other as they drifted.

Overhead, as he hunted for orientation, and as their attitude stabilized, was the bright surface of Darwin's World, cloud-flecked, blue and green. At a glance he could pick out the coastline where Venice sprawled along the Neptune Gulf. Harry Del's house was there, in the Fairview sector, with a view of the same water. Off Stone's left hand was the distant yet still massive half-tocamac of the civilian facility, the Mawson Docks, where the *Stardust* should have been berthed. Instead, the protest fleet swarmed like army ants, enraged into hyperactivity. Beneath his boots was a cluster of lights, bright though they were far-off, and he knew he was looking at the starclipper herself, surrounded by a squadron of Tactical flyers assigned to shield her from the protest fleet. Above the civvy dock and away to his right was the rods-and-cylinders structure of the NARC docks, and if they had been a little closer, they might have glimpsed the *Athena*.

The carrier was berthed, shut down and idle, in the middle of major maintenance work. She was vulnerable, Stone thought fleetingly as he watched the protest fleet mill about in dangerous confusion. Several collisions had already confused the area with hotspots of sizzling shrapnel and drifting wreckage. The demise of the tug was only one accident; surveying the carnage between the wreck and the dock, Stone saw at least four others, and one of them involved a Tactical squad.

He and Jarrat were drifting gently toward the *Stardust*, out of the corrosive and radiotoxic debris, and he was reading the helmet instruments when Jarrat said, "We're not too hot ... suit integrity's decent. Forgive me if I don't talk too much. Trying to conserve my breathing mix."

"Copy *that*," Stone said acidly. "Don't talk at all, Kevin. At our rate of drift, we're never going to get near the clipper before we've sucked these tanks dry. I'm going to put some power behind a transmission, see if I can raise the *Stardust*."

Jarrat's only response was a wry feeling which rippled through the empathic link between them as Stone let the shield fall by a fraction. And then

Stone felt a crackle of something that was not quite dread, and he did not need to be telepathic to know what Jarrat was thinking. They could die here — as surely as they could have died in the inferno on a gantry on the Bartusiak cargo field, south of Eldorado, two weeks ago.

They were pushing their luck, and they knew it. With a grimace Jarrat could easily feel, Stone turned his attention to the suit's grudging power cells. He bled off what he thought he could spare and fed it into the comm system. As he did, he heard the chaos of the civilian frequencies, and quickly switched up to the high bands to get away from the furious chatter.

As he switched up to Channel 77, the NARC security band, he heard a thready film of sound on the very edge of his hearing, and he cranked the gain to maximum. "*Athena, Athena*, this is Raven 7.1, receiving you strength two. Can you boost your signal? I don't have a lot of power."

In moments the audio doubled its strength and Mischa Petrov's voice barked, "Jesus God, where are you? You're not on the tug!"

"We jumped," Stone said dryly. "She's a wreck, Petrov, hot as hell, and she'll take us down with her. Get a fix on this position."

"I've got you." Petrov paused to listen to another channel, and then was back. "You're not safe, 7.1, it's gone to crap out there. Where's 9.4?"

"About two meters away, at the end of a tether cable," Stone told him. "You're probably reading the both of us as one object. Listen, we need a pickup, and it better be fast. The bug-out pods were a no-go. We found a couple of engineers' rigs, but these suits are pretty beat-up, and they weren't serviced before they were stowed. We're looking at twenty minutes, tops, then it's all academic."

"Shit," Petrov whispered. "Blue Raven is on launch procedures, but I'm liaising with Tactical, if you can believe this crap. They've had me swear up and down I won't launch a damn' eggcup, because there's so many civvies in the air, the bastards are beating crap out of each other by accident." His voice was sour. "I'm just the humble XO on this ship, fuckitall. I don't have the authority to launch. You want me to call Tac, organize you a squad?"

"No," Stone said sharply. He had been watching the protest fleet and the Tactical squadron, and his eyes had narrowed on the firefly tail flares. "It's about to get a lot nastier out here. Scan the protest fleet, Petrov. We're close enough to see the pilots' eyeballs, and I'm watching a bunch of these bozos lining up to make a move on the clipper."

"You're shitting me," Petrov muttered. And then, "You're not. There's a flight of seven aircraft, headed for the Cygnus *Stardust*."

"Let Tactical earn their money," Jarrat rasped across the loop. "Log us in, Mischa. Inform all units, Raven Leaders are in the field. And launch the goddamned gunship!"

"Thank Christ for that," the Russian breathed. "Blue Raven, launch. Pilot Lang, lock onto 7.1's signal and bring Raven Leaders aboard. Acknowledge."

"Blue Raven is away," Evelyn Lang's voice said crisply into the loop. "Target acquisition is go. We have them, *Athena*. I'm going to loop way up

above the civvy traffic, come back in under the clipper for a clean pickup. Tac's going to go ballistic, but tell them we're cool."

"Tell them," Stone added, "to look after their own business. How long, Eve? We're running on empty here."

Some edge in his voice must have alerted her. All trace of banter was gone as she said, "Twelve minutes, Stoney — *Cap*. Blue Raven 6 and 7 are suited up and in the jump bay. We'll just reel you in, fish on the line. You know the drill ... chill, now. You gotta spread your consumables as thin as they'll go."

It was the medevac pilot talking now. Stone heard it in her voice. For how many, like himself and Jarrat at this moment, had survival been pinned to that voice? Eve Lang was the best in a difficult business. She was still talking softly, though not to him, and he listened as she murmured, "Blue Raven gunship to *Athena*. Infirmary, standby. 7.1 and 9.4 are coming in hot. Blue Raven medics to the jump bay, asap."

To Stone's surprise, Kip Reardon answered. "Infirmary, online. What goes on, Eve? You said 7.1 and 9.4 —?"

"They were caught in the dogfight out here, Doc," she said evenly. "I'm tracking them to the last meter, but you know the situation. It's a little crazy. We're flying high and wide of this goddamned regatta ... and lucky to be in the air at all. Tac didn't want to see us here."

"Captain's prerogative, Kip," Stone said into the loop. "Sorry if I don't chat. Not enough molecules left in these tanks to yawn."

It was scant exaggeration. The gauges already registered perilously close to zero and his power cells had drained much faster than he had hoped. The suit was very cold. He opened a slender channel in the empathic shield and felt Jarrat's gathering chill, and the beginnings of dizziness.

"Still with me, kiddo?" he whispered.

"Still," Jarrat rasped. "Like she said, chill. Save it, mate."

"Eight minutes ... I'm cutting a tighter flightpath," Lang said into the loop. Behind her voice, Stone could hear the Blue Ravens crosstalking in the jump bay. The medics were setting up, Cronin and Ramos were suited, the bay was already purged. And Lang was shaving her flightpath much closer than she had intended.

It was Gill Cronin — as always monitoring the gunship's flight systems — who said acerbically, "Tac's going to go apeshit."

"Screw Tac," Lang said in succinct tones. "They're out of jurisdiction, and they bloody know it. What do you think the *R* in NARC stands for? And if this ain't a riot, I've never seen one."

She made a good point. Stone felt the tickle of Jarrat's chuckle, heard it whisper over the comm, but Kevin was deliberately barely breathing. He was cold, his gauges were flatlining, but enough remained in the tanks for him to be breathing something, and it would last so long as he deliberately slowed his rate of respiration, heartbeat, everything. Stone had opened the empathic link and could feel him slipping into the early stages of hibernation.

"You all right, Kevin?" he murmured to the comm. Jarrat answered only with a waft of warmth through the bond.

The technique was ancient. It would have been familiar to warriors and adepts centuries before the advent of the steam engine, and Stone knew exactly what Jarrat was doing. Even Tactical rookies were taught the rudiments of biofeedback, and the NARC recruit would become a master before he or she was assigned to field work. Stone had fallen back on these tricks many times, and he left Jarrat to work undisturbed. Concentration, focus, was the key.

"Blue Raven," he whispered into the highband pickup.

"Six minutes," Lang told him. "I can't cut it any closer unless I drive right through the traffic lanes. Give me the authorization, and I'll do it ... but you answer to Dupre!"

The decision was Jarrat's, and though Stone was reluctant to intrude on his concentration he murmured, "Six minutes, Kevin?" His answer was a waft of warmth, almost a color, some swirled, half-blended shade of blue, green and gold. "Six minutes will do," Stone told Lang, and he was looking at his own gauges. He also was beginning to flatline, and he took one last deep breath before he resigned himself to the same discipline. His power levels were too low to permit an acquisition beam, but he left the highband comm open, transmitting a bare whisper of carrier wave.

The visor was scratched, gouged, and he seemed to be looking at the panorama of Darwin's World, the docks, the civilian fleet, through a wicked tangle of graffiti. He could see the wrecked tug high above, lit glaringly by the face of the planet, and from this angle the damage was shocking. He might have wondered how the tug had held itself together so long.

And then he glimpsed another ship, and the languor into which he had deliberately been drifting was gone in an instant. Full consciousness snapped back on, as if he had hit a switch. His voice was a bark.

"Blue Raven, scan the wreck of the tug!"

Cronin was on the air at once. He recognized the edge in Stone's voice. "I'm looking at it, Cap. Problem?"

"There's another ship tucked in behind it," Stone said tersely, "using it for cover."

"I don't see no second ship," Cronin mused.

"Like the man said," Joe Ramos said into the loop, "the bastard's using the wreckage for cover. What'cha seein' Cap?"

At that moment Stone was watching the high engines and porcupine spines of aerals pop up over the side of the ruined tug. "Looks like a civvy transport," he said slowly. "Heavy ... probably hyper enabled. And I'm seeing gun ports. She's armed. Damn it, Gil, we're sitting ducks out here!"

"Pilot!" Cronin roared.

"Your call, Cap," Lang said sharply. "I've got an eighty-second intercept solution, if we're cleared to cross the civilian lanes."

"Do it." Stone's voice rasped. "Carrier!"

"Right here," Petrov assured him, "getting every word. Leave Tac to me, Stoney. I'm also briefing Central."

"I'm tracking two ships now," Cronin shouted across the loop. "The bastard's maneuvering, coming around. Stoney!"

The empathic link was wide open and Jarrat could hardly be oblivious. With the Blue Raven gunship driving directly through the civilian traffic routes, he had time and breathing gas to spare, and Stone felt the drum of his pulse as he stirred.

"*Move your asses!*" Cronin's voice barked. "Seventy seconds, Cap, but I can jockey a shot in twenty, *if* you buggers get the hell out of my line of fire!"

The suit's maneuvering jets were close to exhausted, and Stone swore vividly as he set the pitch and hit the triggers for the shortest burst he could manage. It would send him and Jarrat drifting back into the grudging cover of the tug — but if it would get them there fast enough was another question.

A muscle in Stone's jaw cramped as his teeth ground. As he felt the drag of Jarrat's mass, he hit the igniters again. "How're we doing, Gil?"

"You're still in the fuckin' firing line," Cronin growled. "You got the juice left for another shot out of your jets?"

"Maybe." Stone was uncomfortably aware of the sweat prickling across his face and around his ribs. His lungs were working hard, but a lot less oxygen was reaching his brain than he might have hoped for. He hit the igniters a third time and felt another kick from the jets before the system quit. "That's it, Gil. Good enough?"

"Maybe," Cronin muttered. "Sixty seconds. We know where you are, Cap. Shut everything down, go dark, and *stay put*."

He meant, if Eve Lang could acquire on passive carrier wave, so could the pilot who had been hiding behind the wrecked tug. Stone killed the highband and murmured to Jarrat, "You heard him." Then he clicked off the suit-to-suit local comm.

Now he was listening to his own breathing, a steady rasp in his ears, growing increasingly labored in the seconds as he and Jarrat drifted into the lee of the wreckage, and the armed civvy transport came up overhead. They were under the nose of the tug, the least contaminated part of the ship, and even there they were receiving high doses of several substances and wavelengths which were normally the prerogative of drones.

The transport's pilot was looking for them, and before Stone could even begin to wonder if he was offering a pickup, he saw the weapons pods peel open, and the cannons within powered up with a weird, dim glow of red enunciators deep in the housings. Stone held his breath as he and Jarrat contacted the hull, and both his hands closed about the stub of one of the comm arrays. Jarrat was still tethered on, and still conscious. He hauled himself up and grabbed on, two meters from Stone's position.

They had drifted into the dark side of the wreck, into uterine blackness where the naked human eye could pick up nothing, and where instruments were confused by the sizzling contamination of the wreck, and now they could

only wait. They might be picked up visually if the pilot kicked on his floodlights, but Stone was gambling he would not. The floods would pinpoint the ship's position as surely as a beacon, making it an easy, inviting target.

The chrono in his head was counting again, but the lance of tracer still jumped him out of his skin as it scythed by the hulk, blinding him with corneal afterimages. He felt the hot-cold, prickling rush of Jarrat's adrenaline, the echo of his own shock, and they crammed together into the scant cover afforded by the tug's nose before Gil Cronin could fire again.

He was locked onto the civvy vessel now, but the range was so extreme, he was firing guided rounds to prevent wildfires, overshoots, and the resulting civilian casualties. The problem was, the hulk was so hot, so noisy in the very bands in which the guided shells were scanning, they could easily lose their target lock in the half-second before impact.

And the civilian pilot was not about to surrender without a fight. Stone knew he had locked onto Cronin's position the instant Gil triggered a round, and a pair of modest cannons mounted on the back of the transport had tracked around. They fired now, belching four rounds which were obviously not guided.

The shells were massively wide of the gunship's position, and as the overshoots went 'wild' Stone gave a thought to the civilian traffic in their path. With a curse, he cut back into the loop. "Cap Stone!" Cronin was bellowing into the comm clutter, "you okay? That was shit-kicking close!"

"Close enough to scorch," Stone rasped. "Get those bloody rounds, if you can, before they hit somebody!"

"Doing it now," Cronin growled. "One ... two ... got 'em. Quit worrying." "Who said I was worried?" Stone demanded. He was intent on the transport, watching the guns tracking back into their 'lock' position, preparatory to flight, and intuition sped his pulse. "Heads up, Gil. I think you might just have scared him off."

The transport was maneuvering now, spinning around inside its own length, and from the engine ports mounted high across the stern, Stone saw a dull mauve glow brightening with intermittent blue-white crackles.

"He's going to light up the engines," Jarrat warned in a hoarse whisper. "Gil, he's showing you his tailpipes, for chrissakes. Take a shot."

"You're too close," Cronin fumed.

"Take a goddamned shot!" From somewhere, Jarrat found the breath to roar.

"Then get your bloody fool heads down," Cronin barked. "Twenty-five seconds to intercept. Be ready for a tractor-tow. Sweet Christ —"

And then Stone was blinded again by a lance of tracer that seemed to shrivel the eyes in his head. He and Jarrat pressed into the slight curvature of the hull, putting the nose of the tug between them and the transport, and before either of them could see again, Cronin was shouting into the loop.

"She's a cripple ... I put one in her somewhere."

But the transport was still maneuvering, and Stone guessed the pilot was

trying to make his run on one engine. And as priceless seconds limped by, the Blue Raven gunship was closing distance fast.

"You want prisoners?" Cronin asked acidly.

"Keep a fix on the bastard," Jarrat croaked. "Crippled as he is, he's not going anywhere in a hurry. Come get us, will you, Gil? I'm starting to see bloody double!"

Breathing was an exercise in patience and persistence. Stone felt as if he were struggling to capture every molecule of oxygen as he watched the civilian ship lumber away, injured, lame, but even now capable of turning its blunt nose toward the outer system and beating stubbornly out of orbit.

His vision had begun to wander dangerously when he saw the gunship's running lights, bright against the blue-black mass of the hull. He shook his head to clear his mind, forced himself awake, and reached through the empathic bond for Jarrat. Still tethered on, Kevin was cold to the bone and drifting in the dreamy state on the borderline where consciousness ebbed into darkness.

He did not register the odd, falling sensation as the tractors caught hold of them, but Stone was awake enough to grunt in reaction. His eyelids had closed, and the illusion of falling was curious, delirious with the images of an old fantasy he had never quite forgotten.

It was an Angel fantasy, and he knew it. The clouds were like silver fleece, soft, even warm; the sky was vast and he thrilled to the sensation of living flight, with no armor and engines between him and the rush of the air. And then ... then, there was Kevin Jarrat, his skin emerald green, his eyes gold, the powerful downdraft of his living wings holding them in the blue-green vast, tumbling through the cloudscape, locked together in a ritual of mating as old as mankind —

The deck hit him in the back with a thud, and as the helmet seals cracked open his lungs spasmed, dragging in the ice-cold medical air. The mask formed itself around his mouth and nose. For long moments he just breathed, feeding his oxygen-starved brain cells. His eyes were closed against the searing fluoros recessed into the jump bay's ceiling, but he reached out through the empathic link and touched Jarrat with an immaterial caress. He felt the same stinging cold in Kevin's lungs, the same chill in every extremity, and the weird, double-vision focus of his thoughts.

At last Stone opened his eyes. He waved the mask away, and read the names stenciled on the several armored, helmeted figures which hovered over him and Jarrat. The unit's chief medic, Jon Semler, Blue Raven 24, was suited up, right to the helmet, as if he had half expected to make a jump and treat the casualties *in situ*. In the vacuum. His partner was Ed Munro, Blue Raven 25. The unit's second medic was similarly suited and kneeling beside Jarrat. Both men were taking readings off the engineers' suits, and Stone was not surprised to see Bill Parish, Blue Raven 21, the unit's hazmat specialist. Parish stood behind them with both hands full of scanners. A greasy, foamy mess of decontaminants had puddled on the deck around the borrowed suits,

and when Stone squinted at Jarrat, he saw an odd, bubble-gum pink film on the battered old armor.

"They're clear," Parish was saying, metallicized by the helmet speaker. "Rad levels are normalizing ... corrosives are close enough to neutral ... they'll do." He shut off the scanners and stepped back to let the medics work. Behind them all, Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos had already taken off the helmets, but from the look on Cronin's angular face, they expected trouble. The fluoros glittered in the diamond in his left ear, and his eyes were hard, while the more laconic Ramos seemed amused.

Jarrat waved off the medic and forced his way to his feet, though his lungs were raw, his voice no more than a rasp. "I'm all right, Eddie, thanks. What's the story, Gil?"

"The story," Blue Raven 6 said cynically, "is, the bastard's trying his damndest to do a runner, but I put a shot in one of his engines. He's a lame duck, Cap, and he has to know it unless he has a steaming pile where his brains ought to be. The pilots are keeping him just inside of tractor range. Trying not to spook him, in case you want to see where he's running to."

"I'd rather grab him," Stone said tiredly, "and beat it out of him."

"Oh, yeah." With the sharp, jerky movements of anger, Jarrat was unlocking the greasy armor segments and dumping them unceremoniously into the puddle of decontaminant gels. "Flight deck, you hearing this?"

"Grab him and beat it out of him." Lang sounded as amused as Ramos. "You got it, Cap. I've got a lieutenant from Venice Tactical on hold, on behalf of his colonel wanting to know, and I quote, what in the name of God we're doing out here. Will I hand it to the Russian?"

"Do that," Stone agreed, and cracked the neck seals on his own armor. "Gil, you and Joe want to drag the bastard out of his crate?" He lifted a brow at Cronin and Ramos, who had clearly been hoping for a little physical action.

Blue Raven 7 snorted a ribald chuckle. "Since we shipped out of Thule, it's been one goddamn' sim after another. Gimme something real, just once in a while."

"Try not to break the man," Jarrat said darkly. "Feel free to bounce him around. He took a shot at you, he's got it coming ... and if he had anything to do with putting a hole in the tug, he's going up for murdering our pilot ... as well as about two billion of my brain cells." He paused to rub his temples, where Stone could feel the steady, deep throb. "Getting anoxia isn't too high on my day's agenda."

The riot troops had stepped out of the jump bay, headed for the technicians' deck, and the medics were repacking their gear. The bay was comparatively cold, and both Jarrat and Stone were sweat-soaked. The chill got into a man's bones at once, and before Munro and Semler were satisfied, Jarrat walked away from their bioscanners, in search of coffee and a hot a/c vent. Semler muttered beneath his breath, the kind of language that was frequently applied to senior officers, though not usually in their hearing.

"He's all right, Jon," Stone assured the man. Semler had been a med

student, on his way to becoming a doctor, the summer his elder brother became an Angel statistic. He had idolized his brother, and watching him go down into Angeldeath turned Jon Semler's head around. Med school seemed a waste of his time. He had to be *out*, working with what he had, *now*, not in five years, after college and internship. He was one of an incredible minority of NARC personnel who were recruited directly into the department, rather than 'coming across' from one of the other services. He was arguably the best field medic in the business, and he had the stature to qualify for the descant troops. Three years of college aeroball left him fit enough to romp the NARC training, and he put on riot armor for the first time a scant few months before Stone joined the *Athena*.

He looked down skeptically at Stone, now, from a height Stone might have envied. "I guess you'd know how your other half's doing better than anyone," he said resignedly, referring to the empathic link.

"I would," Stone agreed, "and I do." He kicked out of the greasy armored boots and did not have to feign a shudder as the sweat-sodden shirt clung to his back in the icy draft from the open inner hatches. The draft was generated as pressures elsewhere in the gunship equalized, which told him the tech's bay had closed up and cracked its inner seals. The civilian transport was aboard, and he took a step after Jarrat. "You want to prescribe something useful, Jon? Get me a coffee. In fact, get two!"

The medics were probably cursing again as he left the bay, but it was healthy. They took their work seriously. Stone only chuckled as he followed the empathic trace, not surprised to find Jarrat with a fresh mug in either hand and a vent shunted to maximum heat. He was warming his back, where he had a view through the open pressure door, into the technicians' bay. Without a word, he handed Stone the second mug and gestured into the open bay.

Cronin and Ramos had locked down their helmets and leveled a pair of rotary cannons on the side hatch of a twenty-meter hyper transport. The craft was a smaller, sleeker cousin of the Rand Arial they had flown from Sheckley to Rethan; and this one was badly damaged. With enough Gatling fire concentrated on the same target, Cronin and Ramos would eventually cut through the hull, and the pilot had to know it. The Blue Ravens gave him a full half minute to comply, and he took almost all of it. The cannons were primed, in firing mode, when the hatch cracked with a hiss of compressed gas, and a voice yelled out,

"All right, Jesus Christ, all right! I'm coming out, don't — don't shoot."

The accent was not local, Stone decided. The shooter was not from Darwin's. "What is that? Rethan, the outdistricts, the islands?"

"Avalon," Jarrat guessed. "Sounds like the wrong side of Elysium. Now, what the hell is this character doing on Darwin's?"

"Besides trying to shoot up a gunship, in the middle of a riot," Stone added. "And what the hell is the whole riot thing about?"

"We're way out of touch." With his mug, Jarrat gestured in the general direction of Darwin's. "It has to be local politics." He paused to watch as the

shooter clambered out. Cronin had swiped off his helmet, and he dropped one massive gauntleted hand on the man's shoulder. He was average height, slender save for a paunch, in expensive denims — somewhere in his twenties or early thirties, with the thin face of a rodent and a profound command of profanity.

The tirade of invective continued until Cronin simply tightened his hold on the man's shoulder, degree by degree, until the cursing became a scream. "Watch your mouth," he told the shooter, and gave him shove which sent him stumbling out of the tech bay. "You can talk your way straight to the Infirmary."

"He can also talk his way straight to a labor penitentiary." Stone stepped aside to let the shooter and the Blue Ravens go by. The shooter backed up against the nearest wall and tried to summon a glare. The effort failed miserably. "How do you want to be filed?" Stone asked tersely. Brown eyes blinked at him. "Name," Stone prompted.

"I ... deKoven." The shooter pressed back into the wall.

"You want to talk?" Stone offered.

"Of course he doesn't." Jarrat drained the mug to the dregs. "He's a hard-ass. He's going to tough it out, hold his tongue, till half the riot squad's busted their knuckles on him, and we pump him full of something still on the classified list." He turned his back on deKoven and said to Cronin, "Tie him down somewhere till we get back to the carrier. Let Central have him."

He and Stone were three strides away when deKoven began to squeal. "Deal. I want to make a deal."

Stone lifted a brow at Jarrat, saw the glitter of amusement in the gray eyes, and they turned back. "Well, now," Stone said slowly, "it all depends what you've got to deal with, doesn't it?" The shooter was panicked, and he was a rank amateur. Stone saw nothing of the professional about him. "You took a crack at a NARC gunship. You probably blew away the tug. You won't see daylight this side of your fiftieth birthday."

Color drained out of deKoven's thin face. His voice seemed smothered. "I said I want to deal."

"Deals," Jarrat told him levelly, "get made on our side of the table. You lay down your cards, deKoven, we'll tell you what they're worth." He glanced up over the shooter's head at the Blue Ravens. "Later. Lock him up. We'll get around to him when we know what the hell is going on here."

"The riot at the dock?" Cronin guessed as he closed one steel glove on deKoven's bruised shoulder and easily manhandled him away. He gave Stone a wry look. "You guys got some heavy duty catching up to do."

"Oh, joy," Jarrat breathed. "We picked the perfect time to get home."

'Home' was an odd choice of word, Stone thought. Kevin might have meant Darwin's World, which was certainly the carrier's home base, or he could have meant the *Athena* herself, which had been their own territory for more than two and a half years now. Before he could ask, Evelyn Lang's voice said quietly from the flight deck,

"Blue Raven on approach. All bays, secure for docking."

"Now," Jarrat said acidly, "maybe Petrov can tell us what this is about."

CHAPTER TWO

"That," Stone mused as he took a second latte and rubbed thoughtfully at hair that was still streaming, "is a protest on its way to becoming an airborne riot. And unless I miss my guess, they're protesting *us*." He was watching file footage, the vidfeed from GlobalNet. The CRT's audio track was turned low, but the voice of one of the Venice news anchors droned without pause.

"Protesting the *Athena* specifically, or NARC in general?" Jarrat was still toweling down.

The common door between their cabins was open and both compartments were humid. Like Stone, he had set the shower hot enough to almost take off his skin, and his back was still 'sunburn rose' over its deep copper hue. He relished the heat as he sketched the towel around his legs, and caught sight of himself in Stone's dressing mirror. He was dusky after a week naked on Tarataga, and another week close to naked on the sun decks aboard the *Cygnus Stardust*. The tropics suited him, he decided. His hair was nearer blond than brown, and he thought his eyes looked oddly pale against the tan. He gave himself a slightly obscene gesture as Stone said,

"According to GlobalNet, they're protesting both NARC and Tactical." They were not yet officially returned to duty, and Stone was allowing himself the luxury of dividing his attention between his partner and the datastream.

The moment they were on assignment they would be 'on,' every moment, every day, for as long as it took; this small lull was like a gift. Stone was listening to the file's audio loop as he leaned over and drew his lips across Jarrat's hot shoulders, and down, along the curve of his spine.

"Tac had over forty squaddies out there," he said against the silk of Jarrat's skin, "and they always knew it could get real ugly, real fast." He was low enough to sink his teeth lightly into the curve of Jarrat's right buttock, making him take a quick breath. The sensation cut clearly through the bond and it was Stone who groaned. "We picked the key moment to blunder in," he said against Jarrat's back, "and we got caught." His hands molded around the sharp angles of Kevin's hip bones and pulled him back into an embrace.

Without protest, Kevin turned into Stone's arms, threw away the towel, and hunted for his mouth. Tarataga had suited them both, and the seven-day haul back to Darwin's World on the *Stardust* would have been perfect, if it had concluded with a routine docking. Stone looked more relaxed than Jarrat could remember since before the Death's Head deep cover job. He was tanned and lean, his hair growing a little long, inviting the fingers.

Part of Jarrat was ready for reassignment; another part of him lingered behind, relishing the freedom where the ocean whispered in the night and the keenest reality he knew was Stone's body, hot and hard against him, pale in the light of two of Rethan's moons and sweated with desire. Being back on the *Athena* was a pleasure in itself, but Stone's tongue was in his mouth, Stone's hands played idly across his buttocks, and neither encouraged much commitment to the job. Jarrat was almost inclined to call the dock riot Tactical's business, and leave them to deal with it. Only the presence of deKoven, a shooter who had deliberately singled out NARC targets, spurred him to dig deeper.

The bed was firm and cool against his back as he went down, and Stone settled on him, a familiar, welcome burden. Their legs tangled, and with the empathic shields abandoned, the link between them sang with shared sensations. Pleasure was a soul-deep throb, almost a pain, permeating every cell. Jarrat swam in it, like drowning in ecstatic, blood-hot anguish. But there was more, crackling through the bond with the colors of rose and gold, and even a scent that might have been woodsmoke and wine.

It was belonging. Jarrat had no word for it, and instead he let it echo back through the empathic link, and heard Stone catch his breath. The dark head lifted and the blue eyes studied him searchingly, until Jarrat clenched both hands into Stone's hair to pull him down again. The comm buzzed, but for the moment they could afford to ignore it. The adrenaline was still pumping after the 757 incident, not quite a rush, but enough to keep a man's blood racing. Jarrat groaned as he came up hard against Stone's belly, more than anything wanting Stone in him — and Stone knew, almost before he realized what he wanted himself.

No need to wrestle, nor whisper what he needed in raw, crude, loving words. Stone lifted, let him turn, took it slowly, and Jarrat's hands clenched into the quilt. It might have been raw, even rough, but Stone was in no such mood. Instead, his loving was fierce, consuming. Jarrat was sure he had no secret left, no part of body or mind belonged to himself — and the empathic shields were down. Stone felt the sublime submission just as clearly. The zone between the possessed and the possessor blurred to nothing.

A long time later the smell of fresh coffee reached some part of Jarrat's brain which was stirring, and he swung his legs off the side of the bed. He did not recall falling asleep, but his dreams had been a tangle of tropical lagoons and riot troops, white beaches and hazmat cleanup crews. Stone was yawning as if he also was not long awake, still unconcernedly naked, with a mug in either hand. But the CRT was chattering, and he had backed up the file to the point where they had been distracted, and set it to run again.

"You can bet your pension it's about politics." Jarrat took a coffee on his way to the desk, and while Stone watched he punched in a half dozen data retrieval requests. Resigned to work, Jarrat gave his attention to the screen.

In the last twenty-four hours Petrov had assembled a routine data collect, a package which would be modified and magnified by Colonel Bill Dupre's

office in Venice and then bumped on to Earth. The package was an odd, unwieldy collection of GlobalNet stories, Tactical field reports, official press releases from several political bodies, and NARC's own surveillance. Gene Cantrell's signature was on it, along with Petrov's, and Jarrat read the summary with deep cynicism.

The protest was predictable; and this time, he thought, he might even have shared the fury which drove it, though he would hardly have sanctioned an airborne riot. The demonstration was about the new Angel laws, which were being lobbied across the colonies from Rethan to the frontier. The Sorenson bill was a many-faceted document, and for parts of it Jarrat had only support.

Tougher sentencing for street-corner dealers, automatic death penalties for smugglers, and 'awareness' sessions in the classroom — not the senior high classes which had been taught for a decade already, but classes for the junior grades, structured to catch very young kids, before they hit the street. These were strong ideas; NARC was responsible for designing some of them, and a few civilians were offended. Some parents objected to having their children exposed to the *concept* of recreational drugs; others had no problem with 'narcotics awareness,' but objected to *Angel* awareness in kids who were not yet supposed to know what sex was about, much less the party scene and the tough, nasty realm of city bottom.

These were not issues Jarrat cared to dwell on for long; political ethics was a world away from the field where he and Stone worked. But there were other facets to the Sorenson bill, and Jarrat bridled at them. The public outcry was massive, noisy, angry — and predictable. Bram Sorenson was proposing an end to the legal, licensed supply for addicts. If the legislation went through there would be no more Angel, ever — no matter that death would soon follow — for kids like Riki Mitchell, or for victims like Tim Kwei and Stone himself, who had been force-addicted.

Always whispering in the back of the victim's mind was the prayer that a cure would be found inside of the two years he or she had left to live. It was the cushion which broke their fall, eased their way to a death that remained unavoidable. Those two years were only livable with the licensed supply. Bram Sorenson called the therapy a waste of time and resources. His face had been on every GlobalNet headline for the past week, and the bleakest news, from Jarrat's perspective, was that he had powerful support. Politicians right back to the homeworlds were behind him; elder statesmen very like Cassius Brand from colonies as far afield as Calleran and Sheal were promising him votes.

They should have known better, Jarrat thought. He froze the playback at a closeup portrait of the man at the root of the trouble. If Sorenson's new legislation went through, the innocent would be sentenced to death along with the guilty.

And while it was being lobbied, the street would be a mess. He made cynical noises as he recalled Evelyn Lang's remark — *what do you think the*

R in NARC stands for? In the heat of that moment she had seen only as far as the immediate jeopardy, the hazard into which the civilian protest had dumped two NARC officers who were also personal friends. Jarrat had already looked far beyond, at the bigger picture, and he had no liking for what he saw.

The frown Stone wore told him they shared the same thoughts. "If Sorenson gets his way, they're going to use us," Stone said quietly. "Narcotics and Riot Control. Turn out the gunships, make war on the public, after you've whipped up the riot yourself. Christ! What are they thinking?"

"They're not thinking." Jarrat's tone was dark. "You see the names on this list of Sorenson's supporters? Ninety percent of the buggers are from the homeworlds, Earth, Mars, the Jupiter system. They've never been out to the colonies, they have no idea what it can be like, why Angel gets in so easily. See it from their angle. They think they've found the answer. Cut off the licensed supply ... no safety net, no 'easy' way out. It makes that first bubble of Angel look like a loaded gun."

Stone gave him an odd, sidelong look. "Now, I *know* you're not agreeing with this crap."

"Me? No way." Jarrat thumbed the remote, let the data scroll again. "But you can see how a bunch of old fogeys in Marsport and Shanghai might think. If Angel is going to be stopped before it claims another generation, well, catching kids young enough, making them savvy early enough to know what Angel means long before they get caught — and making bloody sure they know, there's no licensed supply — might look like a viable strategy."

"Viable strategy," Stone echoed darkly. He looked away. "I'd be dead."

"You, and a boatload of others," Jarrat added. He caught Stone's head, turned it until the blue eyes looked up at him. "The legislation is never going to happen. It's too crazy. It'd take people as far out of touch as this moron, Sorenson, to even suggest it."

"And the rest?" Stone pulled him closer and buried his face in the hollow of Jarrat's chest. "This argument's going to blaze for months before the colonies even get to vote. It'll be packwar on the streets, and at least some of the time the folks out there'll be civvies who have something legit to say, like today. They blockade the docks with a protest fleet, Tactical launches everything it's got when they see something like the *Stardust* sailing into harm's way. Suddenly there's a collision, casualties, everything in the air's going in every direction. It's turned into one kicker of a riot ... but it started out as an Angel demonstration, and we'll be expected to come down on them like a load of bricks."

"Politics," Jarrat said, as if the word burned his tongue, and sifted through Stone's dark hair, massaging his scalp for the sheer sensuality of it.

On cue, the comm intruded again, and this time Stone answered the buzz. Neither of them was surprised to hear the voice of Carrier Operations. Stone selected audio only, stood back from Kevin and passed a hand before his eyes. As usual, Petrov was on a short fuse.

"I've been buzzing, where the fuck were you?"

"Unavailable," Stone said tartly.

"Shagging," Petrov muttered, just inside the mic's pickup range.

"Butt out, Mischa, while you still have most of your teeth," Jarrat said in mock-sweet tones. "What do you want? Is Gene aboard?"

"Cantrell's been in Venice for two days, and he took Leo Michiko with him. Doc Del shoved off yesterday, home to his place in Fairview, and the old crock, Senator Brand, went along for some weird-ass kind of therapy. And your prisoner's squealing," Petrov reported without further preamble. "The little shit keeps telling me you promised to cut him some deal. I don't know *squat* about any deal. You better enlighten me, before I tape his mouth."

"There's no such deal," Jarrat told him. "We *said*, he should put his cards on the table, we'll see what we can do — and frankly, Petrov, I'm not in the mood to do much for some little punk who took a crack at Blue Raven."

"You might want to think again," Petrov hazarded, "when you've taken a look at the hand he's playing."

Stone was sorting slacks from boots. He looked up over the swivel chair by the CRT and lifted a curious brow at Jarrat. "You want to give us the short version?"

The Russian took a breath; Jarrat could almost smell the kip grass over the comm. "Your man's a freelance. Full, real name, Madison Jean deKoven, born on Avalon 28 years ago, came to Darwin's to attend college, dropped out a year later, thirty different jobs in seven years. Licenses registered in Venice, residential address in the Hathaway sector. He's just a wannabe, Stone, still trying to make a name of himself, and I guess it was close to irresistible when he got the chance to blow away a couple of NARC captains, a few K's short of their own dock, right under the nose of a goddamn' gunship."

For an elongated moment Jarrat refused to believe what he had heard, and it was Stone who demanded, "What the hell happened to our security? Some little punk freelancer knew we were on the tug? Christ! He shouldn't even have known we were coming in on the clipper!"

"This one's down to Cygnus," Petrov said sourly. "More specifically, it's down to a couple of very junior baggage handlers. Your man deKoven was eavesdropping on the highest bands he can read without running into encryption. These kids working for Cygnus were chatting on the air with friends working over on Mawson Docks. Not even level one encryption, you understand, just chatting in clear, discussing the relative merits of this one's butt and that one's legs, and freakin' hell, don't it just give you a boner, because, damnitall, they're NARCs, and they just got a ride off the clipper on 757."

"Bugger." Jarrat raked all ten fingertips through his hair. "These baggage handlers are on report?"

Petrov snorted. "About as much on report as you can put a couple of eighteen year olds who've been smoking fizz on their off-shift, getting a little silly and cruising the studs from NARC. What's it worth? Fined four months'

pay, a big, fat demerit on the permanent record, mandatory six months' probation under company supervision, forfeiture of a year's seniority on the rank and pay ladder, and a Tactical record as miscreants."

"If you crack it down to basics, it's just a breach of security conduct," Jarrat said bitterly. "Before it could go rotten, there had to be a bastard shooter eavesdropping, and baggage loaders aren't responsible for deKoven."

"I guess it's not much," Stone admitted, "against the possibility of two lives getting blown away. Ours."

"Three," Jarrat said bleakly. "The tug pilot's dead. I never even asked the man's name."

"It was Lewis," Petrov informed them. "Bo Lewis from Hudson, with the wife and three kids. You want to chew on Cygnus about the baggage handlers? The company's falling over themselves to apologize, but it's just dumb-ass kids, what are you going to do with them? It's happened before, it'll happen again. You'll never stop kids being kids, and most of them are dumber than mud."

He was right. Jarrat swallowed the swift anger and lifted a brow at his partner. Stone only shrugged and said to the comm, "Put this one down to blind luck, Mischa, and the law of averages. It couldn't happen again — at least, not to this unit! — in a hundred years."

Petrov sounded less ready to forgive. "Fair enough, the call's yours to make. I'll give Cygnus a buzz. And as for your prisoner, deKoven says he's been hanging around Darwin's, waiting to get a shot at NARC people. *Any* of us, the higher the rank, the better. It wasn't you bastards specifically."

"Nothing personal," Jarrat said ruefully. "What's he offering to trade?"

"And be careful," Stone warned. "He'll say almost anything to keep himself out of a cell."

"He says he's got names," Petrov said doubtfully, "people he knows in piss-water syndicates in dives like Kelso and Sheal. Probably smalltime hustlers like himself, trying to make a name for themselves."

"Still," Jarrat mused, "the minnows know where the sharks swim."

"And where they feed," Stone added. "Deal with the man, Petrov. Don't cut him too much slack, but we can trade names for time. Say, give him five years of freetime, Kevin, about twenty years from now?"

"Sounds right." Jarrat was making his way into his own cabin in search of fresh clothes. The baggage they had taken off the *Stardust* was lost along with tug 757, and his closet looked sparse. Shiptime, it was almost 14:00 and he said to the comm, "You want to get some lunch into the ops room? We need to play catch-up before Dupre hauls us down to Central."

The remark seemed to amuse Petrov. "You were booked on the dawn shuttle, tomorrow, but with this mess at the docks, I'd prefer Gable to ferry you down. Give him something to do before he starts taking chunks out of the furniture. Since Thule, he's been killing time, designing sims for Starfleet transfer pilots. Speaking of which, two just came over. They got in a few days ago, off the carrier *Rossellini*, and one of 'em ain't gonna make the cut."

"He's no good?" Stone had shrugged into a fresh shirt and was settling the collar.

"He's a decent pilot," Petrov allowed, "but NARC doesn't suit him. If he calls me 'sir' one more time, I'll leave a boot print on his ass. Sounds like he's trying to take the piss."

Jarrat chuckled as he shoved his feet into a pair of sneakers that had seen a lot of mileage. "It's probably force of habit. Starfleet's like that. Their heads are higher in the stratosphere than ours."

"And the air gets thin up there," Stone added, "makes 'em loopy. Doesn't mean the kid's a lousy pilot."

"I told you, the guy's an okay pilot," Petrov grumbled. "I assigned him to Gold Raven, but I don't think he can handle the routine in our neck of the woods."

He meant the self-motivation common to NARC people, where almost every soul on the carrier was riding the surge of a vocation. Passion for the job, not discipline and orders, made them do it right — and consider themselves as valuable as any other man or woman in the service. The word 'sir' was seldom heard in NARC company. Experience, skill and courage commanded respect and loyalty. Comparative rank was much less important. No one transferred to NARC from the other services for the glamor or the pay. The salary was adequate, but the work could be rough, and the dangers were much more immediate and frequent than the duty stood by Starfleet or even the Army. Only Tactical shared the same hazard factor — and Tactical's command structure was a close second cousin to NARC's.

If the transfer from Starfleet *needed* a superior officer to tell him what to do, and when, and where, or if he needed to identify himself with a uniform and the 'comfort zone' afforded by insignia of rank, he would fare badly in this department. Descant troops and engineers were as likely to chew him out for tardiness, inefficiency or negligence as were Curt Gable or Mischa Petrov. No one had any arbitrary rank to hide behind. Authority over other personnel was far from automatic. The newbie might be wasting time, trying to work out who was more senior — the gunship pilot or the leader of a descant unit. If he believed the nominal rank of 'lieutenant' appended to his name set him above Cronin and Ramos, a rude awakening was in store.

"Give the kid a chance," Jarrat suggested. "Maybe he can learn the hard way, monkey-see, monkey-do, copy the other kids in his unit. If he strikes out, I'd rotate him right back to Starfleet. Stoney?"

"Back where he'd belong." Stone had one foot on a chair to zip the familiar old Tactical-issue boots. "If he's smart, and he actually wants to be here, he'll catch on. Pull up the carrier data since we left, Mischa. We'll be in the ops room in ten."

"Will do," Petrov said in terse tones, as if he were resigned to the duty while he longed to be elsewhere.

He was hungry for promotion, Jarrat knew. Petrov had wrangled the ops room since before Jarrat came aboard, and he believed he was ready for

command. For himself, Jarrat doubted it — not because Petrov lacked the experience, but because he was wrong type, emotionally, psychologically. Training, skill, qualifications, could take a person only so far. Carrier command was a dimension more, and a world different. Petrov had done it all in augmented-VR, but it was never the same in the field. Even the best sim was only as good as the team that developed it.

Life, Jarrat decided as he studied his partner's broad back, was impossible to predict. No training sims had ever included a Valda Hawass; the VR developers never thought to trace syndicate connections back through three and four generations, just as they seldom scripted a brilliant visionary like Leo Michiko, who operated according his own very different, very powerful code of ethics. And never once in Jarrat's experience had a sim allowed for love to bloom between their own officers.

The best augmented-VR simulations were good, he admitted. They could give a man a thorough workout, mentally, physically, emotionally. But they were not *life*. And if he got his wish, Petrov was about to discover the difference. Jarrat set the problem aside for the moment, and turned back to his partner. Stone was glancing into the dressing mirror, and met Jarrat's eyes in the glass.

"We could be back on assignment tomorrow," he warned.

"Gives us tonight," Kevin reasoned, "doesn't it?" He drew a caress from Stone's brow to the planes of his chest, and let the emotions storming through the bond say the things he could never put into words. Stone offered an embrace, and Jarrat took it hungrily, though he mocked himself.

"What?" Stone wondered, well aware of the thread of wry humor.

"We could be back on assignment tomorrow," Jarrat said resignedly, "so ... grab what you can, when you can."

"Amen," Stone agreed, and palmed both Jarrat's buttocks.

CHAPTER THREE

With the carrier docked and under service, the ops room was stood down. Most systems were idling, and Mischa Petrov had brought several CRTs online to marshal the last two weeks' data.

Physically, the Russian was looking good, Jarrat decided, hard and very fit. He had the musculature, if not the height, to join a descant unit, and he knew it. He was in tight blue denim and a shirt that strained at the shoulders and biceps, consciously flaunting the work he invested in himself. He was as ready for command as he would ever be, and the time was close when Central

would have to make the decision. If the psychological profile warned that Petrov was not command material, he would be promoted off carrier assignment to other work within the department; or he would transfer out, back to an Army carrier where his four years' NARC service would win him a considerable hike in rank.

Today he was chain smoking kip grass as he wrangled data. The dim, dormant ops room was so thick with the scents of lemon and bergamot, Stone waved a hand before his nose as he pulled a chair up to the terminals. Petrov deliberately lit up again, and let the data run. A curious assortment from the AutoChef cluttered the workspace, and Jarrat rummaged until he found a ham and egg roll.

Routine data commanded the greater part of the dossier, and after several minutes Stone crooked a brow at Petrov. "Anything specific we should be aware of?"

The cropped blond head shook, and he coughed on his own smoke. "The specialists from Arago are still aboard. Budweisser called them in to make some of the fine calibrations on the drive alignment."

"Techs came out from Arago," Stone wondered, "not Murchison?"

"They were already insystem." Petrov gestured vaguely. "Why haul somebody else out from Mars, two weeks in a sardine-can courier, when there's already an Arago team out here? Besides, Arago's where the know-how is in that consortium. You haven't heard? Their share price is heading into high orbit. You can't buy Arago stock for love or money."

"And Murchison?" Stone looked up from the CRT.

"Tanking." Petrov smirked. "You're not invested, are you?"

"Me? Do I look like I have the money to play silly-buggers on the markets?" Stone gave Jarrat an amused glance. "But I have at least one sibling and several cousins who're up to their armpits in Murchison stock."

"Not anymore," Petrov said, glib and enjoying someone else's misfortune. "Not unless they're looking for the granddaddy of a tax writeoff."

Jarrat set a hand on his partner's shoulder. "You're thinking this could turn into trouble back home?"

But Stone made negative noises. "My family are way too savvy when it comes to money — and if they started to screw up, the team of accountants and portfolio managers wouldn't let them go far wrong. They'll have dumped their Murchison stock a long time ago. I don't think I inherited the money gene." He looked up and back at Jarrat, and one blue eye winked. "Do we know why Murchison's tanking?"

"Something about a new technology," Petrov mused. "Arago was just awarded a major homeworlds patent. Scuttlebutt is, before you know it, the best drive engine we're flying in these carriers today will be obsolete. Arago's backing their man, some kid by the name of Weimann ... so brilliant, he makes you want to puke ... and they're chewing up Murchison. I took a look at their brochure. One of the Arago techs has a cube. Think about ships three or four times the size of the sleepers that opened up places like Darwin's and

Rethan, headed out for new colony worlds so far away, you can't even see those stars with the naked eye from here."

"If I'm ever in the market, I'll remember the tip." Stone angled an interested look at the Russian. "Now, that was a wistful tone of voice."

"Bullshit," Petrov retorted. "I'm just hedging my bets." He dropped the last butt, ground it out under his heel, and discovered the pack empty. "You guys know I'm due for command assessment, right?"

"We know." Jarrat dropped into the chair beside Stone and swiveled it to face Petrov. "And you want it."

"I can *taste* it," Petrov admitted. "I'll know in a few weeks. One way or the other. If they blow me off ..." He shook his head. "I'll go back to the Army. A four year hitch — retire as major or colonel. I won't be involved in the Angel war, but it'll be fought on the same streets, for close-enough reasons. Corporate crap on Calleran, Sheal, Aurora, wherever." His brows rose, and his fingers drummed on the hood of Stone's CRT. "Four years' seniority, and I can write my own ticket. Maybe a ticket right out."

"On a colony ship four times the size of the *Lombard Explorer*," Stone said quietly, "headed for prime, virgin territory, where the plascrete's so fresh, you can still smell the paint, and there isn't a molecule of Angel in the whole system."

The observation snapped Petrov back to reality. "Like I said, I'm just hedging my bets." He slapped the CRT hood. "I was off duty a half hour ago. You've got a refit of the Infirmary finishing up tomorrow, and maybe newbie pilot trouble, like I told you before. Green Ravens 7 and 9 were shipped down to Venice for reconstruction ... we had a little fire in the launch bay. They smothered it fast, but 7 came out of it short an ear, and 9's missing a couple of fingers. Reardon says they'll mend just fine. Cantrell's recommending them for citation, decoration. Those guys walked right into the fire, bare-handed, saved the asses of a half dozen Starfleet crewboys. Budweisser's still looking into the cause of the fire, but it *could* be somebody goofed, maybe even one of his own techs. Looks like a piece of hardware was left running. It goes bad, leaks coolant across the deck, nobody sees, and suddenly the Green Raven launch bay's belching smoke. Budweisser found traces of coolant where they shouldn't be, but nothing's certain yet."

Jarrat was watching the security vids, and whistled as the footage played. The blue-black smoke swiftly blossomed into goutts of gasoline-yellow fire, and shouts became screams. Lopez and Quinn darted into the pall with a speed that belied their stature. "If Gene didn't sign the paperwork," Jarrat decided, "we'd be happy to."

"He already did, but it couldn't hurt to have your paw prints on it." Petrov was on his way out of the ops room. "Meanwhile, Doc McKinnen's gear is packed and loaded. She's on the *Pacifica*, should be about seven days out from Chicago SkyPort. We put six crates of her crap, including a fucking Chev Rapier the same color as her fingernails, on an inbound freight hauler." He paused, rubbing his eyes. "There rest's all the same old, same old ...

except for the classified stuff. Senator Brand and Doc Del, the kid they hauled out of the old cryotank, and the creep, Michiko. And you know a hell of a lot more about them than I do.” He gave Jarrat and Stone an acid glare. “Cantrell classified the whole dossier, locked it down tight. The cover story was some horseshit about ‘need to know,’ and apparently the humble XO is too lowly a life form.” Frustration was naked on his face as he sketched them an offhand and somewhat obscene salute. “All yours. Enjoy.”

With that he was gone, and with a skeptical expression Jarrat swung the chair around to face Stone. “If it were up to me, I’d promote him to R&D. Give him command of a flying research platform. I’m trying to visualize him in command of a carrier, but ... imagination falls short.”

“Still,” Stone mused, “Petrov’s earned it, time and again. He has the years under his belt, the sims, the ops room experience, the skill suite. And he’s tough, mentally as well as physically,” he added thoughtfully.

“Also ambitious, and ruthless, and emotionally dense,” Jarrat finished. “But there’s more, isn’t there? There’s another element, and they haven’t even worked out what to call it.”

The quality was an homogenous mix of keen intelligence, sharp intuition, vulpine cunning, the patience of a saint, stubbornness, a willingness to take risks, and the ability to place oneself — one’s own survival — secondary to the goal, the job, the crew, the civilian population.

It was a tall order, and most often command was awarded to candidates who had nothing to lose, no one waiting at home, little to go back to. Jarrat and Stone had qualified early, on every score, but given what they had become during the Death’s Head job, every new assignment brought reevaluation. Jarrat was deeply aware of the changes in himself, and in Stone. He recognized a growing ambivalence, a reluctance to send Stone into danger, and risk his own life on a gamble. So far their luck was holding, but they were pushing it, and they knew it. Harry Del had warned them, and as usual, Harry was dead right. The day would come when they would choose each other over the job.

Not yet, Jarrat thought darkly. Not quite yet. But the decision was out there, like a storm gathering just over the horizon. He forcibly shifted gears and kicked his mind back onto track. “Petrov almost fits the bill. And he has nothing to lose.”

“I wonder.” Stone was less certain. “You heard him planning out his future. A hitch in the Army, then a berth on a colony ship, a new world, new life. You know what Petrov stands to lose? That future. He’s *seen* it, probably *tasted* it the way he’s tasted carrier command. He has to want it, which means he’ll fight to keep the way open. He has to survive to make it happen, and the risks start to look bad. He knows what he wants.”

“Needs,” Jarrat amended softly, “the way I *need* you to be safe, need to know you’re there. And that you’re mine,” he added in a hoarse whisper.

“You do know.”

But Jarrat shook his head slowly. “Only till we’re back on assignment.

Then you'll be in deep cover, you become someone else, somewhere else. I can't watch your back, and we both know we're stretching our luck. One day, one of us is going to be shipped home in a bodybag. You do this job for long enough, Stoney, and the law of averages stacks the odds against you."

Stone said nothing for a long, pregnant moment. In the dimness of the near-dormant ops room he looked haunted. He reached for Jarrat's hand then, and Kevin gave it to him. "You want out?"

"I've thought out it," Jarrat admitted.

"We've been thinking about it since Harry pulled me back from the edge," Stone said slowly. "We always said we could separate it out, keep ourselves and what we feel on one side of the line, and the job on the other."

"We can. We do it every time." Jarrat's brows arched. "We can do it as long as we want to. Question is —"

"How much longer we'll want to," Stone finished. "I still feel the vocation, Kevin. I've felt the same thing inside you. The anger inside the bones that won't let you quit. Yet."

"Yes." Jarrat hunted for a smile and knew it barely arrived at his lips. "The job's not finished yet, and I can't walk away. But I dream about Harry's work. He's been saying for months, he's close to a therapy. Not a cure, but a way to arrest the atrophy, so the kid who's made a terrible mistake, or the bozo who snorted the crap at a party, thinking it was gryphon or Buran, hasn't signed some death warrant. So victims of force, like Tim Kwei, have a way back from the edge."

"Like me," Stone breathed.

"Like you." Jarrat reached over, cupped Stone's cheek in one palm and found his skin cool. The blue eyes were dilated in the dimness, dark and somber. Beautiful, Jarrat thought. "Harry's *going* to find the therapy, maybe next year, maybe next week. When he does, the Sorenson bill makes sense. No more licensed supply ... no civvy riots, because the only people who have anything to protest are the syndicates themselves, who're about to go belly-up. They'll switch to the Buran trade, take what pickings they can get. NARC can mop up the Angelpack with a clear conscience, knowing the civvies are home, watching the rat circus on GlobalNet. It'll be over, Stoney, and we'll be the ones who walk off the battlefield. The Angel war becomes the meat and potatoes of history books. This is what I'm holding on for."

"Same here. I dream it every night." Stone stood, and held Jarrat's head between gentle hands for a moment before he went to bring fresh juice from the 'Chef. "Speaking of Harry, we need to look at this classified dossier. Petrov's ready to chew nails over it."

"The humble XO," Jarrat said wryly as he took a glass of juice. "We can take a look at Gene's material ... but I'd rather get the story from Harry."

The dossier opened to their palmprints and access codes, and they ate as they watched Gene Cantrell's package. First up were the security vids, recorded as Marcus Brand was lifted out of the battered, failing old cryogen tank. Harry, Kip Reardon and Karl Budweisser hovered over the patient and

the machinery until the younger Brand was transferred to the carrier's ICU. Harry Del could let Reardon's staff take over then, and he looked haggard. He needed rest, food, fluids. Only another 'Rethan mutoid' could fully understand the work he did, but the physical effort was obvious. As he handed Marcus over to Reardon's people, Del was in pain, exhausted.

And as for Marcus, the supplementary data from Reardon showed him in deep coma. In the background, looking nearer death than life, Cassius Brand seemed to lurk just out of the light. He had aged even in the weeks since Jarrat had last seen him. The Bergman syndrome was assaulting him, due to the stress of watching his son retrieved from cryogen — and knowing he was being impeached by elements within Starfleet.

Cantrell had appended a document, and Stone whistled softly as they read it. Starfleet was supporting its pilot, Colonel Jack Brogen. An elite team of service lawyers was trying to hang the Mostov, Aurora disaster on Cassius Brand instead. He might have looked like a legitimate target, since he had been intimately associated with Pete Denehy. If they could prove Brand had a hand in the Scorpio syndicate, they might also show that the Mostov underground was deliberately neglected by the colonial government, of whom Brand was a major representative.

It was true, Mostov was an old and physically unsound structure, rotten with Angel, filled with Scorpio's — and Brand's — associates. Culpability for the Mostov disaster could reasonably be laid at Brand's door, and in the red-tape shuffle, Jack Brogan would wriggle off the hook.

"Good ol' Jack," Stone said with acid cynicism. "He manages your garden variety, academy-grad cockup, six short months off retirement, with a back pocket full of rich uncles and their senator buddies. Jesus, this is bad. Cass Brand could get hung out to dry."

"He could," Jarrat agreed, "but on Aurora, his name and reputation are worth a hell of a lot more than the he-say, she-say of a gaggle of Starfleet lawyers. If the tribunal convenes in the homeworlds, sure, he's dogmeat. If he can get a dispensation, convene it in Thule ... maybe on the argument that the presiding officers need firsthand access to the *locus in quo* ... he might be able to swing it. Even if the tribunal finds against him, the colony of Aurora itself will tell Starfleet where to go. Brand might not be welcome in the homeworlds — he might get arrested if he showed his smiling face on Earth or Mars! — but he'd be at liberty on Aurora."

"Which is where he wants to be, anyway," Stone added. "First Families, and all the caste system crapola." He released the playback and Cantrell's classified packaged moved on to the next item.

The face of Darwin's World was framed in the CRT, along with the docks and the civilian blockade. The time stamp in the bottom right corner was two days old. The accompanying vid footage, inset in the top left corner of the screen, was drawn from the hours of extensive coverage GlobalNet had invested in the event. It began as a peaceful blockade protesting the Sorenson legislation; and according to GlobalNet, it would probably have remained that

way, if 'militant elements' had not infiltrated the protest fleet and caused numerous 'incidents' leading to the conflict which greeted the *Cygnus Stardust*. The network's background information had been cross-checked and verified via the ops room, liaising with Tactical, government and NARC Central itself.

The live audio track was suppressed, overlaid by Cantrell's commentary, recorded when he compiled the dossier. "Welcome back to a hornet's nest," he was saying from the CRT. "I can't tell you much about the situation surrounding the Sorenson bill that you won't have seen or heard already, via GlobalNet. For myself, I think it's a load of complete bollocks, but there's a lot of people disagree with me, and the higher up the ladder you climb, I'm afraid the more support for this legislation you'll find.

"To me, it looks like a recipe for open war ... which will be fought on the street, and I have the most dismal suspicion it'll be us who'll be fighting it. Not quite what I'd wanted to hear in the closing phase of my career, just as they're about to launch my carrier. Consult with Bill Dupre about this. The legislation won't go through for months yet, possibly a year or more.

"But be aware that there's a sizable body of NARC personnel, including key people on your own ship, who've already said they'll resign before they'll stomp on innocent civilians. This isn't the deal any of us signed on for, but the sad fact is, we take our orders from a gaggle of old fogeys on Earth. Senior politicians elected by the popular vote of the homeworlds ... in fact, old farts who've probably never been any further out than the Martian resorts, and who're so bloody old, and so rich, they have no idea what's going on out here. As I began — welcome home."

The CRT shifted to security vid footage of Leo Michiko. He had been under constant observation, every moment since he came aboard, and he had spent many hours talking with Cantrell. This segment of the dossier was enormous, and after several minutes both Jarrat and Stone switched to the summary. Even this was daunting, and Stone thumbed the remote to freeze the playback. "You want to wade through this? I'd rather get it from Gene, maybe even from the horse's mouth, Michiko himself."

"I've got the gist of it, and it's not strictly our project." Jarrat regarded Leo Michiko with a frown. "I'll get more from Gene and Bill Dupre in ten minutes than I'd get out of this tome in an hour."

With a nudge of the remote, Stone killed the playback. The CRT returned to the familiar icon, the steel gauntlet cradling a white dove. Jarrat sat back and swung his feet up onto the workspace by the screen. He gave his partner a speculative look. "So Marcus Brand is still comatose. I can't say I'm surprised. A quarter of a century in cryogen? Good Christ."

The longest cryosleeps in the past were the longhaul colony ships which opened up the most distant worlds on the edge of explored space, and even they were no longer than eight weeks. More often in the days of the sleeper ships, a vessel like the *Lombard Explorer* would haul out from the homeworlds to one of the scores of staging bases along the route, and the layover

for fueling and freight exchange might be a month long, before the colony ship cruised on. Immigrants were seldom 'tanked' longer than two weeks at a time. Marcus Brand's condition was odd and, in Jarrat's experience, unique.

Few people of Jarrat's and Stone's generation had any real experience with cryogen. Jarrat knew he was unusual. He felt Stone's curiosity like the prickling of tiny needles, and he guess what Stone would ask before he said,

"I've been meaning to ask, since the Marcus Brand thing started. You were in the tank for a few days ..." Stone paused to find the right words. "What did you feel? Do you remember anything?"

The question was more complex than Stone knew. Jarrat had spent a great deal of time trying not to think about it, but Stone had a right to ask, and to know. "If you'd asked me a few months ago," he admitted, "I'd have said I remembered nothing at all. Blackness. Void. Then, a long time after the Death's Head bust, it was like my memory started to jog. Suddenly I'm remembering dreams I never had. It's murky, like swimming in the bottom of a pool that's so deep, the water's green and the light hardly reaches down. I don't remember much detail from the dreams ... and feel free to call me crazy. Because all I can tell you for sure is, I know my mind dreamed the things I can't remember while my body was cryo-inert." He shrugged. "Yvette McKinnen would feed you some line about sheer imagination. Kip Reardon might say the same. Me? I honestly don't know."

"You ought to talk to Harry about it," Stone said thoughtfully. "If anyone would know if you're nuts, or imagining things, he would. Kip's insight would be useful ... and I dare say both of them would value your input. They're groping in the dark when it comes to Marcus Brand, and they're decent enough to admit it."

"So I'll talk to Kip and Harry," Jarrat agreed. "Harry's gone home, if you can call Fairview his home. It isn't. Bally, in the mountains, is where he belongs, with Tansy and so many kids and dogs and horses, you lose count."

"And we're on our way down in the morning." Stone glared at the CRT. "You feel the wind shifting direction? Nothing's as simple as it used to be."

"Things tend to get complicated." Jarrat crumpled the packaging from his lunch and lobbed it into the disposal. "I'd appreciate Kip's perspective — and you *know* he wants to shove us through some scanner, after the debacle on the tug."

"And the situation back on Rethan. Christ, we almost bought the ranch right there." Stone sighed. "Infirmary?"

"Infirmary," Jarrat agreed thoughtfully, and set his sneakers back on the deck.

Like the ops room, the Infirmary was barely idling. With the carrier standing at her home dock, Surgeon Captain Kip Reardon was taking the opportunity to upgrade everything from critical software to OR equipment. Bulkheads had been removed, wiring was laid bare, and the morgue had been completely dismantled. Power tools were howling as Jarrat and Stone stepped out of the elevator, and Reardon himself had retreated to his office.

Even there, with the doors sealed, the noise was intrusive and a layer of fine dust had settled on every horizontal surface. The power was off across the entire compartment, and with just a few systems running on cells, most of the lights were dead and the air temperature was low, and still dropping.

Reardon looked tired, as if the specter of Bram Sorenson haunted him. If blood were spilt, he would be one rank back from the frontline, probably facing in a single day the butcher work a NARC carrier's CMO normally saw in a year — and Reardon knew the worst. He had done this duty before, on Army carriers in several corporate wars.

He was in a bronze and green ski sweater and black track pants, one hand wrapped around a hot mug as he closed down numerous files. He was signing off on several documents at once as Jarrat watched. He archived his work and stacked the transmission copies in the outbound data queue. The *Athena's* AI was occupied with its own overhaul, and the files were still waiting for transfer when Jarrat turned his back on the CRT and gave Kip his hand.

"You're tan," Reardon observed. His breath plumed in the chill air.

"Head to toe," Stone affirmed as he clasped Reardon's wrist. "I could take a lot of that kind of punishment ... listening to the gulls in the early morning, sand between the toes, the smell of ozone on the breeze while you drop a line in the water and pull out dinner. Kip, it's bloody freezing in here!"

"If you're trying to make me green with envy," Reardon told him as he scooped up a hand scanner and thumbed it on, "you're succeeding. Of course it's bloody cold — the power's out until the crew from IntelScan finish rewiring me. My CRTs, comm and a few lights are up on cells, best I can do. The tech guys slapped the deck plates back in place about ten minutes before you arrived. I'm taking delivery of the new machines in about two hours, and we'll be up and running by tonight. Till then, if you're staying, grab a jacket. It's going to get colder." The palm-sized machine whirred as he played it over Stone's chest, and then Jarrat's. "Your lungs are still scarred. Both of you."

"You read the report," Jarrat hazarded. "There was a chemical fire, we were a tad bit too close for comfort."

"So I heard." Reardon was priming a hypo. "I'll take a little blood and design the nano to fix your lungs."

"We had nanotherapy," Stone began.

"In the field, in the back of beyond," Reardon scoffed. "You had generic, prepackaged nano. Nothing wrong with that, but the job needs finishing."

The needle smarted in the fold of Jarrat's left arm. "The medics were pretty good, Kip. And the Tactical units out of Eldorado and Mackay were some of the best I've ever seen." He held a swab to the puncture wound while Reardon went on to Stone with a fresh hypo. "We have two Green Ravens in the base hospital, according to Petrov."

Reardon was intent on Stone's veins. "I've scheduled both kids for reconstruction late tomorrow. I'll rebuild a couple of fingers for Freddie Lopez, and a ear for Bruce Quinn, and I'm cloning up a lot of skin for both. It's straightforward stuff, nothing problematic. Just damned painful. I know

what they're going through, but it was the tradeoff for a bunch of Starfleet crew kids getting toasted. Do we know what caused the fire?"

"We will. Bud's looking into it. Right now, his best guess is a dumb-ass accident." Stone watched the syringe draw a few cc's of his blood, and took a swab from Reardon's fingers. "You done?"

"Give this a couple of minutes to run." Reardon was setting up the bioscanner, and as it began to whirl he abandoned it in favor of the AutoChef. "You want lunch?"

"We just finished." Jarrat pulled up a chair and watched Reardon punch for wild rice and shrimp. "Tell us about Marcus Brand."

The surgeon's brows arched. "There's precious little to tell. He's in a deep, third-stage coma, too deep to bring him out with any drug therapy I ever heard of."

"But he's not brain dead?" Stone took a green tea from the 'Chef. A cloud of steam wreathed it in the chill air.

"I ... don't know," Reardon said carefully, "and it troubles me to say that, because this *is* an exact science. It should be easy to nail down the boy's condition." He slapped plate and mug onto the workspace by his CRT and rolled a chair closer. "The brain is alive. The organ is perfectly functional. But if anybody's home, is another question. Occasionally we see a flicker of brainwave activity in the alpha range, enough to suggest a fleeting dream. But as for organized thought? No. Or, not yet. I should tell you, Cass Brand hasn't given up hope. He visits the kid every day, talks to him. He's convinced Marcus can hear him."

"And what do you think?" Stone asked shrewdly.

"Me?" Reardon forked a large shrimp into his mouth and chewed for some time. "I honestly don't know. We're in the badlands here, the border zone where medicine meets philosophy. For almost a century, physicians were utterly convinced mind and brain were the same thing. Then along came a raft of new evidence, inconclusive but extremely compelling. The question blurred. It's still unclear, and the trouble with me is, I've kept an open mind so long, I see both sides of the argument. It's enough to drive you nuts." He gestured vaguely with a loaded fork. "You'd be better asking Harry."

"You realize he's only *one* of the Rethan mutations. There are others, the telepaths, for a start. Apparently they call themselves the 'keepers of secrets,' because the decent ones take an oath not to divulge what they've seen and heard in the vaults, the sewers, of other folks' minds! Then," he added darkly, "there's the scryers. Their art is 'remote viewing' — and from there, Harry's kind get progressively more weird. The terraformers thoroughly screwed up on parts of Rethan, missed something major in the planet's environment. Harry's people are the result, and I'd pay money to scan his brain." Reardon had been preoccupied with his thoughts, almost thinking aloud, and seemed to click back into the present with a start. "He absolutely refuses, won't let me even try ... and I don't blame him. He was a lab rat in his teens, back home, and I imagine they hurt him. A lot."

Mutoids. The word was harsh, Jarrat thought, yet it was accurate. Harry Del was far from the normal human, and even on Rethan people like him were scrutinized, monitored. Occasionally they were persecuted, though the law did not allow it. "We ought to call him," he said to Stone, who was rubbing his arms in the chill which had begun to creep into Jarrat's bones and take root in his marrow. "Kip, you said your comm's up on cells?"

"Help yourself." Reardon nodded at the CRT by the dismantled morgue.

"You want something hot, Kevin?" Stone was on his way back to the 'Chef.

"Thanks." Jarrat's fingers tapped out the familiar phone code, and the screen came alive with the spinning VeniceCom logo.

They waited almost a minute for Harry to answer, and when he did he was not looking at the screen, though he had selected audioviz. He was busy with something out of the frame as he said, "Hi, Kip, what can I do for you?"

"I'll ask him," Stone said dryly, and Harry looked up sharply at his own screen. "Hello, Harry."

"When did you get insystem?" Del wondered. "Damn, you look good, both of you! Kip told me there was some kind of fracas before you even made it to Tarataga. I saw the med report — do you want me to do the family doctor thing, and take a look at your lungs?"

Family doctor? Jarrat hung one arm across Stone's wide shoulders and leaned in closer to the video pickup. "Thanks, Harry, but Kip's got it covered. Right now he's designing a swarm of nano to fix some old scar tissue ... Harry, you look bushed."

"Bushed, he says." Del rolled his eyes.

"You've been working with Marcus Brand?" Stone guessed. "Seriously, man, you look like you need a decent meal and ten hours of sleep."

"I do." He yawned and scratched at his ribs through the gaudy surfer shirt. His hair had grown long enough to be caught in a silver clasp, Chell-fashion. In the background of his video was an open window, and beyond, the ocean. The audio pickup was sharp enough for the voices of gulls and kids on the beach to carry across the connection. "I've been working," Harry was saying. "I still am. I just pulled an all-nighter in the lab, and before that I was at the base hospital again, all evening."

"Working with the Brand boy," Stone guessed.

"Yeah." Harry massaged his temples and the back of his neck with both hands. "Did Kip tell you, it took me three sessions to get Marc's brain back into shape. The trouble is, I can't reach him, I can't even *find* him. I keep trying ... Cass asks me to, and how am I gonna say no? Cass is staying with me here in Fairview. It's the first time in six decades he's sat on a beach with a face full of sunblock. It's the best medicine for him. If it wasn't free, I'd prescribe it."

Jarrat pressed into Stone's side as much for warmth as for a better angle on the screen. "Kip said he doesn't know if the kid's actually alive or not."

"Nor do I," Harry admitted. "It's bloody damned complicated. And I'm

tired and hungry. Look, why don't you come down here? Let me get some rest, then we'll do dinner — the freezer's full of fish. I'll tell you what I know."

There was an edge in his voice, an odd note Jarrat had not heard before. "Okay, we'll do that. We're coming down tomorrow, as it happens. Dupre wants us at Central, and we have a whale of a debriefing ahead of us before we're reassigned. I have no idea where the carrier's headed next, but we should have a few days on Darwin's."

"I'll see you here, then," Harry said tiredly. "Did Kip want something?"

But Reardon called from across the office, "Tell him to put his head down. Then come back over here and get your nano."

"I heard." Del chuckled. "Tomorrow, Stoney, Kevin."

The CRT dimmed, and Jarrat turned back to Reardon. "More nano mist?"

"Breathe this." Reardon had a cartridge mask for him, and another for Stone. "The 'bots are fine-tuned, task-specific. The therapy you got at the hospital in Bundaberg was broad-spectrum — good enough to cover the situation and get you home. This'll do the job properly."

The vapor was ice-cold, reminding Jarrat of the chill in his marrow, and when the cartridge was spent he handed it back. "No offense, but you're working in a meat locker. If you want to check the healing, call us in when your heaters are back on."

"Ditto," Stone said acerbically, slapping his own spent mask into Reardon's open palm.

"I'll catch up with you at Central," Reardon called after them, "when I shuttle down to fix up the Green Ravens."

"Page us — we might be at Harry's place. Ciao, Kip." Warmer environs were on Jarrat's mind.

"I'm surprised the cold bothers you," Stone remarked as they ambled back to the lifts. "You being the kid from Sheckley."

"It doesn't *bother* me," Jarrat admitted. "It *reminds* me. There's a bloody great chasm of difference."

The door closed over, and in the privacy of the lift Stone leaned closer. He closed his teeth on the lobe of Jarrat's ear and tugged, and his voice was a hot, moist whisper. "In that case, let me distract you."

"God help me, you do," Jarrat breathed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rain had fallen in the night. Venice was wet, and as the morning warmed the asphalt would steam. The scents of the frangipani and silver rain which fringed the rooftop airpark lingered on the heavy air.

Curt Gable had shut down his jets and repulsion a few minutes before and was sitting on the side of the VM-104 Corsair's cockpit, killing time. He was waiting for a load of light freight headed up to the carrier. The cargo straps lay in the seats where Jarrat and Stone had sat minutes before.

They were at the south parapet now, and Stone's eyes were drawn to the bright sternflare of a ship leaving the groundside port. The horizon was thick with cloud but the air was already warm. The forecast was for a brief storm in the early afternoon, clear skies in the evening. The crackle of Gable's R/T punctuated the noise of parrots in the eucalypts, before the thunder-roll of the departing ship swept over the rooftop, blanketing everything.

The NARC building towered over the whole sector, centered in an exclusion zone which prohibited civilian air and ground traffic. Tactical vehicles flew there occasionally, but the antlines of the civvy traffic lanes swept around in a vast curve from the spaceport, which lay over the horizon, to the business district in the north of the city.

A crackle from the R/T, and Gable swore quietly. Stone glanced up at him, watched as he dumped his comset back into the cockpit and climbed down the side of the Corsair, hardpoint to hardpoint. Jarrat had set his shoulders against the guard rail and turned his face to the sky. His eyes were closed behind the green-gold lenses of aviator's glasses. "Problem, Curt?"

"Suddenly I have an hour to kill." Gable leaned both elbows on the rail beside Jarrat. "Our freight's not even crated yet. Good thing I'm on the clock, huh?"

"Good thing." Stone glanced at his chrono for the third time. He and Jarrat were waiting for Colonel William Dupre, who lived off the base — and he was late.

"I'm going down to the staff lounge for something to eat," Gable announced. "Can I get you something?"

But Stone had already caught sight of Dupre's car, a blue Mercury aerodyne, headed in from the west. "We're out of time. We'll catch up with you later."

"Tomorrow, maybe," Gable wondered as he palmed the security lock. "Are you going to the game?"

"Game?" Jarrat echoed, watching the Mercury brake down into a repulsion hover and rotate to fit one of the reserved parking places.

"At the Hudson Company arena. You didn't hear —?" Gable chuckled. "A team of Blue Ravens is taking on a squad from Starfleet. Apparently there was an altercation at a downtown bar a few days ago, and rather than going up against a bunch of our big lads, with or without the armor, some genius decided to settle it on the aeroball court. They might have been kidding, but Gil Cronin hired a court, and now it's a matter of unit pride. The Starfleet numbnuts who picked the fight and then offered a game is locked into the deal. Some officer from the *Marquesas* volunteered to get in a crowd, sell tickets, raise funds for charity. Angel research. We got ourselves a real game."

The drive jets were whining down, Dupre was climbing out under the arch of the gullwing. Stone gave Jarrat a sidelong grin. "We wouldn't miss it," Jarrat decided. "Get us a couple of tickets, Curt. Tell me what we owe you."

"Will do. Morning, Colonel," Gable called to Dupre, who was making his way across the jet-stained concrete, keys in one hand, briefcase in the other.

"Pilot." William T. Dupre accorded Gable a nod, and stepped in through the door Curt had palmed open. "Jarrat, Stone. You look rested."

Some tone in his voice added, 'You'll need to be.' Stone felt a little kick from his partner's nervous system, but they said nothing as the door slid over behind them. Gable turned left, headed for the lounge, but Dupre walked a straight line which led directly into his office.

The lights were already on and the aroma of coffee issued from within. Stone might have expected a secretary, and was surprised to see Gene Cantrell perched on one corner of Dupre's massive oiled teak desk. He was watching the CRT, and stood as he realized he had company. Stone caught a glimpse of GlobalNet before the screen returned to routine base data.

"Stoney, Kevin. I just read the report on the 757 episode." Cantrell clasped wrists for a moment, and fixed Dupre with a hard look. "It has to be the security breach to end them all. How in the name of sweet Christ, Billy, do you guard against a couple of brainless kids babbling on-air, in clear?"

"You can't," Dupre said flatly. The Barbadian accent thickened with disgust. "You make the best of it. If and when it happens, you do damage control. This time we didn't come away empty handed. Your XO," he said to Jarrat and Stone as he pulled the big leather chair up to the desk, "winkled some curious data out of the shooter, this deKoven character. He has friends in low places."

Stone took a beaker of water from the cooler and sat on one end of the long couch opposite the window. He had a view of the city, the traffic lanes, the blue line of the ocean beyond. "Anything you want us to look into?"

But Dupre's dark head shook. "Not you, personally. NARC agents will chase down deKoven's leads in Hudson, Eldorado, Calleran, wherever." The chair groaned under him as he leaned back and surveyed the younger men thoughtfully. "I believe there are much bigger fish in your part of the pond."

"Assignment?" Jarrat hazarded.

“Eventually.” Dupre’s fingertips drummed a tattoo on the arm of his chair. “You know Gene undertook the debriefing of Leo Michiko on the way over from Aurora. It’s been interesting.”

Cantrell choked off a chuckle. “Now, there’s an understatement! I spent more than twenty hours talking to Michiko, and if the man was lying, spinning some kind of yarn, we haven’t been able to pick the deception apart yet, and believe me, we’ve tried.”

It was procedure to take nothing at face value. Intel would have triple checked and verified anything they could possibly track down in the archives on twenty worlds. From the look on Dupre’s face, he was satisfied. “The hard data Michiko has supplied is kosher,” he said slowly. “Tactical reports from the office of Colonel Janssen in Thule came through a few days ago, and I see no deception.”

“I’m in the process of liaising with Tactical Colonel Jay Friedman’s department in Chryse,” Cantrell added. “They provide Tac Intel services for both Chryse and Marsport, but the lag time in the data conduit means it’ll be a week, minimum, before we get useful information.”

“Till then,” Dupre mused, “it’s my call to give Michiko the benefit of the doubt. At this point, he has nothing to gain from lying and everything to benefit from sharing the truth. Gene?”

“Yes.” Cantrell was fetching coffee for himself and Dupre. “The complete transcript of his testimony is available on cube; I don’t suggest you sit down and try to watch the realtime vids ... it’s twenty-two hours of recordings, and a lot of it’s repetitive.”

He meant stultifying, Stone guessed. “Coffee, Kevin?”

“Just water,” Jarrat decided. “I’ll get it. You?”

“Same.” Stone was frowning at Cantrell. “Michiko earned your trust.”

Cantrell’s brows rose. “I suppose he did. You understand, he isn’t merely cooperating to buy his liberty. He’s actively gunning for individuals surviving from the old Aphelion infrastructure. Officially he’s been listed as dead, killed in the fighting in Thule. You probably saw the GlobalNet obituary. It was broadcast as far afield as Darwin’s, Avalon, and halfway across the Cygnus colonies. Wherever you go, they’ll tell you Michiko was cremated in Thule.”

“But the man’s under no delusions,” Jarrat reasoned. “Sooner or later he’ll be recognized by someone, somewhere. God knows, it happened to me a couple of weeks ago, in the middle of nowhere, the last place in the universe I’d have expected to be recognized! And when Michiko’s turn comes, if these elements from the Aphelion old guard are still alive and at liberty, he’ll find himself in a shallow, unmarked grave.”

“Or a dumpster,” Cantrell added acidly, “like Marcus Brand.”

The remark inspired a moment of uneasy quiet before Dupre said, “For the moment, NARC is ready to assist Michiko in the deception and the hunt for his enemies, who are — far from coincidentally — our own enemies! Michiko has already given us enough data to piece together a quite detailed history of the Aphelion diaspora, and how elements of them found their way

out to Aurora and put down the roots of what became Scorpio.”

“We need to be aware,” Cantrell said darkly, “that Aurora was not the only colony to which the syndicate spores fled, after my own baptismal bust in the Jupiter system. Michiko’s less certain of where else they went, but he’s made some astute guesses.”

“On the understanding that they *are* speculation, albeit well informed,” Dupre mused, “we find ourselves in possession of number of leads, all well worth the investigating.” He looked Stone in the eye, and then Jarrat. “And you’re probably guessing, gentlemen, where the data trail leads.”

Earth. Stone’s heart performed a peculiar little skip, enough to make Jarrat dart a glance at him. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “You have enough data to suggest Aphelion still exists? It healed, regenerated, put itself back together after Gene’s bust?”

“Perhaps.” Dupre chose his words with extreme caution. “One hesitates to speculate about what business goes on in the homeworlds. And I can tell you right now, right here, deploying a NARC carrier within twenty light years of Earth or Mars won’t be popular. Deployment on Earth itself might not even be permitted. Earth is Tactical’s playing field, not ours ... even though no one would argue that the job is sometimes far beyond Tac’s capacities. Never forget, like Starfleet and the Army, we take our orders from political masters. Civilians. And they won’t welcome gunships into the skies over their cities.”

“Damn,” Stone breathed.

It was Jarrat who said quietly, “So be sneaky. Use Tactical as a route in. Put somebody into deep cover. Someone who can pass as a — an *Earthier*.” The word felt curious on his tongue. Stone felt the oddity, and Jarrat’s hand was on his shoulder. “Sorry, mate. No offense. I didn’t invent the word, and it *is* accurate. What I mean is, I couldn’t hope to pass for a native of Earth.”

Dupre lifted both hands. “Slow down. Back up. It’s delicate, it’s complex, and it’s dangerous. Much as I hate to admit it, a time comes when the survival of the service is bought at the cost of ... shall I say, selective blindness.”

“You mean, we turn the traditional blind eye to a syndicate running citybottom in Chicago or Shanghai or London,” Stone growled, “and in return our civilian bosses let us get on with business out here in the colonies.”

“Perhaps.” Dupre’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t say I like the situation. I never intimated that I approve. But I’m a realist, Stone. Long enough in this job makes you a cynic. Yet Jarrat makes a good point.”

“Sneak,” Cantrell said glibly, and from somewhere produced a crooked grin. “As for Michiko himself, I hate to admit it, but the man impresses me on many levels. He’s about as much like your normal Angel cartel mogul as I am myself. He’s part politician, part engineer, part visionary. Too bloody brilliant for his own good. And absolutely loyal to his own philosophy, irrespective of the fact you and I might think that philosophy is complete pig-swill.”

A scene in a plush living room in the mountains above Thule haunted Stone so keenly, he could almost feel the chill of Aurora’s air, smell the pine resins from the thriving forests of genetically-redesigned trees which had

begun to colonize the sunward slopes. "I remember. Michiko makes a powerful case. Also a damned cruel case, without one iota of leniency for human frailty."

"How many of us would prosper, I wonder," Cantrell added, "if we were made to play by his rules. Thank gods this one's not for me to ponder — I'm glad to leave it for the academics and politicians!"

"Speaking of whom," Dupre said, stirring, "Senator Cassius Brand is under the microscope." He stood to stretch his spine, and turned to the window, watching the traffic lanes over Venice. "Starfleet lawyers right out of Earth are gunning for him. We received the documents four days ago. Their case makes a warped kind of sense, so long as you close one eye and squint hard enough. I'm trying to remain impartial, but I'll go this far, on the record: I'll be damned hard to convince. Brand falls marginally within NARC's jurisdiction, since he was aboard the carrier at the time the documents were received on Darwin's, and we were in the field in Mostov, at the exact time of the incident. Our data will be pivotal to the inquiry."

"I saw no reason whatever to hold him in custody," Cantrell said levelly, "though one member of Starfleet's presiding tribunal has called for it. I took the initiative, released Brand on a kind of probation. NARC Sector Command ... meaning Billy Dupre! ... knows where he is, and where he's likely to be."

"Which is good enough for me," Dupre said without turning back from the view.

"Good gods, his kid's comatose in the base Infirmary, and Brand himself looks like a cadaver." Cantrell sounded disgusted with the impending legal battle. "Harry Del's treating him, which I suspect is the *only* reason the man is still alive, much less on his feet."

"He's staying at the house in Fairview." Jarrat jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the vague direction of orbit, the carrier. "We called Harry."

"And he probably told you, the old man is *way* too sick to do a runner, even if he was inclined to, which in any case he isn't." Cantrell made a face. "Every evening, security buzzes him into this building and he sits an hour or two with his kid, for what it's worth."

"Marcus is comatose," Stone said quietly.

"The body's alive," Cantrell sighed, "and Harry did whatever it is he does to straighten out enough of the brain damage to make the organ itself viable. Fact is, there *is* a flutter of activity on the monitors, but ... is anyone home? Brand's convinced the kid's alive and will wake. Kip Reardon pulled every trick he knows. Marcus should already be awake, if he's going to wake."

Jarrat's skin was prickling. Stone felt it clearly, like gooseflesh along his own arms. "You can't help wondering," he admitted.

"Wondering?" Dupre prompted, but his face said he already knew.

"If a body's stored in cryogen for a quarter century," Cantrell reasoned, "and if the mind is *separate* from the brain — in other words, and at risk of getting maudlin or just plain cheesy, if such a thing as the human soul exists — where's the personality been for so many years while the body was

technically dead? Would the soul stick around? Give me a reason why it should.” And he was looking at Jarrat, as if Kevin ought to have the answers because he had spent a brief time in a tank.

“Don’t look at me,” Jarrat said acidly. “I wasn’t stored for long enough for it to be a problem. A few days, wasn’t it? A person can be unconscious that long after surgery, or an accident. It’s no big deal.”

“But, twenty-five *years*, now,” Cantrell whispered. “If Marcus wakes with his mind and personality even halfway intact, Kip says he’ll take this as proof that there’s no such thing as the human soul, spirit, whatever you want to call it, because of the incredible time in deep freeze. He can’t believe the soul, spirit, mind, personality, would or even *could* stick around, tied to a piece of meat at the temperature of liquid nitrogen! Here’s the rub. If Cass gets his kid back, and if Kip’s right ... after the lights go out it’s not golden clouds and gardens inside silver gates, or whatever you fancy. Just oblivion, extinction.”

“Ask the psi techs, or a priest,” Dupre advised dryly, “or maybe one of the Rethan mutoids, not an old warhorse like me.”

“Speaking of warhorses,” Cantrell said, changing the subject deftly as if he were compelled to, “the update on the *Huntress* construction is in. She’ll launch on time, and I need to pack my bags. I’ll be signing off on the Michiko dossier and passing it along.”

“You’re headed back to the homeworlds.” Stone felt an odd, yawning sensation in the pit of his belly. “I think I actually envy you.”

“It’ll be the first time in fourteen, maybe fifteen years, for me,” Cantrell admitted. “You?”

“Only eight years,” Stone told him. “I never had a reason to go back. It’s a long way to go, when it’s not on business.” He was watching Dupre’s brown face as he spoke, trying to gauge the man’s expression, but Dupre would give little away.

“I’ll get to actually watch the *Huntress* launch,” Cantrell was saying. “It’s Bill’s call as to who’ll take over the Michiko dossier, but ... I’d assign Petrov.”

“Petrov?” Jarrat echoed, surprised.

Cantrell shrugged. “The man’s overdue for some kind of command, and he knows it, and knowing makes him twitchy. He wants carrier command, but — and it’s not my job to make the recommendation! — I wouldn’t hand him the assignment. He still needs to learn patience, and he doesn’t ‘read’ people. Give him a carrier, and his partner had better be bucking a promotion to sainthood, because half of his or her duty will be in moderation, mending fences, smoothing ruffled feathers. With Petrov in the field, there’ll be blood. Of course, there usually is, so ... what the hell? Your call, Bill.”

“I’m thinking it over,” Dupre confessed. “I have to slide him somewhere, and I’m far from oblivious to the work he’s invested in himself and the job. I know what he wants, I know what he’s earned, but ...” He set down his empty coffee cup. “Later.”

“Which leaves us with paperwork,” Cantrell said gleefully to the younger men. “You’ll find just short of three terrabytes of documentation, including a

comprehensive summary of Michiko's testimony, plus Kip's and Harry's prognoses of Marcus Brand's condition. I recommend you talk to Harry and Kip about Marcus ... and talk to Cass about this goddamned Sorenson bill as well as the Michiko situation. You'll want to know where the key players stand. Including," he added baldly, "your own people."

"*Athena* personnel?" Jarrat had returned to the water cooler.

For a moment Cantrell and Dupre frowned at one another, and then Cantrell suggested, "Have a beer with some of the Blue Ravens. They're a pretty good sampling of the descant units."

And Dupre breathed a long sigh before he added, "The big picture is changing, but you can't see, yet, what it's changing into. The best any of us can do is wait, watch, and see. The Sorenson legislation alone would change the playing field for all of us, even if Michiko's data wasn't likely to set the cat among the pigeons. Which it is! As a service," he said quietly, "we'll soon discover who our real friends are, as well as our enemies ... and just where our jurisdiction ends."

A leaden silence settled in the office, and Stone was reluctant to break it. "Assignment?" he prompted at last.

The word seemed to jolt Dupre out of some reverie. "Yes, but at this point, not what you might be expecting. Leave the Michiko dossier to us. In fact, Gene, I want you to continue with it. The man's earned your trust, and the fact is, he trusts you. I don't want to waste time getting through those rough waters again."

"I'm on a Starfleet courier, Bill, the day after tomorrow," Cantrell began. "They're launching the *Huntress*."

The colonel gave him a wry smile, perhaps even envious. "You're out of here," he agreed, "in four days, Gene. On the *Athena*." The deep brown eyes transferred to Jarrat and Stone. "Earth Central wants Leo Michiko and his data in person, in Chicago. They also want Marcus Brand in a major facility, where *they* can treat him. They don't know Harry Del the way you and I do, and they're far from convinced of his ability to treat the boy."

"They *what* —?" Stone demanded, halfway to his feet in protest.

"They have no respect for Harry or his abilities." Jarrat drained his beaker of water, crumpled it and tossed it into the bin under the cooler. "Why would you expect them to? They're Earthers. They have Harry filed under the label of 'mutoid' and they're happy to fund his lab work, let him mess about with chemistry, designing God only knows what in our basement. But Marcus isn't tanked now. He's comatose in a recovery ward ... and you can bet some bastard, somewhere, checked out Harry's actual *medical* credentials."

"His what?" Stone demanded.

Jarrat took a long deep breath and reined back on the anger Stone could feel simmering in his chest. "You never looked at the diplomas and certificates framed on his office wall? Some Tactical officer!"

"I never had a reason to look," Stone growled. "He healed the both of us, and that was good enough for me. It still is."

"Yeah." Jarrat glanced from Dupre to Cantrell and back. Both men were frowning. "At home, Harry's perfectly qualified. He's a general practitioner with a medical license issued in Eldorado, plus subsequent certificates issued by various regional colleges on Rethan, extending to AI-assisted surgery. The rest of what he does — most of his 'magic' — is the healer at work. The mutoid. How in hell do you diploma qualify a mutoid? And you know, we all know, even a proper colonial medical license from a major, accredited institute, isn't recognized on Earth."

"Well ... shit," Cantrell said pragmatically. "I must be getting old. Or I've been out from Earth too long. I guess I forgot about the dumb-ass red tape."

"I doubt Doctor Del would deem it mere red tape," Dupre mused.

The anger spilled out of Jarrat through the link into Stone. He found himself seething, ready to punch something, with no outlet for the fury. "And some bastard bean counter at Earth Central's taken a look at Harry's credentials and decided he's unqualified?"

"He never qualified to practice in the homeworlds," Jarrat said darkly, "which means they want their people, not ours, treating Marcus Brand." He lifted a brow at Dupre. "There's zip you, I or Harry can do about it, Stoney. Not unless Harry fancies three years in med school on Earth to bring his qualifications up to speed with whatever the Surgeon General's office wants this year. Now, would the buggers at Earth Central accept Kip Reardon as Marcus's medical supervisor?"

Dupre spread his hands. "I've asked, but given the data lag, I won't have their pontification until *after* you arrive in the homeworlds. I've taken the initiative and the orders are in the pipeline, turning Marcus over to your CMO. For myself, I'd be glad to trust the boy to Doctor Reardon. I also know Senator Brand will demand to accompany his son, and it's not a demand I'd want to deny. Where Marcus goes, Cassius won't be far away."

"Which suits Central just fine," Cantrell pointed out. "NARC has a vested interest in Cass Brand. He was one of our founder members, his name is on the legislation that inspired our charter. Now Starfleet's impeaching him, trying to deflect responsibility for the Mostov disaster away from their own man. I'd say Cass *needs* to be on Earth, where he can consult with the best lawyers NARC can find, get his case together."

"This whole thing," Stone said acidly, "is about to get bloody damned complicated."

"And all this bullshit is on NARC orders?" Jarrat asked shrewdly.

As Stone expected, Dupre made negative noises. "Only nominally. The orders come from higher offices. The Surgeon General is a civilian, and the individuals whose world might be challenged by Leo Michiko's testimony are far above us, in a strata to which one is elected by popular ballot."

"Politics." Stone disliked the word in his mouth.

The overcast was breaking up across Venice. A storm would hit the city in the evening, but for a few hours the sun would shine, the streets would steam. A shaft of bright gold seemed to lance into the office, and Stone was

reminded of Tarataga, and of the island of Outbound, where Riki Mitchell had hitched a lift aboard a NARC shuttle. He forced his mind back to the present as Dupre said,

"You don't have to like the system, Stone. You do have to work with it. I believe your family had wanted to groom you for just such a career."

Stone spread his hands, a theatrical gesture. "And here I am."

The remark made Cantrell laugh, and even Dupre found a smile. "All right, you make your point. But remember, you'll be wearing NARC's official face, on Earth. Ostensibly, you're delivering Marcus for treatment, taking Senator Brand to consult with our legal arm, and taking Michiko to NARC Central, where he'll meet not only the most senior officers in this service, but also the politicians, representing the electorates of Earth, whose orders we follow."

A suspicious look had gathered between Jarrat's brows. The gray eyes were sharp with a feral kind of cunning. "You're assigning Stoney and me to bodyguard duty. We can do it, but it's unorthodox. There's twenty other NARCs who'd qualify for the job, without tying up a carrier."

"All very true," Dupre agreed. His eyes glittered as he surveyed Jarrat and Stone, waiting.

"So you want us, specifically, on bodyguard detail." Jarrat was only going through the motions. Stone was aware of the electric tension in his belly. They had both already jumped to the same conclusion. "Looks like we have a party of at least six. We could book aboard a clipper, do the trip in style."

"We could also do it the hard way, on a courier," Stone added, "in less than half the time ... but that wouldn't park the *Athena* deep in the homeworlds, Colonel, would it?"

"No." Dupre smiled, not unlike a snake. "No, it wouldn't." He steepled his fingers and leaned toward them over the desk. "Mister Michiko's situation is extremely dangerous. When his information begins to filter through various offices on Earth itself, there will be ... repercussions."

"There'll be bloody seismic shocks," Cantrell corrected. He nailed Jarrat and Stone with a hard look. "We want a carrier there. Don't look at the *Huntress*, not so soon. She'll launch on time, but I'm taking her out on a shakedown before she's assigned, and I have less than half a crew. We *need* a fully operational carrier in the homeworlds, Earth and Mars, because when the cockroaches start to scatter, they'll head in every direction, so fast, Tactical will be breathing their dust. And you can believe me, there are people who will be shitting bricks when they see the *Athena* coming in."

Because as a NARC carrier she was not supposed to be within five systems of the homeworlds. For decades there had been an unwritten rule. NARC's territory was the colonies, where the provincial rabble could be whipped into shape using whatever means necessary and available.

The taste in Stone's mouth was sour. "The Sorenson bill is bad news," he said quietly to Dupre. "I can tell you now, there's a lot of people on the *Athena* who won't play his game. You could be looking at a blizzard of resignation letters."

The colonel was nodding. "I know. I could be drafting my own." He was up and moving, pacing the office as if he could not be still. "I've given this department as many years as Gene has. Like Brand, we're founder members, we were there when the ink was still wet on the NARC charter. We've always been committed to *protect* the public. In six months, or twelve, if Bram Sorenson gets his way, we could be used as a weapon to crush the very civilians we were charged to protect. And if people like yourselves, and like the descant troops, hand me resignations by the sheaf, I'll countersign them."

"Like the descant troops," Jarrat echoed. "You mention them specifically."

"Because they're the ones on the front line," Cantrell said acerbically. "It'll be people like Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos, Tanya Reynolds and Eve Lang, out there turning the gunships on civilians, whose last line of protest — peaceful, orderly demonstration — will be abused. Jesus God, you saw the rat circus at the docks when the *Stardust* arrived."

It had started as an orderly protest, a blockade aimed at getting the GlobalNet cameras pointed in the right direction. "Someone," Stone said softly, "got in among them and stirred it up."

"Always happens." Jarrat looked away. "It'd happen on Sheal, and the next thing you knew there was blood, and the Army arrived. Meaning me, some of the time. And Eve Lang, in other years, other hotspots. You do as you're told and restore order, and if there's collateral damage, hard luck."

Dupre paused in his pacing. "But Sheal was a corporate warzone. An Army carrier had a right to be there. The street isn't a warzone. The civilians we'll be suppressing aren't a corporate militia. Yet this is the theater where we'll be deployed. Ultimately, people like Cronin and Ramos and yourselves *will* fight, if only in self defense."

The picture was bleak. Stone hunted for any glimmer of light. "There's always a chance the bill won't go through in the colonies, even if it's carried in the homeworlds."

"That," Dupre said bitterly, "is the province of senators and congressmen. The situation is also months away, possibly years. The political wrangling could go on for a long time. Time enough," he added almost in an undertone, "for the big picture to change a second time, in ways Senator Bram Sorenson can probably not even imagine."

It was Jarrat who said, "Harry Del." His eyes were bright.

"And Leo Michiko." Cantrell's eyes were on his chrono. "Cat among the pigeons, Kevin. The *Athena* is going home. Earth. You flush the cockroaches out, see what scuttles where, and why. And I," he said to Dupre, "am running way overtime. If I'm not signing off on the Michiko dossier, Bill, I have to get my gear back together and go meet the man."

"He's on the base," Stone guessed. "Under surveillance?"

"Oh, yes," Dupre said darkly. "He's wearing a chip a centimeter under the skin of his back. He doesn't even know it's there, but I know where he is, every second. He can't get off the base, nor can he get access to sensitive

areas, so there's no reason to confine him to a cell. He's in an apartment, quite comfortable, with his food coming in from a four-star restaurant and a live-in Companion who has absolutely no idea who he's entertaining. Michiko has no complaints at this time. He knows he's been summoned to Earth, and I'll inform him he's rejoining the carrier."

"We shove off in four days." Jarrat stood and thrust his hands into the hip pockets of his denims.

"Your upgrades and service work will be finished in three." Dupre was looking into the CRT. Until then, go over the Michiko dossier, talk to Doctor Del about Cassius Brand and his son. Take a look at the boy yourselves, if you like. And —" He hesitated and consulted the CRT. "I regret to inform you, you'll be running a series of simulations, designed by Doctor McKinnen before she shipped out on a *Cygnus Pacifica*. This new round of sims are designed in compliance with the requirements of our R&D department. The data request comes from Earth Central, not from me, so before you blow up in my face, remember, I also have a boss!"

Stone groaned. "Christ, this is all we need. Who's monitoring?"

"I'll play," Jarrat said quickly, "if Harry monitors the runs. If you don't assign Harry ... no more sims, Colonel. No more data. Stoney?" Stone agreed with a mute nod. "We'll take it up with the bozos in charge of R&D when we get to Earth," Jarrat said in an intractable tone, "and if they want to fire me, I'll walk with a smile on my face."

"What he said," Stone agreed.

The colonel allowed himself a faint chuckle. "Doctor McKinnen's notes were nothing if not thorough. She warns several times that you won't accept any other monitor, and in fact, her recommendation suggests Doctor Del as the only qualified monitor. He's the sole empath affiliated with my staff. No one else in this system knows you and your situation well enough to have an opinion as to whether it's a gift or a curse. I've contacted Del already."

"All right." Jarrat took a long breath. "Can we get through the sims in four days, before we shove off?"

"Not by a long shot," Cantrell judged. "I've seen the schedule. The word 'grueling' comes to mind. You'll be as challenged as if you were in the field. You might need another week in the tropics to recover. I'd say it'll take at least ten days to get through the program, maybe twelve."

"Shit," Stone hissed.

"You want it in stronger language?" Jarrat's eyes clenched shut and he tipped his head back, worked his neck around. "You spoke to Harry? And he said —?"

"He hasn't returned my call. Yet," Dupre admitted, amused. "You might take it up with him, when you consult regarding the Brands."

"We'll do that." Stone followed Jarrat to his feet, and they were edging to the door with Cantrell right behind them. "Classified paperwork, you said. An ocean of it. And we'll set up a schedule for these bloody sims, according to Harry's agenda. *He*ll tell you when and how, not us."

“Good enough.” Dupre turned his attention to the CRT. “Assuming Doctor Del will be aboard the carrier, you have a fourteen day flight in to Earth, there’s time aplenty to accommodate the tests. Keep me informed, gentlemen.”

The door snicked closed behind them, and Jarrat pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, hard enough for Stone to see a veil of red before his own vision. “Christ, Stoney, we’re back in simulation.”

“With Harry monitoring.” Stone slung his arm around Jarrat’s shoulders and turned him toward the staff lounge, the AutoChefs, and lunch. “Let Harry do the ‘family doctor’ routine, like he offered. I wouldn’t be the guy in charge of R&D if they rub him the wrong way.”

“Not,” Jarrat said caustically, “when he might have a plausible blocker for Angel tucked right up his sleeve.” He stalked away, taking Stone with him. “I’m hungry. You want lunch, Gene?”

“Suddenly I’ll be with Michiko till late,” Cantrell called after them. “I’ll catch up with you at the game, if you’re going.”

Stone glanced back with a grin. “To see the Blue Ravens whup some Starfleet butt on the aeroball court? Gable’s getting us tickets. We’ll see you there.”

Cantrell disappeared into the security lift, and Stone followed his partner with a curious sensation, part apprehension, part tingling anticipation.

They were headed for Earth, and against the odds, counter to every intuition he had felt in recent years, part of his mind still said *home*.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fairview stretched between the ocean and the foothills of the Richardson Hills, a long, low range named after the first human pilot to scout this territory. The Fraser River spilled out into Neptune Gulf in South Fairview, and the widest part of the waterway was busy with sailboats, charter craft, expensive houseboats for hire, and battered workboats which serviced the mid-gulf aquaculture farms. Harry Del’s house was just north of the river, where the roadbridge swept over and the marina was tucked into a river cove that had once been a mangrove colony. The swamps were long gone, the water traffic was always busy, but sea snakes were still seen occasionally, and indigenous eels came in at the full moons of spring to breed in the warm, brackish tidal ponds off the main channel.

A dark green Rand Eclipse stood on Harry’s driveway, baking in the evening sun. The NARC logo was discreet on both gullwings and the roof. A

Tactical ground squad had cruised the neighborhood not an hour before, and from the verandah, Jarrat watched them scan the car and match it with records. The squad pulled away moments later. The Rand was kosher. He had signed it out of the NARC garage himself in the late afternoon, and it would be back in the morning.

The aroma of grilling fish tantalized the olfactory senses, and he heard the clatter of crockery from around the corner of the house, the age-old popping sound of a cork exiting a wine bottle. Harry had said, bring a decent white, something that won't disgrace grilled Blue Grenadier and a Greek salad. What Jarrat and Stone knew of Harry's taste in wine was limited, so they brought three and let the healer choose.

Sunset would be bloody. The sun was bloated on the horizon and the storm which had been hovering there since before dawn was moving in. The air felt electric, reminding Jarrat strongly of the forested mountains around Ballyntyre. He knew without asking, Harry was thinking the same thing. He wore a moody, wistful face, and the Bally accent was heavier than usual in his voice. He wanted to go home, he was perilously close to the end of his rope, and he did not care who knew it.

He was also deeply insulted, and Jarrat did not need to share any empathic bond with him to know he was hurt. Still, Harry would barely speak about the Marcus Brand case. It was Cassius Brand who was so furious, streams of smoke might have been issuing from his nostrils. Brand also was a colonial; he owed his son's life — any chance of Marcus waking and returning to him — to Harry, and he respected the colonial medical qualifications.

"Kevin? Kevin, we're eating!" Stone's voice called from the west side of the house, where the sand-drifted gardens became the beach, and at high tide the gulf waters crept right up to the paint-peeled, tumbledown picket fence. Stone knew exactly where Jarrat was, just as Jarrat was keenly aware of his partner's hunger. Stone had been ready to eat a half hour before, but apparently there was a certain artistry involved in marinating fish and chopping salad. It took time, and Stone was dragooned into slicing red onions and opening the wine. Jarrat rolled his eyes and escaped from Harry's kitchen before he also could be dragooned.

The Fairview property was leased, and the lease expired in a few months. Harry liked it well enough, and it suited his needs, but he had no desire to stay. His own house, reduced to a burned-out shell when elements of Death's Head assaulted it, was almost rebuilt. His labs would be installed by now, the new computers online, the cold stores operating. He was itching to leave, and even now Jarrat was far from sure he would agree to make the two-week journey in to Earth — the opposite direction from where he wanted to go. Harry had still not returned Dupre's call, and Jarrat had the suspicion, he never would. It was one request too many from the base commander, as if Harry was fleetingly aware of the smell of an *order*.

Any hint of an order would make him dig in his toes and resist with mulish

stubbornness. He had played NARC at its own game for months, keeping a grip on some part of his liberty even when he was confined for days at once in the labs under the Venice complex. The strain was showing on him, Jarrat thought. He was exhausted right through to his bones, and his eyes were shadowed. He wore the familiar denim shorts and gaudy surfer shirts, and was often barefoot, but he was losing flesh, losing muscle tone. He needed to get out, get home, and Harry knew this better than anyone.

The food smelt very good. The healer was lifting the fish off the grill as Jarrat came around the corner of the wide return verandah. He took a glass of crisp, dry chardonnay and a swift kiss from his partner. Cassius Brand was sitting in the basket chair beside the back door. And he looked, Jarrat decided, like a skeleton wrapped in a bronze silk kimono. Having Marcus retrieved from the tank only to remain in coma had hit him hard. It seemed to Jarrat that the old man's will to survive at all revolved around seeing Marcus wake. The Bergman syndrome was racing through every part of him, and he was alive now mainly through his own willpower.

Jarrat joined Harry at the table, where Stone was tossing a massive salad of assorted greens, red onions, olives and pungent white cheese, and where Brand could not hear what was said, so long as he kept his voice down. "He looks," he said softly, "like hell. What, Harry, still getting revenge for what he put you through? I thought you'd have buried the hatchet and worked your magic on him by now. It's been — what, close to three weeks?"

Harry glanced at him over the grill's raised hood. "I offered, but Cass actually put me off. The old buzzard strikes a hard bargain with Dame Fortune. You know the old saying, something about 'Life's got to be worth living before I live it' —? He laid that bullshine on me, and I think he meant it, at least at the time. If Marcus is actually gone, it'll take an extraordinary inspiration to make Cass want to get back in the driver's seat."

"How about tearing Starfleet's legal case wide open," Stone suggested. "We saw the documents, Harry. It's the proverbial steaming pile. They're protecting their pilot, Jack Brogan."

"They're protecting themselves," Harry scoffed. "Cass gives me the news from back home, *his* home, Aurora. It comes through on his private channels twice a day, and he gets a lot that's classified, stuff GlobalNet would kill to get hold of. Colonel Kristine Janssen messaged him just yesterday." His brows arched, creasing his forehead. "Starfleet must have known the colonial government of Aurora would sue the pants off them for damages after Mostov. Janssen's information is, they're asking for ten-figures, in good old credits, not the rubbish dollars we poor cousins earn! For Bill Dupre to have already gotten the documents informing Cass of the impeachment, you know a Starfleet courier had to bug out of the Aurora system with its tail feathers on fire, about the time daylight was breaking over Mostov's smoking ruins! This whole thing, now, is just legal bullshit, major ass-covering, and Starfleet moved so fast, they bloody knew what was going to happen. They *knew*," Harry finished darkly, "they'd be held responsible for Mostov, and it was

going to look ugly in the newsvids, as far back as the homeworlds.”

He was right. Jarrat and Stone shared a bleak look, and Stone said quietly, “Listen, Harry, we heard about the other business, how Marcus’s treatment’s been snatched right out of your hands. For the record, to Kevin and me it’s so much crap. You’re the best in the business, right alongside Kip Reardon, and a light year ahead of Kip when you get to your own stuff.”

The empath blinked at him. “Thanks, Stoney. It means a lot to hear it said.” He breathed a long sigh and seemed to order his thoughts before he spoke again. “Bill insists it’s nothing personal. Somebody in the NARC Surgeon General’s office looked into the details, and —”

“Counted up the beans,” Jarrat finished. “They don’t like the color of your diplomas.”

Harry summoned a faint smile. “My credentials are colonial, Kevin.” He cocked his head curiously at Jarrat. “You’ve never been to Earth, have you?”

“Never had any desire to go,” Jarrat admitted, “till recently. Since Stoney and I got together, I’ve wanted to see where he’s from. And I know what you’re going to tell me. Colonials aren’t favored in the homeworlds. Kip’s from Mars, Petrov’s your genuine Earthside Russian, Joe Ramos is from someplace in North America, so’s Budweisser ... and the reason they all left is, the one thing they really can’t stand is prejudice.” He gave Stone a sidelong grin. “Half our crew was recruited in the colonies, the other half quit the homeworlds years ago. They get along just fine.”

“Because they’re out here,” Harry warned. “All the Earthsiders you know, Kevin, are the ones who decided to get the hell out when they weren’t much more than kids.” He was busy with the shrimp kebabs. “Watch yourself when you’re groundside. In fact, Stoney, *you* bloody watch him. He’s yours to watch!”

“I will,” Stone said thoughtfully. “It sounds like you’re not making the trip.”

For some time Harry did not answer. The kebabs were plated and he had swiped up the bowl of dipping sauce before he said, “I don’t want to, but I’ll probably come along to keep an eye on Cass and the boy. Particularly on Cass.” He dropped his voice. “Between you and me, there’s zip I can do for Marcus. But the old man’s ... actually not so old. It’s Bergman syndrome you’re looking at, not normal aging. He’s just had a birthday, making him 87. Now, I’ll grant you, he’s no spring chicken! But how old do you think Leo Michiko will look, and feel, when he’s the same age? At face value, you’d assume Cass was three, maybe four decades older than he is, and sick into the bargain. He can have those years back ... if he wants to live.”

As Harry spoke Jarrat was frowning at the senator, but he was thinking of Valda Hawass. Eventually, a day arrived when gene therapies were no longer effective, when the long decline into extreme old age began, and the cosmetic work which kept the surface presentable was barely skin-deep. But viewed alongside Hawass, Brand was comparatively young.

“I can give him back his time,” Harry was saying, “but if he doesn’t want

to go on, there's no law says he must. Bergman syndrome is one of the few incurables left. Anything I can do for Cass is pure serendipity. Grab the salt shakers, will you, Kevin? The fact is, one week ago, I'd have said there was nothing that would get through to Cass, short of Marc waking. But now ... I'm seeing flickers, and it's Starfleet that's kindled them. Well, them and Senator Bram Sorenson's contribution."

He had been heading for the table as he spoke, and Brand's old ears caught the name. He looked up out of sunken, hooded eyes, and Harry was right, Jarrat decided. They glittered with something very like fury. "Bram Sorenson is a bastard with a double-digit IQ and the compassion of a turnip," Brand said, tart as green apples. Even his voice was old, thready and asthmatic. "It's him who should be impeached, not me! Good Christ, this legislation he's lobbying will turn the colonies inside out." He heaved himself out of the chair and straightened his spine with an obvious effort. "Governments will use NARC as a weapon — if they're allowed to. Bloody Sorenson would rationalize the carnage as unavoidable and acceptable casualties. Collateral damage."

"So stop him." Harry set down the plates he was carrying and helped Brand into a chair at the end of the table. "You have the power, Cass. You speak with the voice of the colonies ... the First Families and all that crap. Your people were out here so long ago, you own the colonies, you have your own cultural heritage. Bastards from Earth won't listen to a word you say, but by gods, the colonial governments will. You detest Sorenson, wish he'd go up in spontaneous combustion? Fine. Take him on, head to head, play him at his own game and beat him bloody. But first, you have to *live*."

The wizened face puckered; Jarrat guessed the expression was a wry smile. "You mean, I have to *want* to live ... have a reason to go on for decades, when Marcus is ..."

"Cass." Harry pulled up a chair and took Brand's gnarled hand. "You haven't given up hope, and that's good. Marc's a pioneer. Nobody was ever in cryo for a quarter century, then retrieved. All we know about cryosleep is its effect on the physical body. On *meat*. Maybe there's more. Maybe the human spirit isn't trapped in flesh. Perhaps it goes wandering when we tank the body. Given decades at liberty, it could be ten dimensions and a billion light years away, far in the future or in the remote past. Perhaps — and I'm flying kites! — it needs to find its way back. Nobody knows. Anyone who tells you they know *absolutely* for sure that mind and brain are the same, is lying. And it's a wicked lie, because it consigns us all to *post mortem* extinction. There's no conclusive evidence to support *any* theory of the spirit, soul, mind. One theory says consciousness is a separate energy, unfettered by flesh, unextinguished by death. The other says mind *is* brain. Neither side has a scrap of hard data, science is no more qualified to speak than philosophy. A materialist who insists brain *is* mind, and a metaphysicist who believes he or she can prove out-of-body experience, both offer data which the opposition is compelled to ridicule. We can only speculate, as I've been doing for weeks."

"Kip Reardon's documents list Marcus as comatose," Stone mused.

"He's in deep coma," Harry affirmed as he divided up the food. "He's not even dreaming. Yet I made sure the brain is viable. The Angel damage is repaired, and Marc ... occasionally there's a flicker of *something*, a few blips on the monitors. And you know what it reminds me of? It's for all the world like the *ping* of a GPS signal. Periodically it calls home, takes a navigational fix on its base point — reports in, if you like, maintains the most basic communication. The mobile unit lets the base unit know where it is, that it's still functional, still ... out there." He regarded Brand thoughtfully as he set a plate before him. "Cass, your kid's a pioneer, doing something that's never been done before. You might have to be patient for *years* before the spirit of your son is ready to return to flesh — or even capable of returning."

"Capable of returning," Brand echoed hoarsely.

"Remember," Harry warned, "we've never been able to design apparatus fine enough to detect 'spirit,' and it's not been for want of trying! *If* spirit exists, by definition, it consists of energy resonating outside the range of our sensors ... or in a dimension we can't get readings out of ... or both. Probably both. Any laws of physics we understand are certainly still too primitive for us to even theorize about that region — which doesn't mean it doesn't exist. We can *guess* time and space function differently there. Many legends tell of places *outside* of time. If you've been exploring a realm where time isn't an issue, why in any hell would you want to come back here, where time drags by one day at a time, and you're trapped in a single temporal stream?" Harry's voice was level. He was absolutely serious. "Cass, you have to allow for the possibility that Marcus could come back if he *wanted* to. He just has no desire to."

Metaphysics had never been Jarrat's forte, but he had endured enough grade school astrophysics to grasp what Harry was driving at. Mathematics and philosophy had been drifting together, threatening to merge into the same hyper reality, since the middle of the twentieth century. A grand unification theory remained elusive, but theoretical physicists believed the 'theory of everything' was very close, and it would describe everything from the most fundamental chemical concept to the passage of the life force from the flesh into dimensions such as Harry imagined.

"Patience," the healer was saying. "And in the end, Cass, it's Marc's decision. Perhaps he's been at liberty for a long time, possibly even on a level where time doesn't even exist. He might have been gone the equivalent of a thousand years. Longer. I'm not sure if coming back *voluntarily* is a choice I would make."

Brand was glaring at Jarrat now, and Kevin could guess what he was going to say. "You were in cryogen."

"For a matter of hours," Jarrat protested. "And besides, part of me never surrendered what I have here, now." He reached along the table and took Stone's hand tightly. "My memory was off, but my subconscious knew I had a mountain of unfinished business ... and somebody I cared about was

tracking me down. I have zero idea of how it works, Senator, but if I had to guess, I'd say you have to *want* to stick around and finish what you started. And maybe you have to be ready to make one hell of a sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" Brand rasped.

"You might have to trade the freedom of fantastic dimensions outside of time for ... this." He flexed his hand, watching the fingers with a frown. "Flesh and bone, one time stream passing day by day, slow as a glacier and full of the kind of pain the physical flesh knows way too much about." He tightened his grip on Stone's hand. "I'm also guessing, a short cryosleep isn't long enough to give you the option. People were shipped out by the millions to the colonies, and they arrived alive and kicking. You want me to guess? A few weeks tanked is probably like being sedated after surgery. Your mind isn't done yet ... you stick around. Me? I was down for *hours*. What could I know?"

"Eat, Cass," Harry said sternly. "And for godsakes give this some sober thought. You know bloody well, you can't live much longer if you don't let me treat you! The syndrome is racing. If you don't live, you won't even be here in a year or two, if Marcus decides to wake. And you sure as hell won't have what it takes to challenge Bram Sorenson and beat him to a pulp on the colonial vote!"

The flicker Jarrat had seen in Brand's sunken eyes was back, and shrewd as a lame old wolf. "You can do this for me?" The senator's odd gaze shifted to the younger men. "The same as you did it for them?"

"Damn it, you know I can! I've been telling you for ten days," Harry said tersely. "Now, shut up and eat. Sorenson and his ridiculous bill will keep for a while, and Marc isn't waking up any time soon. Get well first. You need to get strong again, too. Your body's wasted. I can't put flesh on your bones and spring in your muscles. Those, you'll have to work and sweat for. Then, show Sorenson we colonials are made of tougher stuff than he thinks."

"I'll have to get Starfleet off my back first." At least Brand was eating, nibbling around the corners of a kebab.

"Can you do it?" Stone had heaped his plate with salad, and dug a fork into it. "Gene Cantrell and Bill Dupre seem to think it's a matter of location."

"They'd be right," Harry muttered as he squeezed lime juice over his fish.

"If they get me into a tribunal on Earth, I'm busted." Brand was intent on his plate but no longer eating. "You've discovered how *Earthers* regard colonial medical qualifications. You think they're any happier about legal degrees issued by colonial colleges? Meaning, if the tribunal convenes on Earth I can't bring in my own counsel from Aurora. My people would be regarded as amateurs. I'd have to hire Earthside attorneys, who look down on colonials at the best of times. And as for me —? I've already been cast as the villain. I'm the face and voice of the government that allowed the old city to be occupied at all. Let it degenerate into a slum, citybottom. Let industry encroach over the surface, so Mostov turned into a bomb the first time some irresponsible, brainless Starfleet *bastard* let missiles fall there."

The venom in his voice was astonishing. Jarrat glanced along at Stone,

and they shared a quiver of memory. They had been in Mostov. The furnace heat and toxic pall were burned into Jarrat's memory. Stone toyed with his fork for a moment and reached for the wine before he said carefully,

"You mind if I play devil's advocate, Senator? Somebody has to ask the question. Why did the city let those things happen?"

Brand sat back and patted his parchment lips with a napkin. "Mostov was citybottom, and every city has one, Stone, even London and Chicago, Tokyo and Shanghai. Mostov was where you landed when your luck ran out, your job went away, your family quit on you, and you ... quit on yourself." He took a long breath. "There's such a place in every city, and it must be there. It's the launchpad from which you can spring right back after you've hit bottom and rested, recovered, got yourself back in gear." His eyes were hawkish on Jarrat and Stone. "Jarrat knows. He understands. You, Stone? You were born with the silver spoon in your mouth. You didn't see citybottom till you were an adult, slumming for thrills. But Jarrat's from Sheckley, he knows the city has to have a place that's cheap *enough*, warm *enough*, safe *enough*, for a person to fall, hit bottom, recuperate, and start over."

A shiver took Jarrat unawares, and Stone felt it. "Kevin?"

"I'm okay," Jarrat murmured, intent on Brand, who had not even paused for breath.

"And as for the industry on the surface — I can show you the engineers' blueprints, Captain. According to every safety protocol in the colonies, and a majority on Earth itself, Mostov was perfectly sound. There was nothing unsafe about it. The industry above was separated out by twenty meters of armored, shock-cushioned ferroplascrete. Nothing, and I mean *nothing*, short of a missile attack would get through it." He lifted his glass and took a deep swig of wine which left his voice hoarse. "You can't armor a city — any city, anywhere — against a missile attack. If you could, what the sweet *fuck* would be the point of mounting missiles on your warplanes? By definition, a missile attack is an act of war. Warfare is designed to destroy real estate. Starfleet brought a war to Mostov. The old city was destroyed with military weapons, in a military incident. It was utterly unnecessary ... and if I could, I'd crucify Colonel Jack Brogan for it."

"He led the heat-seeking missiles that were riding his tailpipe right into the city," Stone said bitterly. "But Starfleet's case seems to be, if there hadn't been a surface layer of industry on top of Mostov, the fire and explosions wouldn't have reached the old city. They ... might have a case."

"They do," Brand barked. "I told you, Stone, if I let myself get dragged into court on Earth, they'll destroy me." His face set into harsh lines. "But if I can make the buggers convene the tribunal under colonial jurisdiction, I'll make sushi of Brogan, and Starfleet's attorneys along with him."

"Enough!" Harry's palms smacked the table hard enough to shake the cutlery. "There's enough stress around this table to light up an apartment block. I'll take it as read, Cass, I'm treating you —?" The old man answered with a mute glare. "Tonight, then," Harry decided, "while you're still mad

enough to get the adrenaline flowing! And then ... you should go home.”

Jarrat blinked. “I thought he’d be with Marcus, on the carrier.”

But Harry’s dark head was shaking. “Think about what he just said. If Cass sets foot in the homeworlds, Starfleet can exercise their jurisdiction and have him confined. He’ll remain in custody till the tribunal convenes, in which case, it happens on Earth. He loses his leverage. We all do. And Bram Sorenson’s team will party hearty.”

“Damn, he’s right.” Stone sat back and surveyed the table bleakly. “If he’s on the carrier and we hide him, don’t let Starfleet get their hooks into him, we’re accessories to what *could* be called an ‘illegality,’ or at the very least an ‘irregularity in the due process of law.’ Sorry. It’s been a long time since I wore a Tactical uniform, but some things, you don’t forget.” His brows rose as he looked at Brand. “If you want to maintain your leverage, make the buggers convene the tribunal on Aurora ... you *must* stay the hell out of the homeworlds.”

“Christ.” Brand pressed his face into both palms. “I swore I’d be with Marcus, I’d be there when he woke.”

“There’s more at stake,” Harry insisted gently. “I give you my word, I’ll be with Marc until the moment he’s transferred to NARC’s own facilities, and even I’ll agree, they’re the best in the homeworlds. If he wakes on the journey in, knows who he is, who his father is, I’ll tell him everything. If he’s still in coma when I sign him over ... who knows? Maybe some cross between genius and guru can pull off magic that’s beyond me. They might be able to wake him, Cass, when I can’t.”

“If they do,” Jarrat added, “Dupre will message you, soon as there’s anything to tell. Get Starfleet off your back, Senator, and you won’t be popular on Earth, but you’ll be free to travel there, maybe on campaign. Marcus will be safe in the NARC facility.”

For a long time the old man seemed to gaze into some middle distance only he could see. When he spoke at last, his voice was vague. The words slurred. “You’re right, of course. I just ...” He shoved the chair back and struggled to his feet. “You’re right,” he whispered again, and was moving.

They watched him shuffle to the backdoor at the midpoint of the verandah, and he vanished into the dimness of the house. Harry swore and speared a shrimp with a vengeful jab. He did not eat it, but used it to beat an angry rhythm on the side of his plate. “I’ll book him on the first clipper back to Thule. When does the *Athena* ship out?”

“Four days, less a few hours.” Stone drained his glass and poured another. “But we’d want you to get Marcus aboard and settled a day early.”

“Liaise with Kip,” Jarrat agreed. “Whatever you need, tell him to rubber stamp the requisition.”

“I’ll need some weird and wonderful shit,” Harry warned, “if you want me to continue my work en route.”

“Your lab work,” Stone guessed. “The Angel blocker.”

“The Angel blocker,” Harry echoed, and his eyes closed. “It’s like chasing

the will-o'-the-wisp. Like dancing with the breeze. You can't catch up with it, can't get a grip on it, but — oh, you can see it, you can *smell* it." He was looking blindly into his wine glass. "I've glimpsed it, and I know I can isolate it. I also know I'll feel it, in *here* —" rubbing the side of his head "— when I've found it. The thing is, Stoney, Kevin, I might be the only one who can do this. I'm a mutoid, and we're rare. I'm an empath, a healer, and even among the mutoids we're rarer still. I've rummaged inside the physical brains of several living Angel users, enough to start to see the common denominators. And I have the formal training, I'm a research chemist, a cell biologist, as well as a medical doctor. I don't think there's anyone else who can do this work."

"And you were close to results," Jarrat added, "when your property was hit. We know you lost a lot of ground."

"I did," Harry agreed, "but I've made it up, and the second time around the work's taken me in different directions. Kip's shared his data with me, and I've had the chance to work with kids like Tim Kwei." His eyes brightened, glittering with the light of zeal. "I have a solution, compounded from a dozen kinds of rare, toxic fungi and the venom of a certain tropical arachniform native to Avalon. In infinitesimally small dosages it's a powerful hallucinogen, euphoric and aphrodisiac ... it's also highly addictive. And as it stands, it's among the most lethal substances ever developed, and that includes Angel itself, and any nerve gas you care to name. But I'm so sure, *one* element in the solution is the blocker for Angel. The problem is, there are over four *thousand* individual elements, and isolating them will take years."

It was on the tip of Jarrat's tongue to suggest he solicit the help of NARC or the government, for funding and the machines to cut through the work in a fraction the time. But before he could speak, the full ramifications of what Harry had said hit him like a body blow. They rolled into Stone less than a second later.

"Damn," Stone murmured. "If you shared data..."

"At this point," Harry said quietly, "All I've developed is the most horrific biological weapon our violent, nasty species has ever known. If I let it escape into the hands of any government, anywhere, my name could easily be recorded in the annals of history right alongside Genghis and Hitler." He did not have to feign a shudder. "You'll understand if I do the work with my own hands, in my own lab, in my own time. I'll isolate the specific compound I want and then incinerate the test materials and destroy the data."

"Christ," Stone breathed.

Fever visions of Sheal were blood red before Jarrat's eyes. It might have been any corporate battleground of the last century, and he knew on the instinctive level, if such a weapon were in the arsenal, someone, somewhere would use it. His appetite was gone and he sat back, watching the gulls which squabbled at the end of the garden, right above the beach. The overcast was dense and blue-black. The air was thickly humid, heavy with the scent of flowering shrubs and crackling with the electricity of an approaching storm.

"Cass has offered to fund the work," Harry said quietly. "He has to get

rid of this ridiculous impeachment case, and so long as he fights it on Aurora, there's no doubt a topnotch colonial legal team will throw out Starfleet's case. It's going to cost a bloody fortune but, luckily, to him it's a flea bite. It'll cost a whole 'nother fortune to go after Bram Sorenson, but the entire political machine will swing into gear. Cass will be on the campaign trails. He always said he could run for colonial governor on Aurora, and win easily. This is his opportunity. And I," he added in a bare murmur, "get my funding via the backdoor, to install the computers, the machines."

"Not here," Jarrat began, "not on Darwin's."

"Jesus, no!" Harry stood and began to collect crockery. "You want to move onto the verandah? A bucket-sized raindrop just hit me in the eye. No ... I'm going home, Kevin. I had a message from the contractor who's rebuilding my house, and two weeks ago he was polishing the windows and sweeping out the spiders. It's done. Tansy sent me a vid, she was over there to supervise the installation of the computers." His face seemed to hollow as he looked at the younger men. "You know this is what I've been waiting for. I'd have vanished with the next clipper, if I wasn't needed on the *Athena*." Harry paused and finished awkwardly, "I won't be staying in the homeworlds. I'm not welcome or respected there. In fact, I'll be an object of curiosity, even derision, if it gets out to the media who I am, and *what*. NARC promises me anonymity, but in my experience, there's no such thing."

Jarrat had expected as much. "So you'll monitor the simulations on the way in, keep your eye on Marcus, then sign him over to NARC's own neurologists, and get a clipper out. Earth or Mars to Rethan, direct. Two weeks, maybe three if you have a stopover somewhere, and you're home."

"Home," Harry breathed the word like a prayer, and his eyes squeezed shut. "It's no secret, I miss my family like hell. And I'll be well out of this work Central has me doing. You know they're still after me to mess about in Janine Cruz's head? She must be a bloody lunatic. Certifiable. What in hell would possess a healthy person to volunteer for Angel addiction, so she and her partner can duplicate the bond you guys share? It's a nightmare, and I've just told R&D for the tenth fucking time, I won't be doing it. They don't seem to listen."

Raindrops the size of golfballs were spattering into the lush shrubbery, and they had stepped up into the shelter of the verandah. The ocean was silver-green and heaving but the wind was not cold. Jarrat savored the whole panorama as only one who had spent the first seventeen years of his life on Sheckley could, but Stone was preoccupied with Harry's troubles. He did not seem to notice the ocean, the black-faced gulls taking refuge in the eaves, or the crackle of lightning on the horizon.

"Where are Cruz and Scott Auel?" he was asking.

"Mars." Harry upturned the wine bottle to run the last drops into his glass. "They're at the Chryse training facility. Getting their brains examined, I should hope." He swallowed the wine in one gulp. "Stoney, fetch another bottle, will you? Bottom of the fridge. I refuse to fret about Cruz and

Auel anymore. NARC's bloody stupid R&D boffins don't know it, but I'm *gone*. Long before Janine Cruz gets to the point where she's blowing Angel up both nostrils of necessity, I'll be home. Me just bugging out should scrub the project, at least for a while. Cruz gets her life back ... she's a lucky kid, but she's too dumb to realize it."

Stone had slid open the wire mesh door, and paused on the threshold to frown at his partner. "You know they'll pressure us, Kevin, to get on Harry's case. Persuade him."

"You can play them at their own game," Jarrat said bleakly. "You're an Earther, born and bred. Tell them to bugger off, groundside in their own territory, and find somebody *qualified* to practice medicine under NARC auspices. They can't have it all ways. If they're snatching Marcus out of Harry's care, they can stand by their own regulations." He gave Harry a crooked grin. "All you have to do is let the bastards fire you as a medical professional, and you're out. What you've got here is two departments working on different wavelengths. R&D wants to turn Stoney and me into a weapon, or at least a bulletproof surveillance system. Meanwhile, the Surgeon bloody General's office has finally bothered to notice who's treating Marcus, and what the kid knows, if he ever wakes up. Oh, they want him, but under their own law, they *can't* recognize a colonial doctor. Sweet, isn't it?"

The cane chair creaked and shifted under Harry's weight as he sat. "It gives me a way out, and I'll grab it. I'm mad as hell, if I tell you the truth, but I've always known my qualifications wouldn't stand up under homeworlds scrutiny. It was only a matter of time before the bullshit hit this particular fan ... and here we are. I'm not even surprised. Just mad enough to chew nails, and sorry for Cass." He stirred with an effort as Stone reappeared with a green glass bottle on which the humid air was condensing as fat dewdrops. Harry watched him twist off the cap while Jarrat fetched glasses. "The upside is, you have someone to moderate these sims, on the way in. I'll have Cass up and dancing — and on the clipper back to Aurora. When he's done chewing up the Starfleet tribunal, he and I will work out the funding. He wants to call it the Marcus Brand Foundation. He's asked me to administrate it."

"It has a ring," Stone decided. "You'll be taking him up on the offer?"

The empath yawned deeply. The wine was hitting his bloodstream and he relaxed visibly. "I'll take a glass of whatever you got there. And yeah, I'll take Cass up on it. His attorneys will get the legalities straight. There'll be offices in Thule, Chell, Eldorado, wherever. Fundraising. Staff. It'll take *years* to get the oars in the water, and if I'm right, I'll have the pure blocker by the time it's set up. The Marcus Brand Foundation will be about rehabilitation for users, and ... Bram Sorenson can go fuck a skunk." He buried his nose in the glass Stone had just handed him.

At last Jarrat chuckled, and the humor was genuine. Harry seemed to inhale the wine without even tasting it. He put his head back, closed his eyes, and in minutes he would be asleep. Jarrat set a hand on Stone's arm, and they wandered to the west side of the house. They would be under cover of

the wide verandah there, and could watch the storm break out over the Neptune Gulf. By midnight, no part of Venice would not feel it.

The air was cooling as the sky darkened. Twilight wreathed the coastline, mauve, purple, shot through with lightning. Stone slung one arm across Jarrat's shoulders, and his lips traced a moist path from his nape to his mouth. Jarrat turned toward him, hunting for a kiss, but Stone was moving. On a whim, he gathered the wine and glasses and dodged from tree to tree, out to the summerhouse on the other side of the garden. Jarrat felt the skip of his pulse as he followed. The rain drummed loudly on the bamboo roof but the rhododendrons and magnolias shut out the wind, and the prying eyes of the beach fishermen who were still tending their lines.

The wine was crisp, cold. Jarrat held it on his tongue as he caught Stone's head and seized his lips. Stone murmured as he swallowed and his body was warm when he pressed Jarrat back into the timber support under the roof. The empathic shields dropped out by degrees. Desire had stirred in Jarrat as he watched Stone's broad back before him, as Stone made his way to the summerhouse, and here, now, there was no reason to deny it.

As the shields fell, the lust that had been a constant companion for so long ignited in a long, steady burn. Jarrat did not care to remember a time when he and Stone did not feel this, sharing everything from primal lust to a love so simple, it was profound.

Stone's skin was cool, but the pulse in his neck was fast, hard. Jarrat's lips were against it, almost tasting the beat of his life. He relaxed back into the timber and closed his eyes as Stone's hands slid into his shirt. They palmed his breast and swept downward, leaving swathes of tingling skin. He heard the snakelike slither of leather as his belt was cast aside, and the storm air prickled across his loins. Stone's breath banished the chill there.

He cradled his partner's skull, fingers threaded into the dark hair, clenched into the coarse silk of it, but Stone needed no urging. Jarrat's voice caught in his throat as he was swallowed, root to crown, and reality skewed, spun away into half-heard sounds, half-formed thoughts. Stone was in a teasing mood, and soon enough Jarrat was murmuring hoarse curses.

The next he knew, he was on the bench under the frangipani while rain thundered on the bamboo overhead. He was naked, and Stone was dropping his own clothes in a careless pile. Beautiful, Jarrat thought, watching him with the eyes of a lover. Stone was no less than magnificent. He could have been forgiven for arrogance, but Jarrat saw, felt, none of that.

He moved aside to make space on the bench, and found his shoulders against timbers that were still sun-warm while the air was rapidly chilling. He knew exactly what Stone wanted, and settled with his back against the joist. With a soft oath, Stone straddled his lap, lifted up and settled down on him. His hands molded around Jarrat's face, thumbs tracing the contours of cheekbones, his mouth. When he put his head down to kiss, Jarrat tasted himself there.

CHAPTER SIX

On the southwest skirt of Venice, where the forest thickened on the lower slopes of the Richardson Hills, the Hudson Company's steel and plascrete arena towered over suburban Toscana and Catalonia. The import-export corporation had not built the stadium, and in the months when Stone lived in Venice, training with NARC and waiting for assignment to a carrier, the old sports complex was derelict. He remembered a graffiti-vandalized wasteland of drifting litter and broken glass, and the battle fought between a developer who had made a bid to tear down the old Lambert Stadium to make way for a subdivision, and the local clubs that wanted it refurbished. The locals won. Hudson rode to the rescue with funding, and regional craftsmen enjoyed a labor boom. When a game was scheduled, the arena was the brightest thing in the night, south of the city center, and Hudson's advertising was visible for kilometers in every direction.

Tonight the parking lots were jammed, searchlights blazed and the licensed vendors were doing brisk business. The boards at the airgates to the parking lots read 'NARC-*Athena* Blue Ravens v. Starfleet-*Marquesas* 402 Squadron 'Tropic Lightning' — sudden death tournament, one night only.'

GlobalNet cameras hovered over the stadium, and from where Stone was standing, it looked like a sellout. Comm Officer Lonie Epstein from the *Marquesas* was tallying up the gate plus the five percent gross levied from the vendors, and making gleeful sounds. She did not seem to care if the team from her ship was pulverized. Hudson had provided the arena, free for the asking, when the words 'charitable event' were mentioned, and both Starfleet and NARC had provided security and paramedic services.

As Stone watched, the multicolored decks were rolled into place over the soccer field, the rugby goal posts retracted, and with a deep, resonant whine of powerful repulsion, the aeroball court was lowered into the middle of the arena. Portafoods jetted into position, camera drones — some barely the size of dragonflies — swarmed in over the decks. Eight displays rose out of the pitch at the touchlines, behind the goal nets and before the corner posts. The sound system growled into life, blared, stabilized. The threedee displays brightened with the ghost-light of excited plasma before they came online with multiple views of the court.

The music was so loud, Stone could barely hear himself think. He knew Jarrat was making his way back from the west concourse only because he was aware of the 'scent' of him through a chink in the shields; and he was talking

— shouting over the music. Stone was standing in the yellow aisle, at the end of the row where Gable had secured a block booking. Gene Cantrell was already seated with Kip Reardon, and to Stone's surprise, Jesse Lawrence, Tim Kwei and Jack Spiteri had just taken seats in the row behind. Spiteri worked on contract for NARC, designing the battlefield sims which kept the Ravens on their mettle; and the department's interoffice grapevine was faster than any official comm.

The three of them remained inseparable. Jesse in particular looked fine; Venice suited him, as did the life of a dancer. He had not worked as a Companion since the Equinox bust, and though he had lost none of the deliberate grace and beauty of the trade, he looked liberated. The mane of his hair was roped back in a thick braid, diamonds in his lobes caught a glitter from the stadium lights, and his fingers and wrists were heavy with platinum. He waved as he found Stone's eyes on him, cupped his hands and yelled something. Stone waved back, touched his ear and shook his head. He could not even hear Jesse's voice, much less make out what he was shouting.

The displays were cycling through player portraits and thumbnail bios as Jarrat and Gable made their way to the yellow aisle. Stone took a sack of noxiously fast food from his partner, and they settled beside Cantrell. He investigated the cups and cartons, and made a face; there was probably more nutrition in the wrappers. Gable was already eating, and beyond Cantrell most of the Gold and Red Ravens seemed to have descended *en masse*. The Green Ravens were rostered on standby, and settled for the vidfeed, piped into their ready room aboard the carrier. Evelyn Lang was sitting with Gable and Cantrell. A contingent of *Marquesas* supporters had camped not far from the NARC people, and only the thunder of the music prevented heckling.

Stone leaned over, put his lips against Jarrat's ear and said, "What odds are the bookies offering?"

"Five to one on our boys," Jarrat yelled over the din of steelrock. "Nobody likes the look of the Tropic Lightning."

On the screens, the player pictures and bios were coming up, and Stone also was unimpressed. The five members of the team and their three substitutes were years younger, and several were much more slightly built than the Blue Ravens — or most professional aeroball players. A handful of players in the pro leagues were small and apparently slender, relying on agility and speed. But aeroball was a hard, full-contact sport, and in the seconds between the drop of the ball and the possibility of a goal, physical strength and sheer determination were at least as critical as agility or speed.

"It's looking like a massacre," Gable shouted. "I put fifty on our lads, just to be sociable."

"Don't write off the Lightning," Jarrat warned. "They could be a hell of a lot tougher than they look — and they have one big guy."

The team's anchor was Eric Vanderzalm, a hangar deck master sergeant. Of the whole squad, only he looked like an aeroball player, while the others seemed to be pilots or flight crew, whose arrogance had gotten the better of

them in a bar one night. They wore determined faces, and strutted with the same arrogance in their red and gold team colors, but the strongest thing about them, Stone decided, was the fact they were accustomed to playing together. They were obviously a *team*, while the Blue Ravens were casual about their aeroball and seldom played 'in anger.' Five to one odds might be a touch optimistic.

Vanderzalm's counterpart was Gil Cronin himself, who could easily have been a pro player. Stone looked over the team the Blue Ravens had selected, and whistled. The five main players were all drawn from the fifteen-man core of the descant unit, and one of the three substitutes was also from the core. Only two of the subs were drawn from the ten-man support squad who made up the full twenty-five members of the descant unit. One of the subs was Blue Raven 24, Jon Semler, their chief medic — and he had played college aeroball for three years before 'coming over' to NARC.

The Blue Ravens' squad was as tight-knit as the descant unit. Cronin was in the number 1 shirt, playing field anchor, flanked by the Blue Ravens 7 and 14, Joe Ramos and Max Chen, who were both as massive as Cronin, and as agile. The 'point' positions of both starting strikers had been assigned to Blue Ravens 5 and 11, Harrison Wang and Marty Bonelli — exceptionally tall men, even among the Ravens, and almost as muscular as Cronin and Ramos. The substitutes were the field tech, Mick Yablansky, the medic Jon Semler, and the unit's hazmat specialist, Bill Parish. All three were flexible enough to play most positions, and Parish could play them all.

On the main display, the bios for the Starfleet squad were going up alongside the Ravens. The *Marquesas* team were playing in red and gold skintins; the Ravens were in their customary blue and white. Stone glanced at the chrono in the corner of the screen, which was counting down to the kickoff. With seven minutes before the start, the repulsion generators were rolling into place on sleds under the decking. As they started up he felt that certain buzz through the spine, unique to an aeroball game.

In keeping with the event, the two on-court umpires were drawn from Venice Tactical and the local Army base, but the match referee was civvy, professional, and well-known across several systems. GlobalNet had cornered Marina Costello, and she was framed in the big display, trying to find diplomatic answers to delicate questions. The bottom line was always the observation that this was a charitable event, the real winners were the kids in the hospices where Angel victims were shown gentleness and respect rather than being treated as criminals — and no one was particularly fussed about who won tonight.

Which was far from true, Stone thought. The *Marquesas* team had drawn as many supporters as the Ravens, and at least before the kickoff they seemed to be making more noise. Who won mattered very much, to at least three thousand people in this arena.

From the block booking Gable had secured, they had a view into the tunnels. Stone was watching for the players to walk out when Jarrat nudged

him, and he turned back in time to see the first ball, the test, dropped from the basket, twelve meters over the floor of the court.

A viddrone flitted in for a tight closeup of the fluorescent silver-green ball as it extended its flights and began to plane in the stadium's constantly moving air. The display gauged the court's gravity at one tenth of one standard 'G,' and the 'game on' light switched to green.

The sound system blared with the voice of an announcer from GlobalNet. Stone could not recall the man's name. "Ballfans, we have a game. It's two minutes till kickoff, with the players making their way out to the court at this moment, and it's time to remember our sponsors. Tonight's match, the Tropic Lightning against the Blue Ravens, is brought to you courtesy of the Hudson Company, Arago Technologies, HighSkies Car Rentals, NARC Central, Starfleet-Marquesas and Venice Tactical. Tune your combugs to Channel 22 for gamecall bonus features, and we'll bring you bios, tidbits and trivia throughout the action. Please put your hands together to welcome our Match Referee, the beautiful Marina Costello from Phoenix, South Atlantis, on Rethan, who will call the teams to standby and drop the first ball."

The clock was down through the one-minute mark as the players jogged out across the decks, through commercials that fluoresced in a layer of fine mist. At the head of the eight Blue Ravens, Gil Cronin led the way to the gate in the side of the court. Then they were inside, and a thousand spectators leaned forward to see how they would handle the fractional gravity.

At one tenth of his normal mass, Cronin weighed no more than twelve kilos, and some of the players weighed much less. The sudden shift from full-G to one tenth sometimes tripped even pro players, and amateurs often showed their weaknesses in the moments before kickoff.

No one stumbled, but the Lightning were physically much smaller, with only Vanderzalm massing like the Ravens, and at once Stone saw a vast difference in performance. The Ravens trained constantly in zero-G or close to it, and under fractional gravities they had a few extra kilos for stability. Two of the Lightning were pilots, and equally comfortable in the conditions, and they were playing the flanks. But only Vanderzalm had the critical extra kilos to aid stability, and the other two — Rosen and Vokovic — were both senior AI techs. Their working environment was usually the computer core and, predictably, they were playing point, in the strikers' position. They were the Lightning's weak links, and everyone in the stadium knew it before the clock read zero.

Referee Costello was ten meters above the court, riding a light repulsion sled that had been hastily plastered with commercial banners. The basket was two meters higher again, directly above the goal mouth — the bucket-sized pit dead-center in the floor of the court.

To either side of the gate, the substitutes were on the benches; GlobalNet had twenty drones in and around the court, and the displays were alive, a rainbow of color, as the clock counted to 00/00. The referee's sled jetted up, a siren blasted and the clock began to count forward in the instant the first

ball was dropped. Its flights extended to catch every breath of air in the tenth-G zone, and the crowd erupted.

'Kickoff' was an understatement, Stone had always thought. He felt his own surge of adrenaline as the two anchors went up with every erg of power their muscles could generate — muscles trained and conditioned in full gravity. In the tenth-G environment of the aeroball court, they leapt ten meters up, almost level with the referee, two sinuous missiles, bright in the fluorescing skinthins, big in the knees, shoulders, elbows, with the padding of the pro ballplayer. The drones jetted in for closeups as Cronin reached for the ball, which had only just extended its flights.

As his big hand closed on it the flights retracted, leaving the ball as a plain ovoid. Cronin had it under his arm and was looking around for his flanks, Ramos and Chen, when Vanderzalm twisted like a seal and scissored him around the thighs. Vanderzalm had already set up a corkscrewing motion, and he hit Cronin hard. The object was to slam Cronin into the wall of the court and strip the ball, and Vanderzalm's flankers were waiting to take it.

With an agility that belied his size, Cronin jackknifed, and his eyes were darting everywhere, looking for Ramos and Chen. Max Chen was yelling, waving. The ball left Cronin's hand, squirted out of a leathery palm with a ballistic spin that sent it into Chen's waiting fingers, a scant second before Cronin plowed into the wall with his left shoulder and the combined mass of his own body and Eric Vanderzalm's.

They fell in exaggerated slow motion under one tenth gravity, and the walls were patterned with toeholds, handholds. Under pro league rules, it was illegal to 'hang up' for more than three seconds, but the 'holds made excellent relaunch points. Cronin was still grunting with the impact when Chen bounced himself off a 'hold to gain height, shot fast into the opposite quadrant of the court, and passed the ball to the striker on point. Marty Bonelli — Blue Raven 11 — was supple and quick as a gymnast, with less mass than Cronin but no less familiarity than any descant trooper with the fractional-G conditions.

Yelling over the racket of the sound system and the crowd, Joe Ramos and Harrison Wang dove in, running interference between Bonelli and the Lightning's strikers. Ramos caught Vokovic with a hard punt in the side, a legal tackle that pitched him at the floor of the court. Wang caught Rosen by the ankle and spun him hard, sending him tumbling into the tangle of Cronin and Vanderzalm. And Marty Bonelli kicked hard off a 'hold on the mid-line on the west wall.

The kick launched him like a missile at the goal mouth. With his left hand, he aimed the ball for the bucket-shaped pit, with his right, he made ready to fend off the floor of the court, which was coming up fast in his face. Half the crowd was on its feet, roaring; the Tropic Lightning were already screaming for a foul on Harrison Wang, for 'dumping' Rosen. Stone would have sworn it was a legal move, because Wang had not 'held on' to Rosen for more than a second, but only the replay would tell. The buzzer had just begun to bellow

to halt play when the ball slammed into the goal, and the *Marquesas* strikers barreled into Marty Bonelli so hard, all three hit the deck and bounced back up to the three-meter line. Scarlet streamed from Bonelli's nose, and both the on-court umpired whistled for the medics.

The clock showed 00:15.5 elapsed in the first period. Stone sat back with a groan. "It's going to be one of those bloody games," he said against Jarrat's ear. "Every time anybody does anything, somebody's screaming for a foul and there's whistles blowing!"

"Here's the replay," Jarrat said ruefully. His eyes were on the big threedee directly opposite.

Referee Costello was also intent on the playback, as were the umpires, and the appeal was dismissed, two to one. The Lightning looked surly. Bonelli was stuffing cotton into his nostrils as Harrison Wang set up to take the advantage try awarded to the Ravens as a rap on the knuckles of the *Marquesas* team for their illegal application. Wang had bounced up high on the wall, to the eight meter line. The Tropic Lightning were back against the wall in the opposite quadrant, while Gil Cronin, Joe Ramos and Max Chen crouched around the goal, poised to spring like cats. The clock restarted and Wang kicked off so hard, he was in the heart of the Blue Raven cordon before the *Marquesas* flankers and strikers were in.

The ball slammed into the goal mouth, up to Wang's elbow, a second time, and the scoreboard turned over to 0-1. Half the crowd exploded in cheering, the other half were either booing enthusiastically or had fallen silent. Stone looked up at the chrono and saw 00:40 as the court was reset.

With a certain resolve, he pulled a carton out of Gable's sack from the concessionaires, and tried the deep-fried Port Hedland mussels.

The full-time siren blew with 35-12 on the scoreboard. The players had settled their personal and professional differences long before, and were laughing as they bounced off the court. According to the commentators, over sixty thousand colonial dollars, or fifteen thousand credits, had been raised for the Angel hospices of Darwin's major cities; the game would be edited and downloadable from the GlobalNet city server by midnight, for a ten dollar free, proceeds to be added to the night's earnings.

Stone would have said the crowd was going away happy, though the Blue Ravens had predictably mopped the court with the Tropic Lightning. The result was no surprise to anyone in the stands; most of the Lightning's supporters were delighted that their team — outmuscled and outclassed by a squad drawn from a descant unit — had put a dozen goals on the board and not disgraced the *Marquesas*.

But someone among the crowd was far from happy. Hudson's usual security contingent was beefed up with officers from NARC, Tactical and Starfleet, and they were wearing thundery faces as Stone followed Jarrat back from the arena. The repulsion generators were dead, the big displays had

sunk back into the touchlines of the football pitch, the aeroball court was being lifted out. The game itself had been trouble-free — even the umpires were smiling, talking to Global Net, defending the penalties that put a number of Lightning goals on the board.

“That’s an ominous face,” Jarrat said to the *Athena* security squad leader coming toward them as he and Stone cut a path toward the restaurant.

Sergeant Tammy Esteban and two juniors from the carrier’s core crew were waiting by the vast armorglass panes, just above the arena. Esteban was taller than Stone and outmassed Jarrat; she was also strikingly beautiful, and she knew it. On occasion she used her silver-blonde, ice-blue eyed good looks as a weapon, but tonight she was simply furious. The accent of Elysium was thick as molasses as she barked,

“Somebody fucked up, and all I can tell you, Cap, is — it wasn’t us!”

“Let’s see it.” Jarrat gave Stone a dark look. “How bad?”

“Depends on your perspective,” Esteban said cryptically. She was moving, heading for the rest rooms beyond the viewing lounge area.

“Meaning?” Stone prompted.

“Easier to show than to tell.” She glanced over her shoulder at him, and her eyes focused further back. “You might want to have the folks stay put.”

“Folks?” Jarrat echoed.

Not far behind him and Stone were Cantrell, Reardon and Eve Lang, and behind them Gable had his arm around Jesse Lawrence and was whispering in the dancer’s ear, something inspiring a belly laugh. Jack Spiteri and Tim Kwei did not seem troubled by Gable’s obvious fancy for Jesse, but Jesse was in a different line of work now. He fended off the pilot with one elbow, and his eyes were glittering with amusement as he looked up at Jarrat and Stone.

The looks on the NARC faces wiped the smile off his face. “What’s wrong?” Jesse had spent long enough as a Companion for his intuition to be honed razor sharp. He read people the way Mischa Petrov never would.

“Stay in the lounge area,” Stone said quietly. “Curt, Gene, nobody passes this point. Buzz all the Gold Ravens on the ground, tell them they’re on.”

“Get Tactical in here,” Jarrat added, “it’s their ballpark, not ours! Esteban, are we clearing the restaurant or will we evac the whole arena?”

“Christ,” Jesse murmured, “tell me you’re joking.”

“No joke,” Stone said levelly. “Esteban?”

“Leave people where they are till we know more,” she judged. “We can run right into a trap. At this moment, I’m seeing a minimal immediate threat level but, fuck, I’m gonna find out who stuffed this up.” She jerked a thumb in the direction of the restrooms.

The device was in the parents’ room, casually deposited on the bench between the filtered water faucet and the trash bin. A holosnap was propped on top of it, resting against the wall. The face of Senator Bram Sorenson looked out of the image, overlaid by a set of crosshairs in marker pen, centered on his forehead, and over his head was scrawled the word *bang!*, in a thick red marker.

Beneath the image was a blue steel case any service officer would recognize. It was a Hu Chen ammunition box, packed in Marsport, shipped out by the tens of thousands to Tactical, the Army and NARC, on more than twenty worlds. The case was closed but not locked; the lid showed the familiar green 'open' blip.

"Damn," Stone whispered. "You've scanned it, of course?"

She gave him a look barbed with reproach. "We wouldn't be standing here if I hadn't! It's not radiotoxic, not biological, no chemical hazard as such. It reads like a ... a box of ammo. About a kilo of demolex, possibly still packed in something like nine-mil semi-caseless rounds."

"Or maybe all in a lump," Jarrat added tersely, "which would be better for us, because if it blows, it'll throw less shrapnel around. Power source?"

"Reads like one cell," Esteban affirmed, "passive, just sitting there."

"Waiting for something to trigger it," Stone concluded as he went to one knee beside the device.

"Careful," Jarrat said sharply. "It could be live. Jesus, *I'd* wire it live, if I was the kind of sick bastard who'd rig a thing like this in a place like this."

"The question is," Stone mused, intent on the ammo case and seeing nothing, "is this supposed to mean Bram Sorenson would be a target if he were here tonight ... or that a bunch of civilians would have been blown into the middle of next week as a bloody-minded protest over the man's politics?" He had fished the comm from his pocket, and as it slipped into his ear he said softly, "Gold Ravens, this is 7.1. We're going to need a cordon, tight on my position, asap."

The voice in his ear belonged to Sven Hellstrom, the master sergeant leading Gold Raven. "We're with you, Cap, we've been advised. Lieutenant Gable's been on the blower. A transport's on its way in from Central, be here in five. We'll be suited five minutes after."

"We're going to need containment," Stone said shrewdly.

"Get demolition in here," Jarrat said to Stone's comm. "It's *probably* a device, and *probably* live ... it won't be on a timer, the game's over, the crowd's dispersed. Could be motion or pressure sensitive."

"Copy that, Cap," Hellstrom responded. "Gold Raven has it covered. Recommend you back way off and let us earn our paycheck."

The Ravens' comm loop was coming online, and Stone was listening to Hellstrom's people talking to the transport pilots. He lifted a brow at Jarrat as they stepped out of the parents' room. Central's aircraft would touch down on the football pitch, and though the hardware might be a little impromptu, Gold Raven would be well equipped to improvise.

They were herding the lounge occupants to the far side of the restaurant, and as Stone watched, the fire panes closed down, four-meter panels of armorglass, perfectly transparent and rated to a blast far in excess of anything that could be generated by the kilo of conventional demolex. The cafe and gift store area had a wide view of the playing field, where four of the Gold Ravens had already gathered to collect the unit's armor.

Jarrat had settled a comm in his ear and was punching for juice from the machine by the windows. "9.4 to *Athena*. Ops room?"

"I've been listening to your little shindig," Petrov said bleakly. "A *device*, they said. You want a gunship?"

"Right now, it'd look like overkill," Stone mused. "Tactical's coming in, there's about forty assorted Ravens and Starfleet guys still in the arena, and I'm looking at Central's transport on approach. We'll have an armored squad ground-side in a few minutes. But put Green Raven on launch alert. I'll let you know."

"Good enough," Petrov decided. "Your position's secure?"

"As secure as it's likely to be for a while." Jarrat's eyes had narrowed against the stadium lights as he watched the blue-black, slab-shaped and ugly transport drop in over the football field. Stone felt the contraction of his irises in the glare of its floodlights, and the Gold Ravens were crosstalking with Blue on the loop.

Cronin and Ramos were asking if Hellstrom's people needed backup, and Sven Hellstrom answered with a ribald snort. "For a kee pack of demolex? Gimme a break, will you, Gilly? If you want in, there's a whole fuckin' stadium to sweep ... this might not be the only box of tricks they left us."

The armorglass trembled as the transport's repulsion ramped up. Sensor probes retracted, landing strakes extended, and the pilot feathered it down on the west touchline. The grav resist did not shut down completely; the transport continued to support most of its mass, in the interests of the pitch surface. Stone watched the ramp lower halfway before a cargo sled bobbed out into the midst of the Gold Ravens. It was loaded with a mass of kevlex-titanium, and a containment tank.

Movement from behind caught Stone's ear. Cronin, Ramos and several Blue Ravens were making their way up from the escalators and he beckoned them across the cafe area. Cantrell's party had settled at one of the corner tables. Curt Gable had raided the 'Chefs for whatever they had, in lieu of dinner, since the restaurant was on hiatus. He was eating Singapore noodles with a pair of bone chopsticks, while Jesse Lawrence picked over a warm chicken salad and watched Jarrat and Stone with a perplexed expression.

"Sounds like some genuine fuck-brain on the Hudson security squad messed up," Cronin said without preamble. "There is no way, Stoney, the shit got into the stadium after our boys arrived."

"I believe it." Stone was watching Jarrat come back across the lounge with a mug in either hand, and took one from him.

"The device had to get in *before* the event," Jarrat guessed. "No way would you be able to waltz through security after we, and Tac, and 'Fleet got here. But this game's been touted on GlobalNet for days — and you know the vid crews had to be in here, setting up their gear, yesterday. My guess is, whoever left us this little gift came in with them."

"Hid it on the premises," Stone mused, "set it in place when the room was empty, and walked away. Makes sense. Which begs the question, how many more of these are there?"

"We need to see the security feeds." Jarrat's brows arched.

Stone was thinking the same thing. He touched the combug. "7.1 for Petrov. You there, Mischa?"

The ops room responded so fast, Petrov must have been listening in. "Right here."

"Get hold of the arena's own security chief," Jarrat began.

"Drag him in here, pronto," Stone finished.

The Hudson Company's own security had stood down in favor of services provided by Tac, NARC and the *Marquesas*. To them, it had been a precious night off, and Stone knew they would be scattered all over Venice. Some could be out of town entirely.

"I'm calling him," Petrov reported, "I'll let you know when he actually answers the goddamn' comm! In the meantime, is his deputy any use to you?"

Jarrat and Stone shared a taut glance. "Security clearances," Jarrat said quietly. "The deputy has to have them. Get him here, Mischa, if you've got him on the line."

"Her," Petrov corrected. "Woman by the name of Shelley Shoenfield, and she's already on the road, groundside, coming in from East Fairview."

"Have a Tactical squad pick her up," Stone told him. "Drop her on the airport. We'll be on the stadium's control deck."

"And have Tac standby to evac this building from the roof," Jarrat added, "as soon as we've worked out which way it's safe to run!"

As he spoke, six hardsuited Gold Ravens appeared from the escalators. The armor dwarfed any normal human figure, and they were locking helmets as they came up. Stone's eyes skimmed the suits and noted that they were not yet fully armed; no rotary cannons, no snappers, only sidearms were loaded. The two Gold Ravens at the rear of the group steered the containment tank, which rode its own repulsion sled.

The fire panes rose soundlessly, far enough to allow them to duck underneath, and then dropped again fast. As they sealed into place Jarrat was saying to the ops room, "Do you have Hellstrom's video?"

And Petrov: "Gold Raven 9's vidfeed is coming up right now. Shit, Jarrat, it looks just like a restaurant."

"Observant, isn't he?" Stone commented in acerbic tones. "Gold 9, you reading me?"

"Six by six," Hellstrom informed him as the armored figures vanished into the passageway beyond the restaurant, toward the restrooms.

"Just get the thing into containment and lift it out of here." Jarrat looked at his chrono. He gave Cronin and Ramos a wry grin. "You were hoping for dinner."

"We'll wait." Cronin was in civvies — denims, a bronze vest, a dark green shirt. The sleeves were rolled up to display his tattoos, the Blue Ravens unit badge and the Master Gunner's mark. "Get used to it, Cap," he said darkly. "The way me and the boys see things, this kind of bullshit is gonna keep right on happening."

"Till somebody puts a bullet in Bram Sorenson," Ramos added glibly.

But Jarrat was making negative noises. "Bad idea, Joe. Kill the man, and he turns into a martyr. Other idiots will take up his bloody stupid cause, and the idea'll be even harder to get rid of."

"The way to beat him," Stone said bleakly, "is at the ballot. This kind of demonstration only makes Sorenson stronger." The loop was a constant chatter of whispers, and he began to listen intently as he heard Hellstrom cursing. "Sven, what is it? Gold Raven 9, what you got?"

Hellstrom sounded disgusted. "Nothing. We got about a kee of old fashioned demolex, but it's not wired live. Everything's in place, but the trigger's disconnected. You could tapdance on this baby ... and there's a card in the bottom of the ammo box." He paused for several seconds. "The whole shebang's in containment — including the card and the holo of Sorenson. Coming out now."

"We have to sweep the building," Jarrat said quietly. "You know this could be the dummy. We relax, and in ten minutes the floor goes up right under our feet."

But Esteban was adamant. "We already swept this whole level plus the ones above and below, and Tactical's started on the rest. We can't raise any trace of chemistry, radiotoxicity, biologicals, nothing, and all the electronics we're seeing belong here."

"The live device could be on the other side of the arena," Stone warned.

"Could easily be," Esteban admitted, "but if it is, it's Tactical's treat, or Hudson's. We're too thin on the ground, Cap, unless you get us a gunship." She touched her comm, which was monitoring a different loop. Jarrat and Stone had been listening to the Gold Raven, but Esteban was intent elsewhere. "Hudson's own goon squad is in the stadium right now, and most of Venice Tactical's gone on alert ... Security Officer Shoenfield is in the air over Carpenter Boulevard, ETA — our location — four minutes."

Jarrat was frowning at the escalators leading up to the control deck and, above, the airport. "Are they safe?"

"They scanned clean, up to the next level," Esteban assured him

From the discreet holster at the small of his back, Cronin produced a Steyr .44 full automatic pistol. Stone watched as Ramos, Bonelli and the other members of the aeroball 'first five' drew similar weapons. The armor-glass panes were rising, and he watched the Gold Ravens make their way out with the tank between them. Four of them would escort the load back to the transport, and Jarrat flagged them down as they approached.

"Gold 4, let me have the Colt," he said to the mirror-black, faceless helmet. The name stenciled on the breastplate was Yelland.

The Gold Raven passed the AR-60 to him left-handed without shifting his grip on the containment tank. "Loaded, Cap, there's one up the spout and the safety's wishful thinking."

"Thanks." Jarrat glanced at the ammo counter as Yelland's partner turned toward Stone. Without a word, Stone held out his hand and took a

Kovak .50 automatic. He gave Jarrat a pained look. "What in hell gave me the idea we were on downtime?"

"Downtime?" Cronin echoed. "It's a fantasy. And it can only get worse." He gave Stone a grimace. "The problem's got a name. Sorenson."

Stone traded dark glances with Jarrat. "It'll be ugly. Even if the colonial vote kills the Sorenson bill, the next year or so will be —"

"Shit-kicking nasty," Cronin said acidly. "And I have to tell you, Cap ... Stoney, you gotta know there's duty we didn't sign on for."

"Nor did we, Gil," Stone said quietly. He was looking into Jarrat's eyes, which were silver in the overhead strip lights, as he asked, "Have you and your boys made any plans?" For a moment Cronin seemed reluctant to answer and Stone stepped closer. "Hey, this is me. How long have you been bouncing me off the mats in the gym?"

"Maybe too long," Cronin growled, and relented. "And yeah, we've talked about it. Of course we've talked. You get enough beer in these guys, and they'll come right out and slap you in the face with the truth." His face was flinty as he turned toward Stone. "We won't leave our own people spinning in the wind, but if — *when* — it gets to this department being turned into some kind of army, with politicians telling us which civvies to cut down because they're daring to stand up and try to stay alive one more day..." He looked sidelong at his partner, and Joe Ramos's dark head shook minutely. "There's better places to be, Stoney, better things to do," Cronin finished. "We're not there yet. Please God we don't ever get there. But you have to know where we stand."

"You're not Bram Sorenson's tin soldiers," Jarrat said gravely. "Neither are we, Gil. Keep one ear open to your guys. Know what they're thinking. There's a long way to go before we get to the line."

"And we'll all know it when we see it coming," Stone added. "Kevin? Time."

Sven Hellstrom and his offside, Gold 12, Dirk Borden, had positioned themselves at the foot of the up-escalator, and with a nod from Cronin the Blue Ravens fell into a loose sweep pattern right behind them. They would use the Gold Ravens' armor for cover as they went up. Hellstrom and Borden had not yet cracked their helmets, and their voices rasped over the comm as they conferred with Cronin's squad. Stone fell into step beside Jarrat, but when Esteban and her team joined them, Jarrat waved them back.

"We got it covered. Liaise with Tactical, make bloody damned sure the whole arena gets swept *right*, every locker, every service hatch, every crawl space between floors."

"Will do, Cap. Report back to you and Cap Stone?" At Jarrat's nod, Esteban beckoned her people. "Looks like we have a long night ahead of us, kids. Grab something to eat on the fly, and *move*."

The escalators were going up, grinding under the combined mass of Hellstrom's and Borden's armor plus the unsuited Blue Ravens, when Stone looked back at the faces below. Evelyn Lang and Curt Gable had marshaled

the civilians into one group. Kip Reardon seemed to be treating a panic attack in the back of the crush of civilians waiting for evac. Gene Cantrell was on the comm, talking on a loop separate from the Ravens' own, which Stone was monitoring. He was more than likely talking to a Tac pilot, arranging an evac point on the airpark right above.

On the edge of the group, Jesse, Tim and Jack were intent on the NARC squad. They could never have seen NARC at work in the city of Venice itself, and Stone did not underestimate how bizarre it must appear. Of the three, Jesse Lawrence seemed the most calm. He was looking up at Jarrat, and Stone remembered, he had seen Jarrat work before. A sex shop in Alexandria, under the brooding face of Zeus — a den called Palomino, where a brilliant young programmer had been Angel-addicted by force, and dumped. Tim Kwei had no memory of the Palomino club, but the event must be etched into Jesse's own memory, as surely as Jarrat would never forget it. Stone's eyes transferred to his partner, and he saw Jarrat give the dancer a nod, a faint smile to reassure.

With a tortured groan, the escalators passed them onto the next floor, and they cast about for their bearings. The public area was small, with yellow 'turn back' notices, several doors marked 'staff only,' and the big doors of four service elevators opposite the escalators. The airpark was right above, and Jarrat's left hand fell on Stone's arm as they both felt the deep vibration of heavy engines.

"That has to be Tactical." Jarrat beckoned Hellstrom and Borden. Featureless visors turned toward him, mirror-black and reflecting his own face. "Scan the lift shafts, go up ahead, rate it safe for civvies. And tell Tactical to hustle."

"Will do, Cap," Hellstrom's voice said, a rasp over the comm.

Stone had his bearings now. The airpark was controlled from an office on their left, the stadium was managed from the wide, deep studio on their right, where observation windows overlooked the arena and banks of screens monitored every possible vidfeed position and security cam. It was the security vids they needed to access, but short of hacking Hudson's mainframe, they were waiting for Shoenfield. And the Hudson AI was less than likely to be cooperative.

The Blue Ravens went ahead, sweeping the studio thoroughly. The facility had switched over to automatics when the players left the court. Since the game was announced on GlobalNet, the AI had been monitoring exit gates, parking lots, private office space, even the players' dressing rooms, plus every passageway and tunnel in the stadium. Somewhere in the ocean of footage captured by a thousand different cameras was the individual who had placed the device.

Pulling a chair up to the controller's work space, Jarrat applied his right hand to the keypad. He entered his own NARC access code, then a master override that would have given him command of the cortex at the heart of any Tactical vehicle, ambulance or fire control squad, and most Army

vehicles. The Hudson AI responded almost with disdain: "Your access request is acknowledged. I am contacting the relevant authorities for clearance permissions."

"Try a swift kick," Gene Cantrell said from the doorway behind them. He had followed them up, and was still listening to the Tactical band. "We have an armored troop transport landing right now, under the topcover of three armed squaddies, and Shoenfield's on her way in. The roof checked out safe. Gable and Lang are hustling the whole crowd upstairs. I *think* we're out of this particular wood."

"Don't be counting your chickens," Jarrat warned. "Have the Tac squads cover this side of the stadium, just in case."

"In case?" Eve Lang was at the door, close enough to overhear. Behind her streamed the restaurant crowd, headed for a gaping service elevator flanked by Hellstrom's massive armored figure.

"In case," Stone said bitterly, "this whole thing was designed to herd us in one direction, which makes picking us off like spearing trout in a barrel." He looked from Jarrat to the pilot, and back. "This is a classic second-semester training op in any Tactical academy."

"Army, as well," Jarrat agreed. "And you know how many veterans there are out in the street ... and a lot of 'em so pissed off by the Sorenson bill, they could be starting to get antsy."

"Shit, you're right," Lang said darkly. She was watching the crowd pack into the elevator for the short ride up. "I'm thinking, gunship."

Jarrat and Stone shared a taut glance, and Stone knew Jarrat was thinking the same thing as himself. "No. It would be exactly what today's smart-ass demonstrator wants to see ... not to mention Bram Sorenson. The Senator's out there on GlobalNet saying, 'You see, NARC had the whole thing covered, we don't have to fret, just stomp the dissenters.'"

"And on the other side," Jarrat went on, "our demonstrator's on the city nets saying, 'You see, NARC jumps like a trained mutt when its masters whistle — you know what dissidents can expect from here on?'"

"Whatever we're going to do," Stone said in bleak tones, "it has to be subtle, quiet, fast, and effective."

As Jarrat tried every code he knew to get the Hudson AI to cooperate, the last evacuees made it into the lift. The wide doors growled shut and the 'up' icon lit green. Cantrell was behind Jarrat, watching the screens and searching his memory for any code the younger man might have forgotten, and he was still monitoring the Tac bands.

"Two more Tac squads just got in from Madura. I think we're covered ... and Shoenfield's on her way down right now."

"Thank Christ for tender mercies." Jarrat spun the chair out, stood and stretched his back. The Colt fit his right hand with the ease of long familiarity — Stone felt it there, a physical sensation against his palm, just as he felt the prickle of Jarrat's annoyance with the AI.

A chime from the lifts announced Security Officer Shelley Shoenfield.

The Blue Ravens stood aside to let her through into the studio. She was a tiny woman with Eurasian features, red-blond hair, blood-scarlet talons, and she was dressed for a night on the town. The short black skirt, too-high heels and the weight of jewelry were ill-designed for the office, and Shoenfield looked as furious as daunted as she made her way through the Blue Ravens.

"They briefed me," she began, breathless and fumbling a cigarette from her purse. A silver lighter with the Hudson logo flicked repeatedly. "Some fucking bastard got in here with a bomb. Jesus, it's not possible!"

Jarrat aimed a finger at the master panel. "Access your security system. Scan back through the four days since this game was announced. He or she got in here unnoticed, but the vids must have caught the whole show."

She gave him a pained look, but sat down without a protest and said to the audio pickup, "Oriana, this is Shoenfield, AC24-559-D7."

"Recognize Shelley Shoenfield," the AI said pleasantly. "How can this system assist?"

"You can pull up the vidlogs, security files." Shoenfield took a deep drag, and wreathed herself in the aroma of kipgrass and roses.

"State time indexes," the AI prompted.

"The last one hundred hours." Shoenfield reached into her purse for a band, and dragged the fiery mane of her hair into a rough ponytail.

"State vidcam stations required."

"All of them," Stone said flatly.

"All stations," Shoenfield said mock-sweetly. She angled a look up and back at the NARC men. "That's about a hundred-twenty realtime vidfeeds, times a hundred hours. You do the math."

"Not our problem," Jarrat said sharply. "Get Hudson security online. You're going to be liaising with Tactical. Right now, pull up whatever security circuit covers the restrooms, particularly the parents' room, at the restaurant."

She blinked at him, opened her mouth to protest, and closed it again. "Oriana, display 88 through 96."

"Go back to 16:00 this evening," Stone mused. "Sure, we'd like to see how the device got into the stadium, but we can at least get a look at who snuck into the parents' room and positioned it just a couple of hours ago."

This at least was easy. Stone stood back with Jarrat and Cantrell, watching the realtime footage race by at 20x speed, and when Shoenfield offered the pack of Western Stars and her lighter, both he and Jarrat took a smoke. The kip grass was welcome, though the scent was too perfumed for his own taste. He would have preferred jasmine or lime, but neither he nor Jarrat smoked often enough to bother carrying a pack.

The parents' room had been ignored through most of the evening. Few people ever brought young children to an aeroball game. They watched almost two hours of the realtime feed fly by, and then —

"There." Jarrat stabbed a finger at the screen.

"Back it off again," Stone began.

"I'm doing it, for chrissakes," Shoenfield snapped. "Jesus, you want to

do this yourself? For fuck's sake, why did you drag me in here?"

"It's your job, not ours," Stone informed her. "If you don't want to be called into the office, you should try not locking down your AI so tight, it won't liaise when NARC asks nicely."

"Damn." She was about to rub her face, knuckle her eyes, and remembered at the last moment, she was heavily made up. She snatched her hands away and glared at the NARC people, right back to the Blue Ravens who were lounging by the door. Her voice was like a flurry of ice crystals. "If we didn't lock the AI down tight, any shit-head could get in here and tell it what *not* to see. You tried your own override codes?"

Jarrat shot a wry look at Stone. "We tried them. No joy."

"Bugger." Shoenfield squeezed her eyes closed and dragged on the smoke. "Means they were reset on our last system upgrade, and you guys didn't get the memo. And that's *not* my job. Keeping NARC happy is down to my boss."

"The one who still isn't taking calls." Stone leaned closer to the screen, watching intently as a figure walked down the passageway from the restaurant to the bathrooms.

"The bastard isn't taking calls," Shoenfield said acidly, "because he's up to his hipbones in some Companion. Probably Cassandra, the one in the corsets and so much mascara, if she flaps her eyelashes, she'll take off."

"Corsets?" Jarrat echoed.

On the screen, the image had stabilized. A woman was walking away from the vid pickup, carrying a shawl-wrapped bundle against one shoulder, which the viewer assumed was a child too young to be walking. She was wearing slacks and a loose, pale jacket which confused the silhouette, and the soft lighting in the passageway did not help. As the figure disappeared into the parents' room, the vid switched to an interior angle, better lit. The face was obscured by an improbable cascade of ash-blond hair streaked in fluorescent blue and highlighted with sparklets. But something, Stone thought, *something* was different. Not quite what the human eye had been trained to expect by a quarter-million years of familiarity.

"It's a guy," Jarrat said quietly. "The body geometry says *male*."

"Or it used to be a male," Stone mused. "A lot of guys switch. Doesn't mean she can't get saddled with somebody's kid on the night of the game, and have to haul the sprig along."

"You want to go forward again?" Shoenfield asked.

"Let it play," Jarrat told her. "It's not the woman, it's the kid ... the bundle. Stoney, I'm not seeing a *kid*."

"I can zoom it," Shoenfield muttered, before Stone could ask.

"Get in as close as you can," he whispered.

The image zoomed until it broke up into pixels, and still they saw no face peeking out from the shawl. "Damn," Jarrat rasped. "Zoom it out again."

The figure — male, female or changer, who could be sure? — had gone down to one knee and seemed to be rummaging in the cabinet under the

bench. They saw cleaning fluids and tools within, and boxed supplies for the other restrooms. These were shoved aside, and the intruder reached behind.

"Jackpot," Stone said tersely. "So we know where it was hidden, because it couldn't be brought in on the night. It'll have been there since the game was announced. They beat your security by sneaking in when the systems were idling."

Shoenfield bounced up to her feet. "That is so fucking *impossible*," she informed him loudly, "I ought to bop you one for even saying it! Nobody, and I mean nobody at all, can just walk into this stadium, with or without a bomb."

"They did." Jarrat nodded at the screen, where the vidfeed was following the figure back out of the parents' room. "It's way too late to pick this one up tonight. He or she would have left before the game finished. You'll find the vidfeed of him or her leaving. It could be a guy, or a woman, or a changer. That's probably a wig, and Tactical could be looking for someone of either gender, blond or dark, with or without any affiliation to a kid. All you've got from this is a general height and build ... which tend to look like everybody else and his uncle."

"And her aunt," Stone added glibly. Shoenfield glared at him. "Dig back two or three days, Shoenfield. Get an image of the individual who got the device in, and find out how."

She was fuming. "And plug the goddamn leak. Ricardo, you bastard! You should be here!"

"Your boss," Jarrat guessed, "who forgot to update NARC with your current security profile?"

"My boss," she growled, "who's out getting his ass whipped blue and his dick yanked, too busy to even hear the goddamn comm, much less pick up!" She was beside herself with fury. "He wants his ass whipped, I'll do it for him, and I won't be quitting when he says 'uncle' — I want to see blood!"

Stone winced. "Keep us informed. Somebody beat your security. We need to know how."

"They probably filched, or bought, a valid ID," Jarrat suggested as the NARC group withdrew to the elevators. "Somebody among the Hudson staff got picked up by a Companion, drunk under the table and screwed senseless if they were lucky ... and had their ID copied, maybe even their fingerprints and retina scanned. It's the old, old story."

And there was no way to safeguard the system from the human element without taking humans out of the equation. Some corporations had gone to such lengths; Hudson would be tabling the option at their next committee. For himself, Stone was deeply ambivalent. The human element was usually where a complex system failed, but it could also provide a safety net which prevented such a system abusing the very population it was designed to protect.

Gable and Cantrell were waiting by the elevators, and Gable was listening to the loop. He beckoned as Jarrat and Stone approached. "Our ride just landed. The civvies are on their way to the Swanson Grand Hotel, for dinner and a night in the executive suites, on the company. The Gold Ravens just

lifted out on the transport from Central. They have the containment tank." He glanced back into the studio, where Shoenfield was bawling angrily into the company's own loop. "We done here?"

"We're done," Stone said with grim satisfaction. "What's our ride?"

"They've sent us a Sprint." Gable's brows arched. "Where to, boss?"

"Home?" Jarrat angled a glance at Stone. "Midnight curfew?"

"The *Athena*," Stone affirmed. "We were going back aboard tomorrow anyway, and with this nonsense ..." He gave Cronin's group an apologetic look. "All leave is canceled, as of 24:00. Recall orders will be posted immediately. We're shipping out in thirty-six hours, and there's plenty of work to keep you guys busy."

Cronin made a face but said nothing as they stepped into the service lift. It was Gene Cantrell who muttered the kind of language most often heard on the engine deck. The lift was hauling up to the airpark as he muttered, "I guess I'll be making some apologetic calls. I'll also pack up *Mister Michiko* and his baggage and have the whole show aboard, soon as I can get him organized."

"Tomorrow, latest," Jarrat said thoughtfully. "We'll drop you at Central."

The doors opened onto a hot, humid and windy roof. The sky was a mass of clouds reflecting the city lights, and a few of the brighter stars were visible where gaps in the overcast looked like depthless lakes. The stadium lights were still blazing and GlobalNet remained on station. Stone realized he was looking directly into the cameras as he and Jarrat walked out to the transport. Cantrell was waving them off, and a Tactical squad dropped in swiftly between the cameras and the Sprint transorbital shuttle. GlobalNet moved along only reluctantly.

"They," Jarrat said under the growl of repulsion as the shuttle fired up, "are getting to be a pain in the bum."

"They always were." Stone gave the departing news camera ship a glare. "And unless I miss my guess, they'll be all over us like a rash until this Bram Sorenson thing's shot its bolt and been buried."

The remark was just loud enough to reach Gil Cronin's ears. "I'd rather shoot and bury *him*, Stoney. And I can tell you, I speak for most of the lads."

"I know." Right behind him, Stone stepped up into the long, widebody Sprint and shuffled over to make space for Jarrat. Cantrell would be the last aboard — and the first off, at Central's airpark, a few minutes away over the city's rooftops.

"Don't sweat, Gil," Jarrat said under the howl of jets as the shuttle bobbed up above the brilliant cauldron of the stadium. "We're not about to let our descendant units be abused by a pack of politicians so far away, they couldn't pick Darwin's Star out of a map."

"We'd resign first," Stone said candidly. "Kevin?"

"Yep." Jarrat gestured at the night sky. "If Sorenson's bill goes through and some political wolfpack tries it on — well, there's better places to be and better things to be doing."

"Like you said," Cronin said thoughtfully. He was exchanging dark, introspective looks with his own partner of several years, Joe Ramos, and Ramos's raven-black head nodded. "Like you said," Cronin repeated, and then the Sprint's big lift engines were howling, and even thinking was difficult.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fifty minutes after the shuttle bounced up from Hudson's airpark, the NARC duty pilot nosed into the Blue Raven hangar in the belly of the carrier. The gunship was down for routine maintenance and upgrades, its insides laid wide open, technicians working on, in and under her. They had retreated to the safelocks for the few minutes it took the hangar to blow down, repressurize and come back up to a working temperature.

The first face Jarrat saw as the 'locks opened belonged to Karl Budweisser, and the engineer looked far from amused. He was in grubby coveralls and a crew cap turned backward, and his face was smeared with what could have been hydraulic fluid. It was the color of old blood.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the public address. "The ops room just said leave's been canceled a day early."

"It has," Jarrat affirmed, and feigned a wince as he glanced over the gunship. "Don't tell me you were pulling an all-nighter to get this finished before you took off for brightlights or citybottom?"

"All right, I won't tell you," Budweisser said acidly, "but it'd be a big, fat lie. Give me a rain check?"

"Trade you, Bud, three days for one," Stone offered. "On Earth."

Budweisser's eyes widened. "So it's true. The engine deck scuttlebutt is, we're shipping out tomorrow, maybe the day after."

"Scuttlebutt has it right." Jarrat dropped a hand on his shoulder. "London, Shanghai, Tokyo, Chicago. Take your pick."

"Toronto, across the big water," Budweisser said wryly. "First time I've been back home in four years. You?" He was looking at Stone.

"Longer," Stone said evasively. "It's a trade?" He offered his hand.

The engineer shook it firmly. "Call it a done deal. And since I'm not riding the clock, looking for a day fly fishing on the Hudson tomorrow ... let me grab some supper before I get this bitch of a gunship back together."

"Trouble?" Jarrat's brows rose.

"Nothing we can't fix, but she's pissing us all off," Budweisser said philosophically, and waved at his crew. "Take ten. Supper."

The status boards updated constantly, and the return of the Sprint, with

the carrier's commanders aboard, was already posted as they left the hangar. Jarrat paused to glance over the *Athena's* profiles — strategic, tactical, technical, personnel — and he murmured in surprise. "Stoney." Stone turned back and rubbed shoulders as he glanced over the board. "Looks like Harry came up early," Jarrat observed.

He was still listed among the ship's complement of visitors, but this would change when the list was finalized. Stone touched the comm, in the right corner of the board. "Stone for Doc Reardon. Infirmary ... if you're there, Kip?"

A yawn answered him before Kip Reardon's face appeared in the palm-sized screen. "I'm just closing up shop for the night. And before you ask the obvious, yes, I have young Marc Brand in here ... and no, he hasn't budged a muscle."

Stone chuckled, and dropped one big arm across Jarrat's shoulders. "Harry's with us, as far as Earth."

"I know that, too," Reardon yawned. "I just spent most of the afternoon with him, setting up his lab. He's gutted the house, crated most of his stuff for shipment. It's heading out with Cygnus Logistics, and it'll be on Rethan two or three weeks ahead of him, even if he gets a fast turnaround in the homeworlds." He paused. "Damn it, this is a bad business. I'm on some half-assed kind of guilt trip."

"You?" Jarrat demanded. "What did you do?"

"Me personally? Nothing," Reardon admitted, "but I'm homeworlds born and bred, and I'm a medical professional ... and back where I come from they regard Harry as a second cousin to a tribal witchdoctor!"

"If you were asking me, I'd call him a magician," Stone offered.

"What he is," Reardon said sharply, "is a doctor. A physician, a surgeon, a cellular biologist, chemist and toxicologist. And his credentials are quite bloody good enough for me!" His voice had risen almost to a shout, testimony to his anger. "Sorry. Harry'll tell you he's indifferent, but the truth is, he's pissed off. Insulted. And you don't need to be an empath to know it."

"Oh, we know it," Jarrat said ruefully. "But like you said, Kip, it's only a turnaround, a clipper ticket. He's going home, it's what he's wanted since he got here, and this is the tailor-made excuse."

"I suppose it is." Reardon sighed. "If you want to make any kind of farewell to Senator Brand, you'll have to catch him fast. He's waiting for the next down-shuttle, and I *think* it's the same Sprint you arrived on."

Jarrat stirred with an effort. "Where is he?"

"Having supper with Harry." Reardon gestured to his left which, from his perspective, was the mid-deck crew lounge. "He came up with Marcus, of course. You knew he would. He's leaving Darwin's about twelve hours behind us, headed for Aurora with one hell of a fight on his hands."

"Thanks, Kip. Later." Stone flicked off the comm. "Supper. Hungry?"

"If you recall, we didn't get dinner," Jarrat said pointedly.

The crew lounge was dim and companionable, with muted lights and views of the night side of Darwin's, where the lights of cities like Venice and

Edinburgh and Montpellier were strewn like jewels in the darkness. Few tables were occupied. Harry Del and Cassius Brand were in the corner by the long panes of armorglass, talking in undertones. The soft lilt of music covered their conversation until Jarrat and Stone were close. Stone diverted to the nearest AutoChef to punch in an order, and Brand looked up at the younger men with a wry smile.

"You made the news," he said by way of greeting.

Even his voice was different enough to startle. For several moments Jarrat knew he was guilty of staring, and Brand seemed to bask in the attention. He was still thin as a rail, so frail that it seemed any breeze would waft him away. But his complexion was warm, there was a bloom in his skin, his eyes were brighter, darker, and the veins no longer roped in his temples. A pulse beat visibly in his neck, slow and strong.

"You, uh, look good," Jarrat said at last.

"He should," Harry snorted. "It was six *hours*, Kevin. Three sessions. He might feel like the proverbial million bucks today, but I still feel like pony poop. He owes me big time, and he knows he does."

Brand denied none of it. "I feel alive again," he said, as if he could not actually believe it, "and as for owing him ... lifetime funding, Harry. The Marcus Brand Foundation. Your research. The Angel blocker. God knows, a spaceplane in the garage, if you want one. You've earned it, and a generation of victims will thank you." His eyes sharpened, predatory as a hunting kite. "I'll have Bram Sorenson on a spit, with an apple in his mouth. But first —"

"Starfleet," Stone finished as he set a tray down on the next table and turned a chair to face Harry's. "I never liked Jack Brogan. He was an arrogant SOB when we were kids. He still is, and you know the saying."

"Pride," Harry said thoughtfully, "goeth before the fall."

"And Brogan's due to do a face-plant," Stone said with a certain delight. "You want the rice or the noodles, Kevin—?"

"The noodles," Jarrat decided. "You got the pork or the chicken?"

"The chicken." Stone sorted chopsticks from forks. "So we made the news again. With luck, we'll get an update from Central before we shove off. The Gold Ravens pulled a device out of the stadium, but it wasn't armed."

"A kilo of demolex, an unwired detonator, a snapshot of Bram Sorenson, and a card," Jarrat said as he tried the food and added a dash of soy.

"A card?" Brand asked shrewdly. "With a message?" Jarrat nodded. "What message?"

"We'll know that when Central gets back to us," Stone said around a mouthful of rice. "But we can make a fair guess."

The senator sat back, stroking his chin. The tremors were gone from his hands now. He must work hard to recover the muscle mass he had lost, but determination was naked in his face. "Our man — or woman; let's not discriminate! — is telling us one or both of two things. One is that if Sorenson were to show his face in the colonies, he could expect to meet an assassin's bullet. Two ... we can expect public demonstrations, and some of them will

certainly be violent. Perhaps our demonstrator believes only blood on the ground will inspire our government to evolve an opinion and act on it."

"The question is," Harry muttered, eyes on his plate, "is that true?"

"I don't know, Harry," Brand admitted. "I'd like to believe colonial governments will get up and fight for people without being *inspired* this way. But clearly, at least one element among the public doesn't believe it. Four people died in the protests at the Mawson Docks, when the clipper came in. The assault on these young men was, ironically, unconnected! But there's a streetwar brewing, an odd and cruel kind of Angel war foisted on the colonies by the governments of the homeworlds ... and I think we've just witnessed its first casualties."

"Damn," Jarrat breathed, and appetite dwindled to nothing. He looked from Brand to Stone, and back. "You have clipper bookings right through to Aurora?"

"I do. The *Cygnus Indiana* ships out of system about sixteen hours after the *Athena*. I have stateroom bookings for a party of three." Before Jarrat could ask he went on, "Myself, a personal trainer who is being well paid to put flesh back on these pathetic bones of mine, and a legal secretary." He nodded to himself. "It's two weeks home, Captain Jarrat, and I intend to use every moment to thrash out the issues and build my case. By the time I set foot back on Aurora, I'll have the measure of anything Starfleet can field on this particular battleground."

"Battleground?" Stone echoed.

"The courtroom," Jarrat said dryly. "When the tribunal convenes in Thule." He arched a brow at Brand. "Get this impeachment case off your back, Senator, and what's next?"

A spark of youth glittered in the old eyes. "Governorship," Brand said levelly. "I've always said the rank was mine for the taking on Aurora. You'll watch me prove it in these next months. And then," his voice dropped, rasping, "it'll be Bram Sorenson in my sights." He lifted his right hand as if he were holding a pistol on an imaginary target, and squeezed the trigger. "Oh, not with bullets, you understand. But I shall personally flay Sorenson alive, don't doubt it, and bury his bill in an unmarked grave."

Jarrat believed every syllable. "You'll have NARC's resources behind you. Bill Dupre and Gene Cantrell are on the same page."

"Which means," Stone added, "you know you can message the *Athena* and, in a few weeks, the *Huntress*, if you need positive testimony, friendly witnesses ... or access to data that could be cut off by more official channels."

"I'm grateful," Brand told them. "It's also time I pulled my weight, repaid some of the debts I've been racking up." He gave his hand to Harry. "On that note, I'll say goodnight ... and goodbye, Harry, gentlemen. I've been waiting for the shuttle, you know, and I believe I see a steward trying to catch my eye."

The crewboy was in the doorway, beckoning discreetly and tapping his chrono. Jarrat held out his hand, and Brand shook it briefly. His grip was fragile, his skin still like parchment, but his fingers were warm. "Good luck,

Senator. From both of us,” he added as Brand shook Stone’s hand too. “Keep us informed, and —”

“If you need anything,” Stone said ruefully, “yell in the right direction.”

“I will.” Brand was on his feet under his own steam. “It’s time, Harry. I have to go. You’ll take care of Marcus, I know ... and I’ll message you, soon as you’re home.”

The signal lag between Ballyntyre and Argentia, through the data conduit, was ten days. Jarrat was reminded of the ancient practice of writing physical letters and ‘posting’ them via a network of couriers. Humans were more patient in those days, he decided. And patience was a virtue mankind might have to relearn.

With shuffling steps, Cassius Brand made his way across to the steward. He turned back and lifted a hand in farewell before he stepped into the lift. As the door closed over, Harry sighed heavily.

“I wish I could have done more for his kid, but ... who knows?”

“But Brand himself is cured, isn’t he?” Jarrat asked shrewdly. “The Bergman syndrome is out of his bones?”

“Oh, sure.” Harry stirred. “Kevin, will you get me another coffee?”

“More coffee, at this time?” Stone was looking at the chrono. “You’re pulling an all-nighter?”

“Oh, yeah.” The healer sounded disgusted. “And so are you.”

Halfway to the ‘Chef, Jarrat turned back. “That sounded ominous.”

Stone choked off a groan. “Let me hazard a guess —”

“Allow me to save you the trouble,” Harry grumbled. “You have twelve simulations to perform, and some of them are bastards. Some are so rough, you’ll need a day or two to recover before you tackle the next one. We have a fourteen-day haul in to the homeworlds, and we’ll run out of time if we don’t get a jump on this crap ... and I use the term deliberately. Now, one of these sims is designed to be performed when neither of you has slept in at *least* the last sixteen hours. You’re supposed to be dead tired going into it.”

A coffee cup landed on the table before Harry, and Jarrat looked down into Stone’s face. “We woke fifteen hours ago.”

“Then I have plenty of time to crank up the lab and load the sim,” Harry said darkly. “Who’s running, who’s monitoring from the isolation tank?”

“R&D didn’t state a preference?” Stone asked.

“They seem indifferent. It’s the bond, the link, they’re interested in.”

“What’s the sim?” Jarrat wondered.

The healer had collected his cup and was heading across the lounge. “You won’t like it. In fact, you’re not going to like any of them. They’re designed to test the psychological stresses, the emotional rebound, of life and death situations. They’re all drug-augmented VR, which means whoever is making the run won’t be *aware* it’s a sim. One of you will be in jeopardy, with no escape route. The scenarios all end in injury, disablement and in two instances, the apparent death of ... one of you.” His face was dark as he stopped at the lifts, and turned back to them. “I’ll tell you right now, if it were

me, I'd jettison this test series. These sims are not healthy, and I know what's behind them. R&D are trying to explore every eventuality before they conjure a way to make other partnerships like you two."

"You've refused to do it," Stone began.

"But ... I'm not the only Rethan mutoid," Harry said quietly. "When I've quit on them, folded my tents and stolen away into the night, they'll look for someone *like* me. And they'll find them. The 87/T mutation isn't common, but it's far from unknown, and they're not all as ethical as I am."

The lift opened, and Stone stepped in. "They'll offer money."

Jarrat whistled softly and fixed his partner with a speculative look. "What wouldn't *you* do for ten million credits?"

"Especially if it was NARC offering," Harry added, "and the subject of the experiment was knocking herself out to volunteer."

"Ten million credits," Stone echoed in a whisper. His brows rose. "Now, if they offered twenty..."

"They would," Jarrat decided.

"They will." Harry turned his attention to the coffee. "There isn't one damned thing I can do to stop them. And you two have a decision to make." He gave Jarrat and Stone a hard look. "You want to tell R&D where to go? Or do you run the test series? And I'm well aware, you refuse to cooperate at cost of your commissions."

What Harry had not said weighed as heavily on them as what he had. They could quit right now, right here. The journey in to the homeworlds would be a mere formality. Command of the *Athena* would be passed to Scott Auel and Janine Cruz, who were the next in line, waiting for an assignment to become available. The NARC carrier fleet numbered between five and seven at any time. *Athena*, *Diana*, *Valkyrie*, *Virago*, *Avenger* ... and the *Huntress*, even then making ready to launch from the groundside docks at the Mitsubishi Aerospace facilities on the coast of Kure, in the industrial heart of Japan.

The NARC-*Avenger* was the oldest, the most timeworn and battle-scarred of the fleet. She had been upgraded too often, patched and repaired, and she would be decommissioned in the coming year, when construction began on her replacement, the *Inanna*. Scott Auel and Janine Cruz were waiting for the *Inanna*, on permanent standby to cover for commanders who were injured in the field and languishing in therapy, pending clearance for duty.

And they would automatically step in to replace commanders who were killed, so that NARC work, once begun, would barely even pause even if both captains were lost. Jarrat suffered an odd shiver, and knew Stone felt it too. If he had died in the alleyway in Chell before Evelyn Lang could find him ... if Stone had died before Harry could liberate him from the terrible Angel dependency, the *Athena* would have been under the command of Auel and Cruz for months.

If he and Stone chose to quit here, now, it was Auel and Cruz who would

take on the challenge for which Dupre was sending the *Athena* to the homeworlds. Cantrell must take his new crew and ship on a thorough shakedown before she was committed to the field, but Leo Michiko's information would not wait. As Cantrell had said, seismic shocks would seethe through the homeworlds on many levels, and if the spores of Aphelion had indeed wafted out and taken root in more fertile soil, as Michiko swore they had —

"Aphelion," Stone murmured, as if he had read Jarrat's thoughts rather than the millrace of his feelings.

"You want it," Harry whispered as the elevator opened onto a dim, quiet corridor. A too-familiar lab was waiting. Yvette McKinnen had worked there since the Equinox assignment; every simulation Jarrat and Stone had done was performed or controlled from there. "Choose," Harry said softly. "You can walk away. Now. Or you can play their bloody nasty game, and keep this ship, this crew."

Jarrat took a long breath, held it and exhaled it slowly as he looked into Stone's dark blue eyes. "Aphelion." He heard the edge in his own voice and mocked himself for the eagerness. "Harry, you've seen the data, we all saw it. McKinnen turned DAC upside down and shook it, and every data chain leads in one direction."

"All roads lead to the homeworlds," Stone said pragmatically. "Earth." He held out his hand, and Jarrat took it, laced their fingers. "The maggots we uncovered on Aurora are still wriggling."

"Damn." Harry summoned a faint, wry grin. "You're going to do it, aren't you? One more round of sims —"

"So long as you're monitoring them," Jarrat allowed. "You're the only one we'd trust, Harry."

The healer cocked his head at them, and the smile became a frown. "You know Yvette designed them. She's developed scenarios to destruction-test various *elements* of your empathy, not the fundamental communication value of the bond. R&D want to know the downsides, the side effects, the emotional fallout. Mac is always thorough. You better be damned careful what you ask her to do, because she'll deliver the goods. All of which translates, for the two of you, into grief and *virtual* broken bones."

"We know, Harry." Stone raised both hands, as if Del had him at gunpoint. "And we'll go this far. We'll take a crack at it, so long as you're gaging the show. Like he said, we wouldn't trust anyone else. Kevin?"

"We'll also tell you when to pull the plug," Jarrat finished.

"Fair enough." Harry beckoned them into the lab and flicked on the lights. "I'll load up the first run. So who's making it, who's in the iso tank?"

They considered each other levelly for a long moment, before Stone rummaged through a pocket and produced a five dollar coin. "Call it."

"Since you insist," Jarrat said archly, "tails."

CHAPTER EIGHT

From the west windows, the view over the city of Calleran to the mountains was beyond spectacular. The skies of Brennan were green and seething. Seven eighths of the globe was ocean, and the forces driving the weather were only partially controlled by technology. Colonists had been here for over a century. A fourth generation had grown up native to Brennan, accustomed to the conditions, but for visitors, the unremitting humidity was a physical challenge and the constant storms could be unnerving.

Thunder had been rolling over the mountains since afternoon. As the city lights came on, a glittering carpet between the sea and the high foothills, Jarrat saw lightning in the north. After ten weeks buried in Calleran, he knew the quarter from which the big storms came in. This one would be massive.

Ten weeks was too long, and he knew it. Stone also knew it, but they had been on the verge of a breakthrough for so long, neither was willing — yet — to back off. The longer he spent in deep cover, the greater the danger. Every rule said, get in quick, make it fast and get out. But some operations made playing by the rules impossible. The job would take as long as it took. Death's Head was such an assignment. White Lightning had become another.

On the carrier, Stone had settled into his own long, tedious work. In the city, Jarrat had slithered into another man's skin, assumed a personality which had once been alien, but was easier to live with, and in, the longer he stayed.

The apartment was high in the Rand building, forty floors above the offices and street-level malls where the company put on its public face, and the most expensive cars in the colonies were displayed. The lease was paid for another three months, and as Jarrat surveyed the elegant living space he admitted, the lifestyle was coveted.

Not the lifestyle of a NARC. Only the elite in business, or those who were born to a fortune — or those like Jesse Lawrence, who pampered the elite — could afford this. Jesse's name was on the lease, not Jarrat's, and the cover story was bulletproof. Jesse had come a long way since his own days as a Companion. He had gone back to the business, but he was a manager now, and his stable had an enviable reputation. His Companions were not only the most beautiful, they were also *different*. This one was a dancer, like Jesse himself; that one was a singer, another might be a lightpainter, or a *player*.

Jarrat was a player. Poker, racquetball, shotokan. As a Companion, he was in top physical condition, and most of his time was his own. He played

poker with several of Jesse's 'ponies,' and racquetball with Stone, twice a week, when Stone visited, ostensibly as a customer from out of town. Gable and Cantrell also visited, but stayed only long enough to have dinner, trade data, and convince anyone who might have Jarrat under surveillance that the Companion's business was done. Stone would stay the night, and the morning, if he could leave his work for so long.

The separation was dragging, painful. For the first time since the bonding they had been apart for months. Equinox and Scorpio had been streamlined operations, but Jarrat remembered Death's Head as a dangerous jumble, difficult to control because the syndicate itself was a scattered, disorganized, amateur operation. They could be the most lethal. White Lightning was very like Death's Head, and Jarrat was chafing at the assignment. Stone wanted him out, yet they both knew, if he hung on just a few more days, it would all come together.

He turned his back on the apartment's wide-canvas artwork, the genuine Chola bronze, the fake Tang figurines, and looked out over the city. He could see the Sullivan Chung Building, pick it out of the gold and blue of downtown Calleran by the running lights of its airpark. The building had begun to taunt him. For weeks, he had been glaring at it from all quarters of the city, while he tried every trick he knew to get himself into the upper levels. It was the target, and it had assumed the characteristics of some golden fleece.

Two hundred levels above the street was Starlight Park, more than two hectares of quasi-natural forest, so high above the canyons of the ground traffic lanes that the air was clean, and when the storms cleared the stars were brilliant as cut diamonds. Much of the park was accessible to the residents of the upper floors, but in the heart was the mansion itself, inside a three-meter wall, patrolled by drones and secured by Sullivan Chung's corporate army.

For NARC to get in that way, Stone must launch a gunship, assault the building from the air. Physically, the task would be simple; but without the evidence that would nail Patrice Josef Dalmau, not even NARC would put a gunship into the city, where the force of mercenaries on Sullivan Chung's payroll could take up the gauntlet, and the streets below could run with blood.

Dalmau had a PhD in political science, another in economics, and sundry diplomas in marketing, demographics, psychology. He was groomed from childhood for public office — and identified by two independent informants as the mogul at the head of White Lightning. One informant was cryotanked aboard the *Athena*. The other was on her way to Darwin's to begin a new life with a new name, new face.

The evidence was threadbare, and NARC was not ready to commit to an action. The colonial government had tried to forbid any investigation into Dalmau, and the raw intel received from the informants inspired Colonel Bill Dupre to a frown. Gut instinct told Jarrat and Stone to pursue Dalmau, but Central would never authorize it without granite-hard evidence.

All of which sent Jarrat into Calleran, with a luxury apartment, a fat bank account, and a manager whose name was respected as far afield as Venice.

White Lightning was not an assignment for which he and Stone had tossed a coin. They worked a whole night through to devise a plan which would put one of them into the heart of Starlight Park, and it had to be Jarrat.

Their man moved in a group of luminaries. Billionaires, politicians, businessmen, celebrities. And Companions. The best in the trade commanded six-figure fees, and for Dalmau and his associates, it was nothing but the best. Companions of all genders frequented the mansion; two of them were stablemates, and their manager was Jesse Lawrence.

Jarrat's eyes shifted focus as he glimpsed his own reflection in the armorglass. His hair was long. Its growth had been accelerated since the two weeks when this deep cover op was in the planning, and it had been growing ever since. It was blond, with the hue of old gold, and his skin was deep bronze. His chest and limbs were as impossibly smooth as any Companion's, and his eyes were ice-green. He had ceased to notice the contacts; the skin pigment was a monthly shot of melabronze, and he would be blond until the commercial nano in his follicles were deactivated. Months ago, a stranger had looked out of the glass. He would never have recognized himself.

The longer he lived inside this man's skin, the easier it was to *be* the Companion. He could almost forget the kid from Sheckley who had once been offered this same deal when he was too young, legally, to accept it. Memories of the army, of Sheal's corporate battlefields, mocked him across the years. More recent memories haunted him. NARC, the carriers, the descendant troops, assignments like this. And Stone.

Always Stone, there in his nerve endings like a lifeline. Jarrat glared at his own reflection. He was naked, and used to being naked by now. The hair was a tumble across his shoulder while platinum chains whispered across his throat and chest. The nipple rings sparkled with diamonds; both his earlobes wore the same sparklets, and his fingers and wrists were heavy with platinum. Stone had laughed when 'the look' was unveiled, but lately he had stopped laughing. He had begun to accept the performance as another of Jarrat's many faces.

And 'the look' was purpose designed to catch Dalmau. He liked his men lean, muscular, fit. His fancy was for blonds, and he could never resist exotics. The gold mane, the jewelry, the arctic jade eyes, were created for him, and when Jarrat arrived in Calleran — the newest showpony in Jesse Lawrence's local stable — the news sped through the social grapevine. Jesse made sure of it. He priced Jarrat out of the reach of all but Calleran's elite, and then taught him every trick of the trophy Companion's trade.

The pair who were routine visitors to the mansion shared what the knew of Dalmau and his associates. In an evening, Jesse knew what they preferred, what they must have at any cost. With a rueful grin, Stone let Jarrat have the job. He himself was the wrong *type*, too tall, too muscular, while Jarrat had the raw material that could quite easily be molded into Dalmau's fantasy.

Three times, the man had visited this apartment. He brought nothing with him that NARC could use, not even his ID. The fee was paid in advance,

Jesse took care of the financial details, and the ‘work’ was easy. Dalmau liked his men young but not too young, lean but not thin, strong enough to make the act of possession actually mean something, intelligent but wise enough not to flaunt it. In the bedroom, he liked to take a cognac, wrestle a little and win. Then, when he had his prey down, he would pop a little chimera and mount up for a long, hard ride.

The toughest parts of the job, Jarrat thought, were letting the man get the best of him in the wrestling bout, and then accepting the hands of a *customer* on him. Hands that were not Stone’s, roaming his body, while Stone felt everything through the empathic bond, leaving Jarrat a reluctant channel, sheepish about his own arousal, when his body ignited as it must. Stone had said little on the subject, but Jarrat felt rebellious misgivings from him, kindling swiftly into fury when Jarrat was *entertaining*. The resentment was not directed at Jarrat himself, but at the job, even NARC itself, yet Stone recognized the absurdity of his own feelings.

This was the job they signed on for. NARC only recruited volunteers who were already professionals in their own field, and the work could easily drift into the bedroom. Many times, in the two years Jarrat and Stone had served together as friends, they connected with strangers in the field, struck up relationships. Stone had been genuinely fond of Riki Mitchell, and Jarrat often thought of Lee, the little Companion who had shared his bed while he masqueraded as Hal Mavvik’s cocky young shooter. Both of them had traded sex for information and favors, without hesitation. The job was like that, there had never been anything to rationalize —

Because six months ago, they were unattached, Jarrat thought bleakly. They might have been tiptoeing around each other for a long time, always careful not to let simple lust show through. And it might have been easy to play the part of the Companion here, now, if what he felt for Stone was only lust. Love complicated everything.

It was love that made Stone seethe when, through the bond, he felt Dalmau’s hands on Jarrat’s skin, and the deep, driving beat of possession. Jarrat always tried to lock the empathic shields between them, but the greater the sensation or emotion — fury, joy, arousal, fear, grief — the more seeped through. And Jarrat would clench his hands into the velvet of cushions, the bunched satin of knotted sheets, and brace himself to ride out Stone’s resentment as well as the squall of Dalmau’s chimera-driven desire.

Gifts arrived by courier in the morning, and some of them were priceless. The evening after Dalmau’s second ‘appointment,’ Jarrat was fingering a San Mateo chrono with the original titanium band, glaring at its black marble face, when Stone stepped out of the security elevator. It opened into the apartment’s hall, after a forty-floor drop from the rooftop parking lot. Jarrat was expecting him, had been aware of him every minute and kilometer since he left the carrier. Resentment still burned in his gut, like the cinders of a fire that could easily be rekindled. A glimpse of Jarrat, as he came into the apartment, seemed to fan them.

Jarrat was at the wide window, where he spent a great deal of time in the evenings when he was not entertaining. Stone's feelings hit him like a punch and his spine straightened as his skin prickled in the draft from the hall. He knew what Stone would see. He was a lean, gold-maned figure, half-bare in loose white sweatpants that only made his skin seem darker. That night, 'the look' Jesse had designed for him only seemed to infuriate Stone.

"Not my fault," Jarrat said in lieu of greeting. "Leave it alone, Stoney. I'm not in the mood."

Stone, being Stone, reacted with a blinding flash of anger that cooled almost at once and left a curiously tender humor in its wake. In the armor-glass, Jarrat watched his reflection come closer, before fingertips trickled down his spine and Stone's mouth closed on his nape. "Not in the mood for what?" he growled as he slipped his hands into the sweats and molded them about Jarrat's hipbones.

"I don't want to fight," Jarrat said quietly. "Not about *that*."

"We've never fought, much less about *that*." Stone left a transitory bite brand on his shoulder, under the spill of yellow hair.

"You think I don't know what you're feeling?" Jarrat turned toward him.

"Come to bed," Stone said, sultry as a tropical night, "and I'll give you something to feel."

And Jarrat went with him, straddled him and rode him until they were both exhausted. A long time later, they were half asleep in a loose embrace, watching the flicker of traffic a kilometer from the windows, when Stone said softly, "I know it's not your fault. You didn't choose to be here — well, you did, but it's got to be done. If Dalmau fancied something like me, it'd me getting my field plowed while we wait for a chance to get into the building."

"And you hate it," Jarrat said against his shoulder.

"I hate it." Stone's big arms tightened. "When the bust comes around, I hope he gives me a reason to break his nose. I'd do it with great pleasure."

Jarrat propped himself on both elbows and looked down at Stone in the soft light of three lamps. "He doesn't hurt me."

"If he did, I'd go punch his lights out without waiting for the bust to come around." Stone's blue eyes were dark, half closed. "I know everything."

"You mean, you know he can turn me on," Jarrat rasped.

"Christ!" Stone reached up, caught him before he could move away. "You're a man, Kevin, it's physical, biology. It's how the machinery works. I'm not a fool."

"Then say what you mean." Jarrat subsided onto him, pillowed on the bigger, broader body. "I don't read thoughts, Stoney. Never could."

"What I mean ..." Stone hesitated, and his hands cupped Jarrat's face, his thumbs brushed the contours of his cheeks, the line of his nose. "What I mean is, of course I bloody resent it. I'm *not* supposed to be mad enough to spit? I'd bust Dalmau's nose with great joy, because I love you, you moron. *And* you can feel it from me, *and* I know you feel the same way, because I can feel it from you. Don't you dare lay some crap on me about it all being

part of the job. You're going to fuck me now, deep as you can for as long as you can."

"I am?" Jarrat looked down bemusedly at him.

"You are." Stone's long legs scissored, caught him in a hold that might, in another time, have inspired a wrestling bout. Not now. Jarrat was in no such mood. Stone could have had the world, if he had asked for it. Instead, Jarrat reached over him for the bottle of sweet-scented, sweet-tasting gel, and seized Stone's mouth with a kiss that left no molecule of air in his lungs.

They never spoke of it again. Three weeks later, Stone's resentment was still seething and Dalmau was still visiting the apartment. The man's bedroom routine had not changed. The wrestling bout was ridiculous; the cognac was fine; Jarrat never bothered with the chimera, though it was offered. And after Stone's company, the ride was no challenge. Dalmau was hardly in the same physical league. The man went away happy, and more gifts arrived by courier. A bottle of hundred year old scotch whisky, right out from Earth; a pair of emerald nipple rings that matched his eyes.

But Jarrat was moody, restless, filled with the same resentment, and Stone knew it — the feeling echoed through the bond, reverberating like a tangible thing. They had never handfasted, never even discussed their partnership in terms of fidelity. Even if they had, Jarrat thought bleakly, *this* would have been deemed different.

This was work. It was the job. The moment he walked off the carrier, he became Jesse Lawrence's showpony, whose name and picture were all over downtown, and whose pricetag alone was guaranteed to attract attention in the group with whom Dalmau socialized. Fascination for the exotic brought Dalmau here. Smugness would make him invite Jarrat to the mansion. It was only a matter of time. He had to show off, the way he had to win at wrestling. He had to be the best, own the best, perform the best, the way he popped chimera before he fucked. The effects were purely artificial; any man was like a steel bar wrapped in velvet, and he would last as long as he wanted. Dalmau had to be top of the heap — yet he had received Jarrat on recommendation, like secondhand goods.

Eventually he would have to assert his ownership in the face of the friend who had made the recommendation. Her name was Glen Krentz, and while Jarrat wasted time in Calleran, Stone had been running a second investigation, back-to-back.

She was a credits billionaire, a share market pirate, born on Earth and living in the colonies where the more volatile markets made it easier to make an extra billion. But Krentz would never have passed an audit; she often took massive losses, with no apparent source for the funding which somehow covered those losses. On Aurora, industrialists like Michiko and Pete Denehy supported each other with donations, well inside the bounds of colonial law. But Brennan had no such law. Krentz's funding was coming from somewhere else, and Jarrat had always believed in the adage, *Follow the money*. She and Dalmau used the same clubs, restaurants, an uptown sexshop where they

could play at slumming and never get their shoes muddy. They made the same investments, used the same Companions.

If Dalmau was the power behind White Lightning, Jarrat would have placed Krentz at his left hand. Bust one, and they busted the other. He was so sure, he was only waiting for Stone to share the data that put Tac squads in the air over Starlight Park, and forced Dalmau to face NARC.

The plan was to call the bluff of Sullivan Chung's mercenaries, have the company stand them down, flush Dalmau out like a fox and pick him up on the run, halfway out of the system. It was a good plan, with the virtue of being simple. The kind of plan that unraveled while you watched.

Jarrat's eyes shifted focus again as he looked over the city at the lights of the airpark, just west of the mansion. Private cars made their way in and out around the clock. The corporate forces used hangars fifty floors lower, in the armored interior of the building. Jarrat thought fleetingly of Equinox Towers, but the difference was, Sullivan Chung was unconnected with Dalmau and White Lightning. A NARC action causing heavy property damage, even if civilian casualties were avoided, would be damning to the department.

For six weeks Stone had kept Krentz under surveillance, but she never faltered. She knew she was under the NARC lens. Now, she was booked on the clipper for Earth, with legitimate reason. She had been heavily invested in Murchison AeroTech, and with Arago Technologies destroying them on the markets, the lackeys who managed her portfolio wanted her back.

Nothing NARC had uncovered would keep her off the clipper, and Jarrat could feel the bust slipping through their fingers. She would leave in two days, right after the anniversary party at the mansion. Krentz would be there, as would most of Calleran's luminaries, and many of the city's trophy Companions. For over an hour he had been waiting for a call, hoping for it. If Dalmau must assert his dominance, flaunt his ownership of the Companion the downtown midnight ratpack was whispering about, he had one chance left.

His eyes flicked to the chrono over the hearth. It was just short of 22:00 and his fingers itched for the comm. Still, the chime made him jump and a pulse drummed in his ear as he picked up. He had known it would be Jesse. The screen lit brightly, and Jesse's face wore an expression of triumph.

"Kevin, you're on. I just took the booking. You'll be with Dalmau, and he's paid triple fees, so you know he'll be sharing you with friends."

"Shit," Jarrat whispered.

"Problem?" Jesse skipped a beat. "I told you, this could happen."

"I know. And no, it's not a problem." Jarrat glared at his reflection in the window. His skin prickled as he remembered the sessions he and Stone had spent with Jesse. In twelve hours, Jesse turned a Sheckley kid into a skycity palomino, and Dalmau's ratpack had never doubted the performance. Stone, bemused and sometimes slightly scandalized, had played the customer, and it had seemed like a game. Even now it seldom seemed real to Jarrat, but he suspected the fantasy was about to come alive with a vengeance. "When?"

"Tomorrow night, 22:00, give or take fifteen. I'll pick you up in the limo,

take you over there. I'm also going to wait there, and bring you out."

"Dangerous," Jarrat warned. He looked down into Jesse's eyes, in the screen. "You realize what I'll be doing, when I'm through with the god-damned *customers*."

"Of course I do," Jesse said tersely. "Listen, if you're not up this —"

"I'm fine," Jarrat told him. "I'll see you an hour before showtime?"

"Yeah." Jesse hesitated. "Remember what I taught you. Stretch out and lube up ahead of time. You don't want surprises. Never forget, your asking price is two-fifty, you're at the top of your trade. They bruise you, they pay double. If they insult you, you stick your nose in the air and walk out."

"Not this time," Jarrat said edgily. "This time, I have to be there."

"Well ..." Jesse shrugged and dragged both hands back through the honey-gold mass of his own hair. "You be careful, is all. See you tomorrow."

The line went dead. Jarrat drummed his fingers on the workspace beside the comm while he fought the hot chaos of his thoughts into order, and then punched in a code he could have hit in his sleep. NARC-*Athena*-515. The comm raised the Tactical AI first, which checked the source and patched through the call. 515 was a private line on the carrier, and his own comm was absolutely secure. NARC techs had installed the line. Shiptime was four hours behind Calleran time. He glanced at the chrono and saw 17:45.

Stone answered moments later, and Jarrat said without preamble, "We're on, 22:00, tomorrow."

"Jesus," Stone said hoarsely. "Are you okay?"

"Too late to chicken and run." Jarrat hooked a stool with one ankle and pulled it closer. "We're almost through, Stoney. One more day and we can get the hell out."

"All right." Stone licked his lips, a tiny anxious expression only Jarrat would have recognized. He *felt* the rush of stress as clearly as if Stone were in the room rather than parked in low orbit, right over his head. "It's showtime for me at 07:45 anyway," he was saying. "Krentz's gear's already at the clipper dock. She leaves the house in Rosenbloom in the late afternoon, for the shindig at Dalmau's, but the mainframe isn't pulled out till next morning. Gives us a window to get in, turn the house over, see what we can get."

"You'll be in the air?" Jarrat guessed. It was where Raven Leader should be, with men groundside and his partner at the most critical point of the op.

"Yep. I'll have an extraction squad waiting for you. Blue Raven will be at two thousand meters, just downrange of Rosenbloom, covering our people at the Krantz estate. Gold will be standing by the Sullivan Chung building. They can take you off the roof."

"Not without a fight," Jarrat warned. "There's a corporate army between me and the airpark, and I'll be close to buff naked, never mind unarmed! I'll be in a groundie, and I'll have Jesse with me. Lift us right off the road."

"Will do." Stone leaned closer to the vid pickup. "Kevin ... I hate this. We get through this, and then we strike a deal." Jarrat could guess what he was going to say. "No more," Stone growled.

"Oh, yeah." Jarrat took a breath. "Stoney ... hey, man, I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," Stone said darkly, "not this time. And there won't be a next."

"Amen to that," Jarrat agreed. "Can you make it down tonight?"

But Stone's dark head shook. "The ops room's cranked up, we're on surveillance till it happens. Calleran Tactical's on standby, and I'm dodging the colonial governor, who's still trying to tell me I can't investigate Dalmau, can't put a gunship in his precious city, unless the Angelpack riots." He lifted a brow at Jarrat. "If we screw up, Dupre's going to have our balls done over-easy for breakfast."

"So we don't screw up," Jarrat said tersely.

"You, uh, need any help," Stone wondered, "prepping for the, uh, run?"

Jarrat gave him a look, mock-hard with reproach. "I know what I'm doing. I can handle Dalmau and his ratpack buddies. I could get edgy about going in unarmed, but we know the house goons are well set up. If I need something, I'll grab it on the fly." A buzz from Stone's end told him the ops room was calling. "You're busy."

"I have to go," Stone told him. "Get some rest, and ...". He met Jarrat's eyes in the vid pickup and his feelings ripped through Jarrat like a squall line. "I'll call you," he promised, and the line went dead.

"I love you too," Jarrat said to the blank screen, and reached for the brandy he had set down minutes before. If he closed his eyes he could follow Stone, breath for breath. The bond gave a sense of closeness that was dangerously reassuring. Jarrat was on his own, and he knew it. Help from the carrier was a minimum of an hour away, while death could come in seconds.

With stubborn determination, he swallowed the brandy and headed for the bathroom to begin the long, thorough preparations for the run. No part of his face or body was neglected, and the last hour, before Jesse arrived in the scarlet Cobra, were interesting, if bizarre. There was a mercenary element about thoroughly, deliberately prepping his body for an onslaught, and when he was done with the glycerine-sweet lube he lifted weights for twenty minutes to pump his muscles, before he cooled off and painted his eyelids.

He was putting on the jewelry while Jesse rode the lift down from the roof park. He wore flimsy skinthins, the same hue as his own skin; he might as well have been naked. Platinum and diamonds glittered, and the contacts made his eyes basilisk green. His hair was loose, falling into his face as he pushed his feet into the rope sandals that were chic in Calleran this year, and spread his arms as Jesse appeared. "Best I can do."

The younger man gave him a lopsided grin. "I could get you into any stable this side of Chryse itself, with a six-figure starting price."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Jarrat said darkly. He picked up his wallet, shades and keys. "Let's get it done."

"Relax!" Jesse looked him up and down. "You're gorgeous, and thanks to me you know what you're doing. I'll be in the building, and ... where's your partner?" He glanced at the ceiling. "Stoney can't be far away."

In fact, Stone was closer even than Jesse thought, and a large part of Jarrat's own edginess was Stone's sensations slipping through the bond. He was in the shuttle, not ten kilometers from this building, monitoring the Rosenbloom sector. Specifically, running forward observation on the Krentz estate. Jarrat felt the prickle of sweat in his gloved palms as he flew the VM-104, the solid weight of the helmet on his head, the vibration through the airframe as big engines moved the aircraft.

"He's ... working." Jarrat closed his eyes. *Raven Leader is in the field.* He focused on Stone for an elongated moment, and caught his breath as Stone picked up on his own feelings, the sharp misgivings about this masquerade as a Companion, the race of Jarrat's pulse, even the unaccustomed tug of jewelry. Stone picked up on it all and the bond fluoresced with disquiet.

For several long seconds he was concentrating not on the ground squad, his aircraft, the gunship, but on Jarrat, and like a kick in the spine, Jarrat felt the Corsair jink violently. It fell through several hundred meters and then bounced up on repulsion, as Stone was jerked back to his own reality. Adrenaline pounded through him, his pulse rate soared, and Jarrat dragged in a breath. He would never be aware of Stone's thoughts, but for a moment he would have sworn he actually heard his partner's voice. *Not now, Kevin — if you're in my head, I can't do this — you're going to get me killed.*

"Go." He was ahead of Jesse, heading for the lift, and the empathic shields slammed up tight.

Harry had taught them well. After six months of practice Jarrat could at least eavesdrop. From the tense concentration in Stone's every muscle, he knew the moment the NARC squad made their surreptitious entry to the Krentz estate. It should be Gable on the ground, leading the crew. He had transferred from Starfleet eight months ago, and was more than ready to take the assignment. Jarrat forced his mind back to the road as Jesse turned left by the Carlos Ortega Mall and threaded into the traffic headed for the spaceport on Playford Boulevard. He watched Jesse's long legs, and was reminded of the first time he had seen the Companion — in a bar in Elysium, on the Equinox bust ... and in a courtyard at Randolph Dorne's mansion in the air.

The Cobra made slow time in the traffic, and against his better judgment Jarrat focused on Stone again while Jesse called ahead to tell the client they were running late. Stone's perceptions engulfed him. He knew when the VM-104 came under fire, he felt Stone's throat tighten as he shouted into the loop, felt the odd, twisting, falling sensation in the hollow of chest and belly that told him, someone was down. Someone was injured or dead.

The numbness and chill in Stone's extremities confirmed the impression, and Jarrat dragged himself away with a gasp. They were in the secure garage under Dalmau's building. The car was silent, and Jesse was peering at him worriedly. "Kevin, you look terrible."

"It's nothing," he lied. A cold sweat had broken on his face. "I'm just listening in on Stoney. It's going badly in Rosenbloom." Then he sent the gulling up and determinedly stepped out.

The garage was wide, well-lit, and cold. He was dressed too lightly for the chill, and when Jesse offered him a parka, he took it. They were scanned, imaged, recorded, several times on the way to the lifts. He turned to face the lenses and Dalmau's AI passed them through. The lift went up fast, and as it opened he handed back the jacket.

Soft lights, fluting music and the scent of jasmine greeted him. He opened the velcro at his throat and the skinthin split to his navel. Jesse was signing them in, and the mansion's chief of staff offered him a brandy in the gallery. The last Jarrat saw of Jesse, he was breathing the vapors from a small balloon and pretending to be entranced by a Monet.

With a smothered curse, he locked the empathic shield as if it were an armor plate. Stone had no time to be preoccupied by echoes of what was going to happen to Jarrat. For himself, Jarrat did not dare divide his attention between his own work and Stone's. They were an abyss different, yet so dangerous, a lapse of concentration would be lethal.

Patrice Dalmau welcomed him with a kiss, a brandy, the offer of chimera if he wanted it, but this of all nights, he needed a clear head. Krentz was already in the private suite, and two men were wrangling in the spa. The party had already started. Dalmau was behind him with an embrace, a long caress which stripped the skinthin from him. With a sultry glance around the group, Jarrat went to work.

The night's fee was monstrous, and he earned it. Krentz was a surly spectator, but Dalmau was hard to please. Exhaustion had begun to tug at Jarrat's limbs before he was passed on to the others. In a silk robe, Dalmau took Krentz's place in the big lounge chair by the hearth as she stepped out to take a private call. Jarrat was crushed between two heaving bodies when she returned, but he heard the bark of her voice.

"Pat, we've got trouble."

"Trouble?" Dalmau was sleepy with the aftereffects of the chimera.

"Snap out of it!" She was snarling with urgency. "My place was hit. We don't know who the hell it was, but my people showed them a good fight."

"Property damage?" Dalmau struggled up to coherence.

"Major. The *merchandise* is safe, but the house is smoking rubble. Griss says they traded shots with a plane, knocked it down. They took one prisoner. We should be able to beat out of him who's all over us like stink on shit."

Sandwiched between Dalmau's threshing friends, thoroughly besieged and struggling just to breathe, Jarrat heard every word. His heart beat a tattoo on his ribs as he dropped the empathic shield a fraction, a fraction more, and physically flinched. As the feed from Stone kicked in he ceased even to notice what was being done to him here, now. But Stone was 'dark,' and Jarrat knew the sensation. He was deeply unconscious.

Fury and dread galvanized in a surge of energy. The exhaustion was gone, and he shifted position with a subtle twist that put him in command of the threesome. He finished them in minutes with Jesse's tricks, and crawled away across the bed to catch his breath. He was bruised, sore, but so unaware

of his own body, he neither acknowledged nor cared about it.

"Christ, you're kidding me," Dalmau was saying as Jarrat stood and stretched his abused spine. "Paul Grissom took a prisoner?"

"He was tailed from the air, but he lost the buggers in citybottom between Natal and Dundee. It's a warren, you don't want to know about it." Krentz paused and a lighter flicked repeatedly. She dragged on the smoke and passed it to Dalmau. "Where d'you want the prisoner?"

"Here," Dalmau said without hesitation, and only then seemed to become aware of Jarrat, who was standing by the bed, hands on hips, head cocked and wearing a mildly curious mask. Dalmau summoned the snakelike smile which came so easily to the career politician. "My dear boy, none of this need concern you. It's only business. Nothing to trouble your beautiful head. Come this way, and relax." He scooped up the skinthin and the flimsy sandals, and held them out. "You were marvelous, darling." He swept back Jarrat's hair and kissed his neck in passing. "I'll have to leave you, but you can relax as long as you like. Bathe, sleep, supper. By all means call your manager up."

He had led Jarrat to a door ten meters down the private passageway, and opposite. Inside was a suite almost as elegant as Dalmau's own, and Jarrat had only to smile, step inside and let the door slide shut. He had no way to know if the apartment was bugged, but it was a safe bet. He washed quickly, caught his breath while he slaked his thirst with plain water, and put out the lights.

For ten minutes he remained absolutely still, until even the house AI would assume he was asleep and shift the room to low-level surveillance. Stone was still 'dark,' his body at rest, his feelings shifting like deep ocean currents, as they did in dreams. His limbs were growing cold, which told Jarrat clearly, he was out of the riot armor. And he was so close to this location, Jarrat felt he could have reached out and touched him.

It was time to move, and events in Rosenbloom served his purpose. The Dalmau staff were intent on their own trouble, and when he cracked the door and peered out, he was not surprised to see the passages deserted. Jesse should be waiting in the gallery, off one side of the vestibule with access to the private lifts, and if Blue Raven were in the air over Rosenbloom, Gold should be standing by this building. Their pickup would already be covering the exits.

He had planned on having several hours to prowl around, listen, watch, maybe look into files, filch access codes. He doubted Dalmau would keep Angel itself, or the raw materials, on the premises, but after business was concluded, Companions were as overlooked and ignored as furniture. Conversations were unguarded, files left open.

Time was short, but the hit in Rosenbloom was the perfect distraction. He moved from shadow to shadow, hall to hall, unnoticed. He knew the layout of the building well from architect's blueprints, made available to NARC under protest. Dalmau and Krentz would be on the top floor, a studio from which surveillance was controlled; the security staff worked out of offices

on the west wall. If a prisoner were anywhere in the building, he would be there.

Stone was still moving, and Jarrat would have sworn he was on the ground. Natal and Dundee were adjoining sectors, fused into one entity by the freight lines which bisected them. Calleran's citybottom was the run-down streets by the tracks, and the honeycomb of subways, malls and arcades into which Tac rarely ventured. Stone was there, Jarrat was certain. Natal was south of this building, and it was a safe bet they had taken Stone there to get him out of the armor, and into a new vehicle. The car that had been tailed out of Rosenbloom would be picked up the moment it showed itself again.

Twenty minutes, he thought feverishly as he moved from a private lounge to a deserted office. They would surely have Stone in the building in twenty, and if they were both going to get out, he would have to be armed and in position to make an intercept, which complicated his options.

If Stone remained on the ground, he would be brought up from the garages under the building. If Krentz's goons loaded him into a flyer, he would be coming down from the roof. Jarrat pressed against a cool marble wall and forced his brain into gear. *Think!*

His top priority was certainly a weapon, and all the reloads he could carry. He called the floorplan to mind and slithered into the shadows of an open gallery which led through from the vast dining room to the private suites. The security company's offices were beyond, and he was playing a hunch. Most of the troops should be upstairs, watching the feed from Rosenbloom and talking on secure channels with the squad that had pulled Stone out of the plane.

He was right. The security office was almost deserted, and the armory was one chamber beyond, palm-locked. One officer had been left to mind the fort. Jarrat saw sergeant's chevrons on his shoulder. He would do. The man fell sideways, unaware of the blow that put him down, and Jarrat grunted as he hefted the dead mass. He slapped the sergeant's limp hand on the lock, and the door opened with a whine of servos.

The company was armed with Kovak and Chiyoda. He took a machine pistol and four magazines. Short of pockets, he stuffed the magazines into the breast of the skinthin and swore as he dragged the sergeant into the armory. The door sealed, and Jarrat moved on. A chrono in his skull was counting down, and he guessed he had ten minutes.

Before he stepped out, he let down the empathic shields a bare fraction and tapped into Stone. "On the ground," he murmured with a primal satisfaction. Luck had swung his way. He knew passages via which he could make his way back to the gallery where Jesse would be waiting, and the lifts which fed directly to the garage. The Cobra was big, armored, fast, and Gold Raven were close, looking for it.

His priorities had shifted, and he was NARC enough to realize it. He should be looking for evidence. Stone was a big boy, he could find his own way out of the mess he had let himself be dumped into. Several times, they

had each been in this situation. The field agent was trained for it — you could rarely hope for help, much less count on it.

Yet Jarrat was intent on his partner, and the hunt for evidence was low on his agenda. There would be other opportunities, other strategies, but Stone was too valuable to be left in White Lightning's hands. He could be traded, the way Death's Head had tried to trade him. He could be ransomed, and NARC would pay a high price. He could be killed outright.

Dread was heavy on Jarrat's shoulders as he made his way to the hall. Survival instinct outweighed the hunger for the evidence to nail Dalmau, and only the NARC in him forced his mind back on track as he passed by a series of dark, silent offices. He guessed he had five minutes before the squad bringing Stone would be here. It was not enough, but it was all he was likely to get. He slipped into the first office and saw the common door connecting it to the next. The screens were dormant, and his skin prickled. He knew passive monitoring must pick him up, and again he played a hunch. The security staff must be elsewhere, locking down a situation. Stone's very predicament bought him this opportunity, and he was only twenty meters and as many seconds from the lifts.

He flicked on the lights and took stock of the office. It had every hallmark of the executive suite. The teak desk, big leather chair, outside windows, a chandelier, a cut glass tantalus, an antique gold fountain pen. It had to be Dalmau's personal office, and Jarrat had learned some fraction about the man. Dalmau favored antiques, like the pen. He liked his cognac old, his limousines kept their wheels on the ground, and the house uniform was curiously old world.

Intuition sent him to the desk, where every drawer was locked. The kevlex butt of the Chiyoda smashed one after another, and he tipped the contents to the floor, looking swiftly for *anything*. And there they were. A gold-cased IntelScan palmset which doubled as voice recorder, camera, uplink to the office AI, and comm; a morocco-bound book, a real paper and leather *book*, an antique luxury such as Dalmau treasured. Jarrat snatched it up and leafed through its pages. Names, dates, dollar values, phonecodes, passwords, eight-digit alphanumeric access keys, flight numbers. "Jackpot," he told himself as he shoved the journal and the palmset into the skinthin.

And he was out of time. The chrono in his head read zero. His heart hammered as he opened the empathic shield again, and he almost yelped. Stone was near, and he was hurt. He was far from unconscious now. Something was damaged, Jarrat knew, though it was not the overwhelming pain of a broken bone. Stone was barely breathing, and both his arms hurt, as if he were hanging — hanging from hands that were carrying him while he pretended unconsciousness?

Very carefully, he sent feelers through the bond, and Stone felt him at once. Oh, he was awake. Cautious as a lame old wolf, Jarrat slithered out of the office and along the passage to the junction where the gallery branched off to his left. The lifts were opposite, and the desk where Jesse had signed

them in. Dalmau's secretary was absent, almost certainly marshaling the house staff and keeping the evening's entertainment flowing. No matter the situation in Rosenbloom, the anniversary party went on. Any interruption in the festivities would be a dead giveaway, and Dalmau was too smart to allow his connection with Krentz to show through.

The evidence was warming against his chest, Jarrat was sure. He moved into the gallery unseen, and whispered Jesse's name. A shape moved in the wing chair opposite the replica Titian, and Jesse cursed as he got up.

"Jesus, Kevin, where've you been? Guns? Damnit, we should be gone!"

"Not without Stoney." Jarrat gestured at the lifts with the Chiyoda. "They shot him down, they're bringing him in right now, and I suggest you get behind something, then get ready to run. I want you in the lift like a rabbit, first chance you get. Understand?"

His eyes were wide, dilated. His mouth flapped open, but he nodded mutely and dove into the grudging cover of the chair.

Even then, Jarrat could feel the tiny rumble through the floor of the lift coming up. He had picked his place before he called Jesse's name, and was in it when the lift opened. Stone was still feigning unconsciousness, hanging limply between two burly men, each as big as Cronin and Ramos. Two others were in the elevator. They had the look of a driver and a shooter, and Jarrat targeted the shooter first.

The next twenty seconds were a haze of adrenaline, cordite and ear-destroying noise. The shooter died without even drawing his weapon, and the driver lived less than two seconds more. Blood was still in the air, fanning like drops of wine in freefall, when the Chiyoda ripped through the guards who had been holding Stone. He went down flat and stayed down, half in, half out of the lift. He was still falling as the guards clawed for their sidearms, but Jarrat was much too fast. One man slammed into the wall by the open lift, already dead. The other wore an expression of astonishment as he tumbled back into the lift, on top of the driver.

"Run!" Jarrat bellowed at Jesse, and he himself was moving. They had seconds — the gunfire would bring house security down on them so fast, so hard, if they were not out in a dozen heartbeats, they would not *be* leaving.

He was five paces ahead of Jesse, and Stone had lifted his head as Jarrat shifted the Chiyoda into his left hand and stooped to seize his partner by his collar. He threw his weight into the effort, hauling Stone back into the lift, and his hand was over the 'down' key as he turned back for Jesse.

He was so close, Jarrat actually heard the sharp intake of breath as the 9mm thudded into his back. A security man had leaned out around the desk. Three rounds spat out of a Kovak handgun, and two of them slammed into Jesse hard enough to throw him forward into Jarrat's arms. Before the man could fire again, Jarrat had hit the down key. The doors closed over and the elevator car was falling as he went to both knees, holding Jesse in his lap. Stone was groggy but awake, wincing as he forced himself up. As he saw the blood laving Jarrat's hands and legs, he breathed a long groan.

"Keys," Jesse rasped. "Pocket. Get out ... Christ, don't let 'em get you."
"We won't." Jarrat held him as gently as he was able. "The Cobra's right there, we'll get to it before they can reach us. Gold Raven's over the street." He offered comfort, not false promises. Jesse's eyes were already glazing, darkening, and Jarrat's legs were sodden with his blood. The injuries were close to inoperable, and there was no chance of medevac in time. "You were great," Jarrat told him. "You made it all happen." He looked up into the pale mask of Stone's face. "We'll nail Dalmau with what we found." Stone groaned in sheer relief, but when Jarrat looked back into Jesse's face, the life was gone. His muscles were lax, the dark eyes vacant, his skin waxen.

Fury rampaged through Jarrat like a summer storm. His head swam with incandescent rage while his heart raced and his bloodstream flooded with raw hormones. Sweat broke from every pore as he laid Jesse down, and he struggled with his shaking hands to reload the machine pistol. His vision was blurred as he met Stone's expression of disbelief.

And then the lift, his partner, Jesse's body, everything misted out to gray, faded to black. He dragged a breath to the bottom of lungs that felt tortured. He heard voices, but could make no sense of the words. Pain prickled through his temples and scalp as filamentary wires were withdrawn. A shot fired into his shoulder, close to the main artery, and gradually the voices drew into sensible focus.

"He's still in the red. Is it the macrodex?"

"No, it's the drug, it's the sim. The hookup's disabled, the blocker's in. How's he looking?"

"Rough. Still in the red zone, but ... stabilizing. Shit, Harry, what the sweet *fuck* are they doing?"

"Complying with orders," Harry Del said in disgusted tones. "They're looking better, Jon. Thanks for coming up, I'm grateful for the help."

"Hey, part of the job," John Semler said mildly. "I'd say there's no permanent damage, but —"

"Not that you can see, but the memories seem so real, and they don't go away." Harry sounded angry, tired, frustrated. "You can go now, Jon. They'll be coming around in a minute. I can handle it."

"If you're sure." The Blue Raven medic moved away to the door. "You want me to report to Doc Reardon?"

"I certainly do! I'm going to be lambasting this test series, so will Kip, and the more clout we can add to the official protest, the better. And thanks," Harry added. "I owe you one."

Jarrat's eyes were slitted open. He was looking at a gray metal panel in which were recessed four CRTs, two of which displayed his own vital signs while another showed Stone's. The last was busy with the data collation, which would go on for hours after the human element was through.

Grief pounded through him, even though he knew, now, it had been a sim. The blockers Harry had shot into him shut off the IV-fed macrodex, and when the filamentary hookups were removed the VR fantasy faded out. But

as Harry had told Jon Semler, the memories were *real*. The hormones flooding him were genuine, and the anguish he had suffered. His body was sweat soaked, his eyes stung with hot, acid tears, and the physical exhaustion was as real as if he had run a marathon. The track pants he wore were sticky, cold. Like an Angel fantasy, the augmented-VR trip had taken him to the edge, turned him inside out. The physical exhaustion was so intense, he had barely the strength to pry open his eyelids as he heard the isolation tank cracking open. The lab's lights were low, but he squinted at any light.

"You quit the sim early." Stone's voice was a dry croak.

Four hours in the iso tank was its own kind of stress. He had been with Jarrat every moment as days were compressed to hours, the virtual memories of weeks in the field were force-fed through the VR-hookup in the form of an intense backstory. The mind did the rest, fleshing out scenarios with its own fantasia, amplifying and magnifying, covering in seconds what would have taken hours to live.

"I stopped it a little soon," Harry admitted. "I don't think there's any doubt you'd have made it out. The goons would have been waiting for you when the lift opened, but you'd have cut them down and got to the car. Gold Raven were right over the street, waiting to lift the Cobra out in tractors. I choose to take it as read, mission accomplished. Besides, this one was unfairly loaded, like several of the others."

"You mean," Stone said from the water cooler, "there was no way in hell for me to have been pulled out of the wreck of the plane, not with Blue Raven providing topcover. So the second half of the sim was — what, contrivance?"

"Contrivance to get the results they wanted," Harry agreed. "Take it steady, Kevin. Come back slowly. Drink this. Right now, you're probably thinking that if you could get your hands on Yvette McKinnen, you'd cheerfully strangle her! But don't blame Mac. She designed these sims to strict specifics. R&D were absolutely clear about what they wanted. You know Mac ... you hire her to design a virtual abattoir, and an abattoir is what you'll get. There was a note left in the system for me, when we started. 'They're big boys,' she said, 'they know when to quit.' Not," he added, "that you quit."

The liquid was only water, and Jarrat almost spilled it. His hands were still shaking. Stone was swallowing a third beaker. He stood at the water cooler, naked and sweating, while Harry shut down the machines, and he plucked a couple of towels from the bench by the cooler. One landed on Jarrat's belly, and Stone drew the terrycloth lightly over him.

"You're all right, Kevin," he was saying. "Keep telling yourself, it was just another sim. Jesse's fine. McKinnen called him a few weeks ago, talked him into helping her design this bullshit. The kid must've figured he was assisting the department, gave her the inside info, how the Companion's trade works."

"But the sim was skewed," Harry insisted as he fetched a second beaker for Jarrat. This one was tall, and brimmed with electrolytes. A shot of vitamins and minerals hissed into his side, and Harry pulled up a chair. "Like Stoney said, no way could he have been taken prisoner, but R&D wanted to ramp up

the stress in this last test. They wanted to see if you could remember what the hell you were in Patrice Dalmau's mansion *for*, while your partner, your lover, was being brought in for a brutal interrogation. And then, they wanted to see if you could handle the death of a close friend for whom you felt responsible, and still get yourself and Stone out of the building."

"I'd have done it," Jarrat rasped.

"At a cost," Harry agreed. "Your vital signs were redlining. Cardiac, pressure, respiration, hormone count, temperature. Kevin, you can do permanent damage. This work is no joke. They're nasty-minded VR fantasies, but many of the physical effects are real. Pain, grief, shock, fear, rage, all flood your body with toxins, and it's almost as bad for the poor bastard in the isolation tank. You're captured in there, tortured ... you wake up with a mouth full of blood, because your body reacts to the VR as if it's real and you bite right through your lips. At this moment, the both of you need a workout, a sauna, a decent meal and ten hours of sleep."

"I'm too tired to hit the gym," Jarrat said hoarsely.

"I know," Harry agreed. "And it's one of the things that makes this work even more dangerous. This is the last run, and you'll have to forgive me if I tell you, the pair of you look like shit. If it was in my power, I'd order you ten days' R&R, and I'll be making the recommendation to Kip."

They were both aching, head to foot. Stone had spent the last four hours suspended in freefall, in complete darkness and silence, at an air temperature a few degrees below body heat. He had talked without pause, candidly describing every sensation, from the most furious to the most erotic or desperate or outraged. There were no secrets. He had been so focused on Jarrat, with the empathic link gaping wide, that any feeling inspired in Kevin by the VR program, or the macrodex, or both, transmitted perfectly. He looked as ragged as Jarrat felt, bruised about the eyes, and he had lost flesh in the last two weeks. Twelve simulations, some eight hours long, all grueling, had punished them. They had alternated in the tank and in the hookup, and in the fantasy world they had been tested to their limits, maimed in battle, killed outright, tortured, betrayed, abandoned, convicted and imprisoned. The simulations were fake; the memories were real, and they would be difficult to set aside.

With a supreme effort, Jarrat swung his legs off the reclined seat and stood shakily. Stone slipped an arm about him and fended Harry off. "We'll hit the shower, get something to eat. Get a drink, relax."

"Forget," Jarrat said, draining the electrolyte solution. "Or try to."

"Now, there's where I *can* help you," Harry said quietly. "I am what I am. I've rummaged around in those craniums of yours before. I can smother the memories, not so much suppress them as blur them. I can make it all seem like something terrible that happened to a friend. You heard about it second-hand and it hurts vicariously, but not like this."

The temptation was to have him do it at once, but Stone said quietly, "We'll take you up on that, Harry, when R&D are through with us. There's

probably going to be a debriefing. We'll get through that, and then ... do your stuff."

"Don't wait too long," Harry warned. "I'm not staying in the homeworlds any longer than it takes me to sign Marcus over to the NARC specialists and get a clipper booking." He took the empty beaker from Jarrat. "Speaking of which, we dropped out of hyper at Itzhak Loyola a few minutes ago, while you were under."

The beacon was Node One in the data conduit that coiled through the Cygnus Colonies, to the frontier which was always expanding beyond. "Two hours to Earth," Jarrat said tiredly. He felt as if he had been used as a punchbag. "We picked up a comm package, Harry?"

"Of course." Harry was intent on the CRT at his elbow, watching the final data scroll. "The messages'll keep. The NARC top brass want to conference and everyone, I mean *everyone*, myself included, I expect, is ordered to show up. I'll ... think about. I might even be there, if they send me a ride and give me dinner. But none of that'll be happening for a day or two. You've time to unwind, relax, and unless Kip's a bastard, which he isn't, you'll be on at least seven days' downtime." He jerked a thumb at the door. "Go. I'm just closing down the file, and then I'll be gone, without looking back."

"Thanks." Stone lifted the pair of robes from the workspace at the end of the panel. "And thanks for killing that bloody pig of a sim early."

"Meet us for dinner, tomorrow night, on us." With leaden arms, Jarrat was shrugging into his robe. "I don't know any place on Earth, but I'm sure *someone* can show us around."

Stone summoned a raw chuckle. "I know a few places, if they're still open after eight years." He belted his robe and steered Jarrat out of the lab. "Tomorrow, Harry."

"If I'm still alive," Jarrat muttered as the door closed behind them.

Shiptime was almost midnight, but with the carrier two hours out of Earth few crew had retired. The status boards were busy with alerts, messages, priority assignments. They would spend several hours clearing HCQ, Homeland Customs and Quarantine, at Memphis, on Ceres Prime in the belt, before the *Athena* would be escorted through the inner system by four merchant *astra* tugs. She would shut down at the NARC dock in five or six hours, and the prospect of sleep beguiled Jarrat.

He hit the taps in his cabin's shower stall, set the flow to cool, and turned his face into the stream. Stone was behind him a moment later, massaging his shoulders, rubbing the taut, knotted muscles of his back, and Jarrat groaned as he began to relax. At last his mind began to think again and he admitted, "Part of me wants to apologize."

"For what?" Stone's hands were still working.

"For what I did in that damned sim." Jarrat shifted about, set his back against the wall and pulled Stone under the water.

"It was the assignment," Stone reasoned, though Jarrat felt very real resentment threading through him. "There was no other way to pull it off. If

we wanted a syndicate bust, we did what was necessary.” He rested his palm on the planes of Jarrat’s chest. “Not that we enjoyed doing it.”

“Would you?” Jarrat asked with a curiously hollow feeling. “Would you take the assignment, Stoney, if the situation came right down to it?”

“We were trained to,” Stone said quietly. “You forgotten your academy days? Third semester classes taught by that ex-Starfleet Intelligence woman with the green streaks in the red hair, you remember? ‘Sex is a weapon, sometimes more effective than firearms, and you should not, *must* not, shirk your study of this tool of espionage’.”

“Then she’d launch the VR,” Jarrat added, “and I’m sure it got interesting for some kids. ‘Get past your gender bias, manipulate your subject regardless of their sex or your preference’. Swinging both ways helped.” Then he set the subject aside and looked up at Stone through the water. “Forget it, Stoney. It’s a bridge we’ll cross when we get to it ... it might never happen.”

Stone pressed his face into both hands, kneaded his eyes, and pulled Jarrat against him. “We got through the sims. No more after this. Harry had it right, they’re not healthy. R&D have learned everything they need, and as for me — I’m up to my eyeballs. Christ, I was up to my eyeballs before we started, so were you.”

“Harry said the file’s closed. Good enough.” Jarrat yawned deeply. “They don’t need to see our smiling faces to get through HCQ. We’re clean, nothing to declare and all that crapola. You want to sleep till we dock?”

“Oh, yeah.” Stone turned off the water. “I want to sleep for a week.”

“Not a week,” Jarrat argued as he plucked a towel from the locker. “I want to see this planet of yours. Show me around, same as I showed you Sheckley.”

“There’s a lot of it,” Stone warned. “You won’t see it all in a week.”

“So show me the best parts,” Jarrat challenged, yawning again. “And tell me how not to get my lights punched out as a colonial.”

Stone winced. “You’d better stick close to me, kiddo. And keep your mouth shut in public, when you can. It’s the accent,” he explained when Jarrat gave him a suspicious glare. “You’re ... different, Kevin. You probably never noticed it, but colonial genetics are not *quite* the same. Jesse calls you a cougar, because he can’t put his finger on the difference, can’t describe it or explain it, but it’s there. And when you add *whatever* it is to the accent, they’ll pick you out of a crowd.”

“They?” Jarrat rubbed his hair as he subsided onto the nearest bunk.

“Earthers.” Stone was busy toweling down. “Colonials get a bad rap back home. Don’t be too quick to take offense, because most of it’s ignorance and stupidity. Take pity on the buggers instead of splitting your knuckles on ‘em.”

“I’ll try and remember that,” Jarrat said darkly as he slid sideways onto the mattress and pulled up the sheet. Blindly, he held out one hand until Stone took it, and then dragged him into the refuge of the bed.

CHAPTER NINE

The NARC building stood in the Cicero-Bridgeport sector, west of the expressways, and the top forty levels enjoyed an uninterrupted view of Lake Michigan. To Stone's eye, little had changed in eight years. Chicago was an unfathomable leviathan in the months he spent as a freshman at Floyd Webber Polytechnic; it was a leviathan now. He never knew Chicago as well as Jack Brogan knew it. Brogan was the social athlete, with a date scheduled every moment he was not in class, playing two girls and a guy off against each other. The nineteen year old R.J. Stone was already sure he had met 'the one,' and rampaging through Chicago's venomous citybottom was less attractive than long, sensual nights in the apartment down in Calumet.

The memories were bittersweet. He savored them for some moments, and then banished them in the interests of sanity. If Angel had not interfered in his life, he would have been installed in one of the major downtown offices by now. A career in science and technology, a subtle shift into politics. He felt only a sense of relief as he looked out across the gray-green lake waters. Grief and rage sent him to Tactical, and then to NARC, and for years Stone would have said he knew where he belonged. For the first time he was not so certain, and the feeling was unnerving.

The name of Bram Sorenson was headlining in the homeworlds too. Since the carrier picked up the data package at the Itzhak Loyola data relay, they had heard little else. Here on Earth, and on Mars, the popular vote was overwhelmingly in Sorenson's favor. Cut off the licensed supply, let users die sooner rather than later, and the Angel problem would wither away. The theory was gathering momentum, and Stone was unsurprised to find Leo Michiko solidly supporting it. The opposition was weak, and overwhelmed.

"Penny for 'em," Jarrat said, a pace behind him.

"They're not worth so much." Stone set his back to the view and looked his partner up and down mock-critically. Jarrat still looked tired, but Reardon had signed them to seven days' downtime, and five of those days remained. This conference was the only incursion into their R&R, and from Stone's perspective, their presence here was a formality. They had been at ground zero in Mostov, they had taken Michiko into custody, Harry Del was their mentor, and they had brought Marcus Brand to the homeworlds. They must be here, though they had little to add to the others' testimony. NARC was nothing if not thorough.

Across the lounge from the wide armorglass panel through which Stone

had been gazing at Lake Michigan, sitting with Kip Reardon was Harry Del himself. He had the look of a stranded fish, in street clothes, with his hair tied and his shave fresh. Reardon was elegant in the blue and gray NARC dress uniform, which he chose to wear, though the officer's prerogative was plain clothes. Gene Cantrell was in civvies, never more than five meters from Leo Michiko. And Michiko looked like visiting royalty, in a high-collared, dark blue business suit.

He saw an ally in Bram Sorenson, and given any opportunity to speak, he would expound on the philosophy he had outlined to Stone weeks ago, at his house on Aurora. His own solution was to legalize Angel, cut the trade out from under the syndicates. Soon enough, the worthless minority who were ready to self-destruct with addiction would be gone, the syndicates would fold, and NARC could be dismantled.

Sorenson was on Mars at this moment. The public nets between Chicago and Chryse were ablaze. The further from Earth, the greater dissent, and in the colonies the violence would be starting even now. Stone met Jarrat's eyes, and found them stormy.

"You want to get out of here, after the session?"

Jarrat looked at his chrono. Local time was 9:45. "If they ever get started. If it was up to me, I'd get the hell out right now." He lifted a brow at Stone. "Where to? What's on your mind?"

"Just being *out*," Stone admitted. "You might not have been impressed with this system on the way in, but Earth has a lot to offer ... so long as you stay the hell away from the more obnoxious natives."

In fact, Jarrat had been scathing. The homeworlds were dense, noisy, cluttered. The mess began at Quaoar, where Node One, the Itzhak Loyola beacon, was surrounded by the deep space comm labs, tenders, shuttles, the shuttle docks, and the ten-kilometer Cygnus Logistics freight terminal. The homeworlds noise grew from there. The Jupiter system was a sprawl of exquisite space cities, following the path of the old industrial network where the first starships of Earth — 'einsteinian,' slow, dangerous — had been built, tested and launched.

Once, the space cities of Sequoia and Geneva and Amaterasu were industrial towns on the raw edge of the frontier. Now, they were among the most prestigious real estate, busy with hotels and the plush offices of freight companies which staged colonial bulk cargo through the Callisto marshaling yards. Heavy industry was edged aside, thrust into the arid no-man's-land of the belt, where aesthetics were of no importance and the old exclusion zones around the smelters were still toxic, still marked by hazmat beacons, two centuries after the big ships headed out.

Stone had been fascinated to see what Jarrat made of the homeworlds, and at the pained look on his face, he actually laughed. Jarrat might have expected a pristine system, neat, tidy, clean. What he saw was often time-worn, patched, obsolescence constantly upgraded to keep it in service. The remnants of the quest to leave home, get out to the stars, were everywhere.

Centuries-old hulks were lovingly preserved in working order and called 'historic,' but colonial eyes saw only an old machine, based on the dangerous technology of a bygone age.

HCQ was installed in the *historic* Marilyn Number 7 mine outside Memphis, on Ceres. The facility was fully restored, right down to the mass drivers which were on display like precious artwork. Jarrat gave Stone an odd look, as if he were sure he was being set up for a punchline. In Kevin's words, the machinery was so 'butt-ugly', it should have been fed to the smelter and churned back out as car parts. Homeland Customs and Quarantine worked out of an armorglassed bay with a view of the domed city of Memphis. The whole asteroid had been tunneled, and at the height of its industrial years, more than three million had lived here, engineers, construction workers, technicians from every field, and their families.

He was reminded, Stone knew, of Sheckley. The comparison was inevitable, because the concept and brute technology were all too similar. Ceres was critical to human expansion, because the industry that built the first starships was so dirty, so dangerous, it could not be developed within a million kilometers of a major human population. Mars was already home to a quarter billion colonists. The cities of Chryse, Marsport and Olympia rivaled anything on Earth or Luna.

Any seven-year-old on Earth could recite the story, chapter and verse. To *Earthers*, the ugliness and poisonous technology of those years had a curious nostalgia. Even Stone felt its tug, though he was astute enough to know it was actually the siren song of his childhood he was hearing, years when exploration and adventure — insane risk and horrific bloodshed — were clothed in a golden haze of glory which made them seem desirable. The glory lured one generation after another into space, and the bottom line was inescapable: if those men and women had owned more sense, and stayed home, the starships would never have opened up the colonies. Mankind would have been imprisoned in the homeworlds. And today, as a species they would be suffering their death throes here.

The four merchant *astra* tugs escorted the *Athena* directly to the NARC dock. Mars was just a noise in the sky, a white-spot of blown-out comm traffic in every band, like Luna. The carrier approached from the darkside, where the city lights of Spencer and Morse and Joule were strung out like beads in a necklace, and the region of the Birkhoff Observatory was marked out by its very blackness. On approach, the cradle of humanity seemed little different from Darwin's and Rethan, and Jarrat said so. But the colony worlds had been very different before the terraformer fleets arrived. They were made over in a rough approximation of Earth's image, and centuries of human habitation finished the job.

The NARC dock orbited at geostationary directly above Chicago, and Jarrat's first glimpse of the planet's night side was from downshuttle. He whistled, for a moment caught between admiration and horror. The horror won out and he said in an appalled voice, "The whole bloody thing is *city*."

"Not quite," Stone said cynically, looking down on the blaze of lights, where one metropolis blurred into another and the transcontinental highways had attracted new cities along their length, like ants swarming to a spilled drizzle of honey. "But it used to be mostly city," he added, wondering how much of Earth's social history Jarrat knew. "There's still eight billion of us 'at home,' as they say here, but the population got up to fifteen in an age when we didn't have the technology to properly support half that number. We almost didn't make it. That's a whole 'nother story. Get me to tell you about it some time. Right now? There's a 're-greening of the planet' going on, now the climate's settled again. There's not much you can do, when your summer's about six weeks long. Christ, we were halfway to Aurora, and we'd done it to ourselves."

"The climate?" Jarrat's eyes were narrowing as the shuttle spiraled into the dawn, headed in and down. Stone had given him the window seat, for the best view.

"We broke the machine a few hundred years ago." Stone leaned over to look out and down. "The whole planet got warmer, but that just meant we melted off the ice caps, almost drowned ourselves — and changed the deep ocean currents, worldwide. The *planet* got warmer, but the continents got real cold, real fast. Europe was a mess. Mind you, it was good for the Stone clan." Jarrat gave him another of many odd looks Stone had attracted lately, and Stone chuckled. "My family got stinking rich in the late twenty-first, early twenty-second century. There was an industry boom like you wouldn't believe. You had a billion houses from the Atlantic coast to the Persian Gulf, built for yesterday's warm, moderate climate. Then, down comes the snow, and winter lasts forever. Their summers were short, like summers in Alaska and Siberia, but houses in the north were built for this crap. In Spain and Italy and North Africa people were desperate. My ancestor wasn't an architect," Stone finished with a certain grim glee, "he was a building contractor. He worked out how to insulate, re-power and triple-glaze existing houses on the fly."

Again, Jarrat whistled. "He'd have made a billion credits out of that."

"Two," Stone corrected, "and before you look at me like that, his three sons blew most of it, inside of ten years after the old man died. They're still stinking rich, but you could only pull that trick once. The next generation on were dumb-ass rich kids, who wouldn't know one end of a day's work from the other." He shook his head, amused. "There's still a lot of money in the family vault, but they dole it out to the deserving, and the ones they favor."

"Not like you," Jarrat concluded. "As long as I've known you, you've lived on NARC salary, and if you own a car or an apartment, it's news to me."

Jarrat's hand on his arm stirred Stone out of the reverie, and he jolted back to the present with a start. "Sorry. I was just thinking about being *out*. Chicago's a city, it has its own charm, like London and Shanghai and Tokyo. But if you've got the itch to breathe fresh air and look at mountains and blue water, you're in the wrong place."

"I'm in the wrong place." Jarrat was frowning down at the expressways and, beyond, the gray-green lake. "Not to say a word against Chicago, you understand, but after Elysium and Chell and Thule ... not to mention bloody Calleran! ... I've had enough city to last a decade."

"Then we're out," Stone decided, "as soon as this conference breaks up." His mind churned, mulling over one scenario after another, and Jarrat waited for inspiration to strike. "How long since you strapped into an ultralite and took off with the wind in your face and a couple of condors flying on your wingtips?"

"You're joking," Jarrat said tersely. "The last time I flew an ultralite, it was over the ruins of Bangor on Sheal, dead-sticking from altitude in the dark, to get air samples without the squatters and refugees knowing what the army was doing. They were scanning for drones, they'd killed our popup satellites, and we wanted a physical sample return, because they were dropping like flies down there. From three hundred meters up, it stank so bad, I put on a mask."

"Damn," Stone whispered, and then nodded. "All right, kiddo, ultralites it is. Which means Spain. Barcelona, to be exact." He felt an odd thrill, and knew Jarrat felt it too. "I guess I'm going home. My family has a house there — assuming I'm welcome. They might also escort me to the door!"

"Call first," Jarrat said dryly. "Make a peace offering. What do you give the natives here, to make them friendly?"

A chime from the conference chamber behind them intruded, and the quiet voice of an usher called, "Two minutes, ladies and gentlemen."

"Here we go," Jarrat intoned acerbically. "Let the tedium begin."

He was uncomfortably close to the mark. In an hour, Stone longed to be elsewhere. Set in the middle of the silver-marble chamber, catching a blue gleam from the wide chameleon windows, was a vast oblong table. Around it sat four politicians fresh from the General Assembly in Zurich, six officers from Civilian Oversight, three representatives from the Surgeon General's office, three key members of NARC's own top brass, plus two Starfleet majors, speaking on behalf of their legal department, four senior officers from Tactical Command, and several characters from the local R&D labs, whom Stone greeted with a glare. Seated together at the northern end of the table were Harry Del, Leo Michiko, Cantrell and Reardon. Jarrat and Stone deliberately chose the seating furthest from the officers.

They began with the Michiko dossier, and Jarrat groaned. The summary alone would consume an hour. For some moments Stone was afraid they were going to dissect the document right here, but most of the officers present were concerned only with the whereabouts of the Aphelion survivors who had scattered at the time Marcus Brand was sealed in cryogen. Cantrell's own final report was screened before NARC General Sebastian Gaunt called on Leo Michiko to speak.

"Everything I have to divulge was documented over fifty hours of intense interrogation," Michiko said witheringly, without rising to his feet. "My information has been triple-checked and exhaustively cross-referenced. Exactly

what do you wish me to add, within the time constraints of this conference?"

"Your personal intuitions," Gaunt said, just as witheringly, "speculations, the kind of hunches that don't make it into such documentation."

"You want me to guess?" Michiko demanded. He leaned forward to look along the table, and nailed Gaunt with a hard look. Gaunt was the same age as Michiko himself, but looked much older. "I've never been in the business of guessing, General. I'd be pleased to quote you the odds of whatever situation actually coming about, but you'll have to be much more specific."

Gaunt's papery eyelids slitted. He seemed to reevaluate Michiko. If he had been inclined to underestimate the man's intellect, he corrected the error. "At a later date, then, Mister Michiko, and ... *specifically*, as you say. We'll need to discuss the contemporary manifestations of the organizations and individuals whom you have identified as being at the crux of the syndicate. Some of them have passed into history. Others have not, and you'll forgive us if we proceed with caution." Gaunt's fingertips rapped a tattoo on the desk before him as he frowned at Gene Cantrell. "It is unfortunate that the syndicate was not completely destroyed many years ago. However, as was demonstrated by Captain Jarrat's and Captain Stone's most recent report regarding the current situation on Rethan, the major cartels have a regrettable propensity for rising, phoenix-like, from their own ashes." Gaunt's frown had passed on to Harry Del now, and Stone watched Harry stiffen. The empath was painfully aware of the curiosity of every stranger in the conference room, and he had only been waiting to come under its lens. "If the roots of the Aphelion syndicate are still viable here in the homeworlds, as Mister Michiko seems to suggest, we will have them out like a rotten tooth."

"Seems to suggest?" Michiko echoed, and he was on his feet. "Captain Cantrell, I've heard more than enough of this bureaucratic drivel. If your superior officers can ever decide what they need to know, and when their *committee* has worked out how to coherently phrase their data request, I'll make myself available for consultation. Now, Captain Cantrell, if you'll be good enough to escort me back to my apartment, I'll take up no more of your presumably valuable time."

He was stalking out of the room without waiting for Cantrell. Part of Stone wanted to applaud, while Jarrat stifled a snort of amusement and Sebastian Gaunt's mouth dropped open. The *Earthers* around the conference table were literally speechless until Cantrell had disappeared after Michiko, and then it was Charles Steinberg, the newly-elected senator for Greater Shanghai-Hangzhou, who said,

"The nerve of the man! I'd have him under arrest."

"For what?" Gaunt said acidly. "You can't arrest a man for rudeness, Senator. If you could, doubtlessly we would all be in custody. Pay him no mind. It's just colonial manners, or the lack of them, getting under your skin. Until you've spent a year or three in the colonies, you'll routinely be struck dumb by the sheer audacity of these upstarts."

Steinberg was mollified, and a whisper of cynical humor went around the

table, but Stone was aware of a hot flare of anger from his right. He leaned back and, under the desk, laid his hand on Jarrat's thigh. His voice was a scant murmur. "Let it go. There are only two genuine colonials in this room, and the bastards seem to have forgotten, Michiko was Inoshiro Carvoni ... born on Mars, like Kip. He's not the colonial, you and Harry are."

"Captain Stone, you have something to add?" Gaunt inquired, as if it were impertinent of Stone to speak at all.

"On this subject General Gaunt? No." Stone came to his feet to address his elders and betters, but refused to be intimidated. "But if this meeting would care to move on and address matters of more immediate importance, I believe Captain Jarrat and I have a good deal to contribute."

The general was three times Stone's age, a veteran of Homeworlds Security and Starfleet. His eyes widened a fraction on Stone but his face gave nothing away. "Which matter do you consider of most importance?"

"Marcus Brand," Stone said smoothly. "Our CMO has certified that the boy is in deep coma. NARC has brought him to Earth, ostensibly for treatment, but Doctor Reardon has spent weeks in research, and Captain Jarrat and I are informed, there is no such treatment. Before we left Darwin's World, we gave our word to his father, nothing detrimental would be done to or with Marcus's comatose body. At this point, we need the assurance of the Surgeon General's office that we didn't lie to Senator Cassius Brand."

"*Senator* Brand," Steinberg said in caustic tones, "is under investigation. He should have presented himself here, on Earth."

"Cassius Brand will more than likely be found innocent," Stone said without skipping a beat, "and even if he were culpable in the Mostov case, his guilt, like his decision to call for the tribunal to be convened in the city of Thule, has no bearing whatever on the treatment recommended for his son."

Heads turned toward Stone; Steinberg was bristling again, but Stone spoke with the accent of London and his service with Tactical was as much a matter of record as his attendance at Floyd Webber, both here in Chicago and in Paris. Stone was looking directly at Colonel Theresa Dyson, representing North American Tactical Command. She was a lean, hard figure with a chiseled face, older than Steinberg but generations younger than Gaunt. "Captain Stone is quite right, Senator," she said with genuine amusement. "Under Earth or colonial law, the question of what becomes of Marcus Brand is not contingent upon his father's guilt or innocence, and I would refer the matter to Major Lo-Tolliver, of the Surgeon General's office."

"Thank you, Colonel," Stone said quietly, and sat down.

Like Steinberg, Adam Lo-Tolliver spoke with the accent of Greater Shanghai. In Stone's experience, social climbers cultivated that sound, but in Lo-Tolliver's case he was born there. Steinberg was another question; the accent was deliberate, studied, and sounded artificial. Both Jarrat and Del were having a little difficulty with the local pronunciation, and Stone himself had forgotten how people like Reardon, Cronin, Budweisser, adopted the colonial accent almost of necessity when they left the homeworlds. They

wanted to be understood when they spoke — and they had no desire for their vowels to mark them out as *Earthers*.

"In the case of the Brand boy," Lo-Tolliver was saying, "Doctor Del and Senator Brand can be assured, he will receive the best of care. He'll be absolutely secure in this building, until he regains consciousness."

"And if Marcus doesn't wake?" Harry stood.

The colonial accent seemed very alien, and Stone was reminded of what he had told Jarrat. There was always something *different* about the colonial gene strands. It might be the body morphology, perhaps the length of the limbs, which was always affected by greater or lesser gravities on various worlds. Jarrat was long-limbed. It was one of the physical qualities about him Stone found most attractive. Sheckley's gravity was around ninety percent of the standard G, just 'off' enough to give kids growing up there a *difference*. In the colonies no one seemed to notice, but on Earth Kevin would be lusted after for the grace of his body, and in the same moment scorned as a colonial.

"Doctor Del," Lo-Tolliver said pleasantly. "It's good to make your acquaintance at last. I've read so much about you and your work. However, it is highly probable that specialists here have access to techniques beyond your experience."

"I subscribe to the same journals," Harry said stiffly, "I get the same bulletins. Have you considered the possibility researchers in other systems might be inspired by different environments, and achieve other results?"

"Oh, I hardly think we need take up the time of this meeting with some in-depth medical discussion which will mean nothing at all to the vast majority of us." It was Steinberg, of course. "Colonial medics have their role to play, but I'm sure we, here, place our confidence in homeworlds technology."

Stone winced. "Harry —" His voice was a bare murmur.

"Then give me a straight answer," Harry said, and the anger was evident in his tone. "Tell me what message to send to the boy's father. If Marcus *doesn't* wake up, what are your intentions regarding his future?"

He was certainly alluding to Earth's policy of euthanasia for patients whose coma lasted longer than two years. Stone glanced at Jarrat, and they both listened intently. Lo-Tolliver leaned closer, over the table. "Do I understand, Doctor Del, that the senator desires the repatriation of his son?"

"His *living* son," Harry rasped. "If you invoke local law to put Marcus out of your misery, you can expect one hell of a fight from Senator Brand. After he's finished with Bram Sorenson, he'll come gunning for you."

"For me?" Lo-Tolliver smiled and glanced around at the assembly. "It's hardly my decision."

"Then, whose is it?" Harry barked. "You sit at the left hand of the Surgeon General himself. If you don't sign the order to terminate, who does?"

The amusement vanished from Lo-Tolliver's face. "I gather Senator Brand dispatched you with an ultimatum."

Harry drew himself up to his considerable height. "Something like that. He cooperated with NARC's *request*, to send the boy into medical hands

which are considered qualified in this system. However, you are not authorized, Colonel Lo-Tolliver, to read his cooperation as a readiness for Marcus to be treated under homeworlds law. Marcus remains a citizen of Aurora. When you're through with him ... *when* you've failed to bring him out of coma, you're under obligation to repatriate him *alive*." He paused and looked from Gaunt to Dyson and back. "I'm under instructions to make sure this is clearly understood, gentlemen, before I sign any document releasing Marcus Brand to NARC, the Surgeon General, or any other homeworlds authority. Until I have your agreement to these terms, in writing, Marcus remains my patient."

Silence fell around the table. Gaunt's old face set into deep lines; Charles Steinberg was so furious, he was fidgeting. Theresa Dyson seemed thoroughly amused. At last, it was Gaunt's aide, NARC Colonel Mayling Gretski, who leaned closer with the olive branch. "Colonel Dyson can correct me if I'm wrong, but ... if Marcus Brand was transported on Auroran travel permits, he should retain his original citizenship for at least five years. If he's comatose, he can hardly apply for Terran or Martian citizenship, and in the very letter of the law, he should be treated as a colonial."

"Correct," Dyson agreed. "If he were a routine tourist, he might be convicted of a crime here, and sentenced, but he would be repatriated to serve that sentence. Corporate fraud, for example, would send him to prison for ten or fifteen years — on Aurora, not here." She looked along the table at Harry. "Doctor Del, you may rest assured, the letter of the law will be upheld. If the senator is any doubt, I recommend he assign his son a legal representative, perhaps a NARC lawyer, to safeguard the details."

"I'll do that," Harry said quietly. "And thank you, Colonel Dyson, Colonel Gretski."

He was about to sit when Gaunt called his name. "There's another matter, Doctor, before you stand down." Harry waited, and from the look on his face, Stone thought, he knew the item which was about to be tabled. "With regard to the experimental program involving Captain Cruz and Captain Auel, our associates at Research and Development need to know when they can expect you at the Marsport facility, to begin the actual body of the work."

Harry froze. For several seconds he was a statue, not even blinking, and then without a word he shoved back the chair and walked out of the room. For the second time, Stone was inspired to applaud, but the men and women around the conference table were less charitable.

"How extraordinary," Gaunt said, acerbic, astonished, irritated. "Does anyone have the slightest idea what Doctor Del means by this sudden departure?"

"I should think I can speak for him." Kip Reardon stood. "Harry Del and I have been working more or less together for six months. We've shared data, and also shared a responsibility for Captains Jarrat and Stone. As CMO of the *Athena*, I also feel a certain responsibility for Marcus Brand."

"Enlighten us, Surgeon Captain Reardon," Gaunt invited.

"There's not much to say." Reardon glanced down at Jarrat and Stone. "R&D have been harassing Doctor Del for months. As you know, they want to see if they can use the skills of the Rethan 87/T to create an empathically bonded partnership with Cruz and Auel, just as you have Jarrat and Stone here. Harry won't do it. He's a *healer*, not a destroyer. Any such bonding of Auel and Cruz starts with the Angel addiction of one of them, and Harry considers Captain Cruz to be certifiable for volunteering. He's submitted his refusal to participate at least five times that I know of. He came to Earth as Marcus Brand's physician, not to take part in R&D's program."

"Extraordinary," Gaunt repeated, as if it had never before occurred to him that colonials might utterly refuse to do as they were told. "Thank you for being concise, Captain Reardon. Well, this question is for Doctors Carpenter and Llewelyn-Yip to negotiate privately. As a civilian, Doctor Del is quite entitled to make his own decisions. For the moment ... I would suggest a thirty minute recess. When we return, I'll ask our colleagues from Starfleet Legal to brief us on the subject of the Mostov incident."

The assembly rose and, swallowing a livid curse, Stone followed Jarrat out of the convention chamber.

CHAPTER TEN

Four hours later, they were free to go. Jarrat's face was thunderous and Stone's head had been threatening an ache since they were both called on to recount their personal experience of Mostov. He had described his own part in the scene, but Starfleet wanted to hear Jarrat also, and Stone watched the expressions of disdain around the table as he stood, and spoke. In fact, Kevin was effortlessly elegant in civilian garb. The black slacks, beige jacket and bronze silk shirt would have taken him anywhere. But there remained that *something*, the long-limbed aspect of the cougar, the impatience with formality, bureaucracy, protocol. The colonial's swift insight into what should be done, unfettered by the snarl of red tape. And the accent, Stone thought as Jarrat reported his own recollections of Mostov.

The whole party from the *Athena* had been assigned quarters on Level 52, but Harry Del was not staying. A message was waiting on their machine, and Stone was unsurprised to see Harry's face on the screen "I'm out of here," he said curtly. "There's an upshuttle in an hour, and I'm on it. If you or Kip want me, I'll be on the carrier, and the *first* fucking thing I'm doing, Kevin, Stoney, is calling Cygnus and getting the first booking going in the right

direction.” He sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, but ... it’s not that I can’t handle this, I guess it’s just that I don’t even want to. It’s too much aggravation, for no good reason. I’ll catch up with you later, all right? And I’ll message you, soon as I know when I’m shoving off. If I don’t see you again ... hey, you know where I’ll be, and you’re always welcome. Don’t be strangers. Tan and the kids don’t bear grudges — they know what happened to the property was none of your doing, and NARC made it good. From the vids I’ve seen, it’s better than it was before, so ... shoot, I gotta go.”

The screen darkened and a list of other messages popped up. Yvette McKinnen had called. She was even then waiting for a connection to Paris, France. Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos had already caught a flight out, bound for Ramos’s home in Arizona. Budweisser called to leave a number in Toronto where he could be reached in an emergency, ‘but don’t bother calling, because I’ll be out.’ The carrier was idling again, with a skeleton crew aboard. She had been fully serviced and upgraded at Darwin’s, and at the NARC docks here she was almost shut down, running ‘dark.’

One last message remained, and Stone was inclined to hit the delete without even looking at it. The grapevine was fast. Word had raced through Tactical and Starfleet that the *Athena* was insystem, and Jack Brogan seemed to want to talk. Against his better judgment, Stone played the message while Jarrat was stuffing a backpack.

“You’re back,” Brogan said unnecessarily. “I’m, uh, at the Starfleet complex in Tokyo. You might have seen me on GlobalNet last night. I did an interview ... they showed your carrier docking, incidentally.”

“Who the hell is that?” Jarrat called from the bedroom. “Sounds like —”

“Brogan,” Stone affirmed, “calling to gloat, by the looks of him. “They’re painting him as the hero back here ... Starfleet spin doctoring.”

On the screen, Brogan was failing to mask his smugness. He thought he was off the hook, and he was preening. “They’re decorating me,” he told Stone. “Seems I’ve contributed service above and beyond. Well, damn, it’s nice to be recognized. So, anyway, if you want to discuss the tribunal, give me a call back.”

Stone muttered a blistering oath. “He wants to know which way you and I are leaning. Did we ever bury the hatchet with old Brand, or do we want to fry him alive? If we wanted to crucify the old man, our testimony would be written for us by Starfleet Legal, to support good ol’ Jack.”

The backpack thudded down on the floor by the door and Jarrat came to the comm. “You going to call him? Jesus, that’s a smug bastard.”

“He’s got quite a case of egomania,” Stone said disgustedly. “He’ll go down hard, when Brand’s through with him.” Then he tipped back his head, squeezed shut his eyes. “Damn, they’ll drag us right back to Aurora. You fancy freezing your ass off in Thule for three weeks while the tribunal races through the inquiry with its usual glacial velocity?”

“I could handle living in Argentia for three weeks, at Brand’s place, while the tribunal was on,” Jarrat mused. “If they need us there, it’ll be NARC

telling Starfleet when the tribunal convenes. Between assignments ... maybe after this Aphelion thing is done."

"This Aphelion thing," Stone echoed. "Christ, the only one who has any idea of where to start is Michiko, and a month ago we were trying to bury him! Normally, we'll be *sent* to a system, Tactical's waiting for us with a bloody monster of a dossier, we have a place to put the first hook in the water." He gave Jarrat a bleak look. "This system's different. It's not going to work the same way here."

"I noticed." Jarrat jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the vague direction of the conference chamber. "They're a pack of SOBs. Arrogance unlimited. Every argument they make pivots on authority, not sense, not compassion." He thrust both hands into the hip pockets of the black slacks. "I'm not sure how much of this I can take before I make tracks right after Harry."

"You and me, both," Stone said bleakly. "Look, we're on downtime, and Michiko just stuck his nose in the air and walked out on them. The whole Aphelion assignment is Bill Dupre's brainchild, not ours, and it starts with Leo Michiko, or it doesn't start at all. Tactical Command won't open doors for us, and nobody's likely to come out and volunteer data."

"Yvette McKinnen," Jarrat mused. "She knows the backdoors into DAC, she's been inside before. I'd get her and Michiko together in a lab. Two egos and intellects that size, they'll either kill each other or hand us Aphelion."

He made a good point, and at last Stone smiled. "I'd put Gene in between them to referee the bout. He'll be around until they launch his carrier, and as for Mac, she'll be in Paris in a couple of hours."

"We'll call her," Jarrat decided. His eyes brightened. "But not from here! We're out, mate, while we've got the chance." He leaned over, dropped a biting kiss on the side of Stone's neck, and snatched up his pack. "This is your stomping ground. Go."

The NARC Airpark spanned the entire roof. Up- and downshuttles left every hour for the orbital docks, and other NARC buildings in Paris, Mumbai, Shanghai, Tokyo. Stone called up the schedule, and negotiated with the control AI to reserve seats. Jarrat had already signed them out, and with an hour to wait for a flight to Paris, they locked the apartment and took the elevator up.

They were drinking Irish coffee in the busy transit lounge, watching the upshuttle load passengers and freight for the docks, when Kip Reardon appeared. An overlaid robotrolley trundled behind him. Stone waved, and the surgeon headed over from the armordocks which held out the heat and smog of the Chicago August afternoon, and the storm of engine noise from the Airpark.

"You're headed out. Why am I not surprised?" Reardon pulled up a chair. "I couldn't stand more than a morning of this place. Damnit, Kevin, I feel like I should be apologizing."

"No you shouldn't," Jarrat argued. "How long have we known you, Kip?"

"Not much under three years," Reardon admitted.

"If you were a card-carrying bastard, we'd know about it by now," Stone said glibly. "You want a drink?"

"Coffee's fine," Reardon decided. "I've got a long flight. I need to wake myself up, not voluntarily anaesthetize myself."

The AutoChefs were two meters away, and as Jarrat got up to fetch a mug, Stone wondered, "You heading home?"

"Yep. A little town called Lassiter, a half-hour drive down the Olympia Highway, out of Chryse." Reardon watched the Mumbai shuttle take off over the southwest rampart. The armorglass vibrated but the engine was muted to a distant rumble. "It's a long time since I was home. I don't get back often enough. It's easier to have Jan and the kids ride the clipper out to Darwin's two or three times a year. They enjoy the trip and, Christ, any chance to get out of the homeworlds, right?"

"Why don't they leave?" Jarrat prompted as he handed Reardon the mug. "They could relocate to Darwin's."

"Not yet. Thanks, Kevin." Reardon inhaled the aroma of drip-brewed beans. "Jan has too much seniority at Arago to just walk away from the job, and Arago don't have an office on Darwin's. Chris is two years short of an exobiology doctorate at UMC, Jo's married to one of the bigwheels in regional politics, and Frank is interning at Marsport Queen of Angels. He's following me into NARC ... unless," he added bitterly, "Bram Sorenson has flayed the department alive and we've all quit." He shook himself out of the mood. "It's a couple of years, minimum, before any of them could think of relocating, and the fact is, Frank's found himself a nice boy and bought a hobby ranch out at Ophir. Chris is the one who'll be out and gone, soon as she's got the doctorate under her belt. She belongs on a research ship, way beyond the frontier." He glared at the coffee. "I'm a few years off retirement from the services myself, and I've had offers from Douglas Wahl and Queen of Angels, and others. I can't say I want to go back to Mars, but I've been trying to winkle Jan out of there for years."

"She won't budge," Stone concluded.

Reardon shrugged. "It's the old story. She wanted to see her kids settled, secure, before she moved on, and now she's so far up the promotional ladder at Arago, she pulls down more money than I do! I'm going to ask her to give that up and be a country doctor's wife on Darwin's?" He actually chuckled. "I think I'd be setting both my legs."

The armorglass rumbled with an incoming flight, and Jarrat turned to watch it land. "Things have a way of working out, Kip. When's your shuttle boarding?"

"Ten minutes." For the third time, Reardon looked at his chrono. "In fact, I'd better get moving, or I'll have an aisle seat right in the back. Look for the good things while you're here, Kevin." He offered Jarrat his hand, and then Stone. "Earth still has a lot to offer. It's the people who cock it all up."

He was gone then, hurrying across the smoggy, blustery private parking apron outside the lounge, the trolley struggling to keep pace with him. Stone

sat back and regarded Jarrat curiously. "What do you make of Earth?"

"The bit of it I've seen so far?" Jarrat's brows rose. "Old, dirty, patched up, crowded, noisy. It's all about bad air warnings and traffic alerts, and so much comm clutter, we're fighting for bandwidth."

"That's about it," Stone agreed. "Still, I can show you a thing or two. It's better when you get out of town. When you have eight billion people, you've got to put them somewhere, and they make a mess. You can imagine what this world was like when there were fifteen billion here! This isn't the planet is used to be. Trawl the archives, you'll see the original model, before we forcibly upgraded it. Parts of Darwin's are similar, and parts of Rethan. Nothing about Aurora is even close, and there's nothing in the Zeus system that's similar ... except the mess Equinox made of it."

Jarrat drained his mug and set it down. "We're headed out of the city?"

"Spain never had the population density most of the other regions suffered," Stone said thoughtfully, "and when the big winter came and stayed, it was just far enough south to do better than most. The Stone clan made its money and headed there. They also have places in London — which is where I grew up, mostly — and Shanghai. I'm hoping my parents are out east. You won't have to meet them. Christ, I won't have to meet them! They're the kind who bear grudges. And me? I'm the blacksheep of the family, they'd like to skin me alive and barbecue the remains."

"Fifteen billion people," Jarrat mused. "You'd wonder how it happened ... you also have to wonder why they didn't terraform, to fix the damage."

"They couldn't." Stone set down his own mug and reached for his bag. "In those days, terraforming tore the landscape and atmosphere to rags and rebuilt it from bedrock on up. There wasn't a square kilometer left unfarmed or uninhabited, nowhere to relocate a population while they ripped up the mess and processed it through a fleet of machines the size of supercarriers. You've forgetting the march of time. I dare say the twenty-first century was quite an experience for the people who had to live through it."

The flight board by the entrance flashed the alert Jarrat had been waiting for. "That's us." He had slung his pack over one shoulder when Stone's hand on his arm called him back.

"This building," Stone said quietly, "isn't Earth. It's NARC, like a halfway house between here and where you ... *we* come from. When we leave NARC territory, well, don't let the bastards rile you. Most of the time they don't even know they're doing it, and the rest of the time, you can make the whole thing worse by deigning to notice."

Jarrat gave him a frown, but for the moment made no comment, and Stone watched him make his way through a crowd of *Earthers*, to the armorglass, and out. Jesse Lawrence had it right. The long-limbed body morphology, the long, sun-blond hair, turned heads toward him. The fashion on Earth for decades had been near-shaven skulls and 'art' tattoos, pierced-in jewelry, black UV-shield skintins and bomber jackets, for both genders. In the colonies, where ozone layers were healthy and the air was

most often clean, denim, tanned limbs and unshorn hair were chic. Jarrat was in blue-marble jeans and a pale green shirt; his hair was sun-streaked, after Tarataga; he had the different, 'boneless' walk of the spacer, who was accustomed to any kind of gravity or no gravity at all; and if he had spoken, his accent would have completed the damning portrait.

Everything about him only excluded him from the humans through which he moved. Both men and women turned to watch him go by. Stone saw honest lust on several faces, just for a moment, before it was masked by derision, and someone, somewhere made the old joke, perfectly audible over the background chatter of the transit lounge. "Pretty-ass, hustler pretty, but what's he *wearing*? No gators to wrangle in this swamp, c'loney-yokel! Sweet Jee, better check between his toes! You want a webbie for your first-born?"

The voice issued from the knot of passengers waiting for a domestic shuttle. Stone looked them over critically. They were uniformly thin, with twiglike limbs in the black skinthins, the ruthlessly cropped hair and tattooed face art of the regular inner city guy or girl. And they were smug, he thought, complacent in their homeworlds pedigree. They were smarter than the 'yokel' colonial, who either had no idea how to dress properly, or did not care. They were purebloods, their genes had never been changed by worlds like Rethan, where the terrformers had missed something critical, and mutoids like Harry were common. Their qualifications would take them anywhere, and they knew it, while Del and Brand would never get a license here without reeducation, and even Jarrat's high school diploma was worthless.

For just a moment Jarrat's shoulders stiffened, and Stone felt a rush of anger. Then Kevin strode on as if he had not heard. He was still silent as they boarded the eastbound shuttle, and the repulsion was ramping up when Stone leaned closer and said, "Don't let it get under your skin. Let it go."

"I have." Jarrat clasped the flight harness and sat back. "It's in the nurture, Stoney. They learned their crap from parents and teachers, buggers like Steinberg and Gaunt. Besides ... I know where I belong, and it ain't here. You know the looks they'd get in Venice, waiting for a shuttle in broad daylight, looking like that? It cuts both ways."

The anger was still simmering, deep down, but Jarrat was content to be the alien, the outsider. Stone was far more discomfited, and as the aircraft launched over the murky wides of Lake Michigan, he found himself looking at his fellow *Earthers* through the eyes of the outsider. His heart went out to Harry Del, who must have been overwhelmed by the blanket of hostility. He would shield himself to the best of his ability, but it would be an acute discomfort to one who was almost always aware of the seething currents of human emotions through which he passed. Fully shielded, 'tuned out,' he would be aware of nothing, and it must be like being struck deaf, Stone thought. An entire layer of perception was gone, and the silence would nag at him, a constant reminder of why it was silent.

Two minutes ahead of schedule, the shuttle bounced up on repulsion, turned her blunt nose up and headed fast for low orbit. The world dropped

away, the sky darkened from rich blue to purple to star-studded black, and the shuttle leveled out on the fringe of space. The globe turned beneath the short, broad wings and in minutes the shuttle was falling. The Arago cushion made the downflight so smooth, drinks were served on the way into Paris.

The language changed again, and Jarrat cocked a curious ear to it. "French. I'm hearing McKinnen." He gave Stone a wry smile. "I'm not getting a word. You?"

They were waiting for their baggage, with a dozen other passengers headed into the NARC building. This airpark was so similar to the Chicago facility, the major differences were in the signage. Everything was in five languages, whereas Chicago remained stubbornly Anglo-Hispanic. "I can get a few words, so long as they don't babble," Stone admitted. "I went to college here for a while, on exchange from Floyd Webber in Chicago, but I never spoke the language well. I guess I've forgotten most of what I knew. It wasn't that Paris appealed to me more, or one campus beat the other — the open-body flying's superior, south of here. Not so regulated as in the North Americas, and Spain's warmer, meaning better updrafts."

"Which is good news for ultralites." Jarrat saw their baggage on the approaching trolley, and beckoned the machine toward them. As he hoisted his pack over his shoulder he was already glancing over the tariffs for car hire, and he was appalled.

Everything from bottled water to commercial airbus vouchers cost four or five times what the same item would have cost on Darwin's, and eight times the price on Rethan. Since Stone had last been here, costs had hiked by a substantial margin, but Jarrat could never have seen a double-digit pricetag, in credits, on a bottle of plain water, and a triple-digit tag on a cross-town shuttle ticket.

"Get me out of here," he said with grim amusement, "fast, before I make a 'colonial yokel' of myself. That's eighty-five bucks, in old-fashioned Darwin's bluebacks, for water!"

"We're not on Darwin's," Stone said cynically, "and that water's pure Oort Cloud mother lode."

"It's what?" Jarrat halted in mid-stride.

"People here have a moral objection to drinking recycled sewage," Stone told him, "even though it's perfectly safe. They mine fresh water in the Kuiper Belt, out by Itzhak Loyola, and if you can afford to buy it, at least you know it hasn't been down several thousand different gullets and out the other end."

"I grew up on recycled waste water," Jarrat said tartly. "Sheckley was set up to reuse every drop of everything."

"Another reason the *Earthers* are leery of colonials." Stone cut a line directly to the Rand hire counter. "There's a superstition about contamination and genetic deviation. It actually happened here a few centuries ago, when the place was so polluted, wildlife literally lived in human filth. It's *never* happened in the colonies, but when did the truth stop the rumor mill?" He dug his wallet from a pocket, and slid his card into the slot. He had already

looked over the available range, and he said to the elderly woman behind the counter, "We'll take a Phoenix."

Perhaps wisely, Jarrat choose not to notice how much he paid to hire the car for three days. Stone signed for it, took the keys, and with a sound of relief Jarrat went ahead of him, out of NARC Airpark 'arrivals.' The Rand garages were on the south rampart, overlooking he city.

In the late evening sun, Paris sprawled to the horizon and over it, uniformly gray and punctuated by swathes of deep shadow. The city lights were not yet on; the sun was low, and the sky was a mass of traffic. Jarrat gave the vista one long glance, and followed Stone to the rank where their Phoenix was parked.

"You want to do some sightseeing?" Stone wondered as they slid in.

"It's too much like Chell," Jarrat said honestly. "Old, overcrowded, beat up and patched over. I know, the word is *historic*. But ... not my scene, Stoney. I saw enough grime and crush in Sheckley." The gullwings locked down, and he looked at the local time. "So, where to?"

"Home," Stone decided. "We'll get in around 22:30, and I'll call ahead but my folks should be at the Shanghai house at this time of year. Something to do with business, don't ask me what."

The Phoenix was the largest rental Rand offered. It lifted on repulsion and the jets kicked in with a solid thrust. Stone hovered over the Airpark threshold, waiting for a 'go' to join the southbound traffic, and minutes later he was lane-hopping into the fast stream. An amazing mass of humanity and freight formed up to hurry out of Paris and across Spain, headed for the North African spaceports. The express lane's minimum speed was well inside the Phoenix's performance. Stone opened the jets, flicked on the auto, and turned to concentrate on his partner.

"You're not impressed," he observed, amused.

Jarrat answered with an eloquent shrug. "In a lot of ways, I am. It is magnificent. I've heard it described as 'a testimony to the survival of a doomed species'. Humans weren't even supposed to live, much less get out of this system and thrive. Like a lot of survivors, the Earthers ... sorry, homeworlders ... are paranoid, self-centered, snobbish. I've seen the same thing in other places, where a bunch of refugees throw in together, pool their resources, work damned hard, drag whatever they can scrounge or build into a pile, and hoist a flag over it. Just let outsiders turn up and try to beg food or water, much less machines or drugs — it turns into mayhem." He looked out, and down, at the brilliant swathes of highways and the palaces of light which crystallized out of the gathering night as the sun set. "It's the same thing here, on the macro scale."

It was an interesting perspective, and Stone agreed. "You saw all that on Sheal?" he guessed.

"The city of Bangor, in the McQuade sector, after the third battle." Jarrat cast off the memories with an obvious effort. "Two corporate armies were just bouncing the rubble, the water supply was no good, two thousand people

were surviving by scavenging the ruins. Then one day you saw shacks going up, and a couple of trucks were back in working order. Suddenly they were bringing in water from the dam, south of the city, and they got a generator online. A few days later, hunting for canned food, they found a cache of munitions. They set up a perimeter, and you know what happened next.”

“I can imagine.” Stone was investigating the comm, and with one fingertip punched in a code he had known since childhood. The house AI answered a moment later in rich, fluid Spanish. Stone gave Jarrat a wry glance and told the machine, “It’s, uh, Jerry ... if anyone remembers me. We just got in, via NARC Paris, and hired a car. Jarrat and I, that is. Kevin Jarrat, my partner ... if you remember.” Aside to Jarrat he whispered, “If they ever bothered to register my partner’s name.” And then to the machine, “We’re about fifteen minutes out from the house. I’d like clearance to land — or at least tell me if we’re not welcome.” He waited for a response, and several seconds of silence passed. He sighed touched the ‘end’ key.

“Your message has been forwarded,” the AI informed him in a light, girlish synthetic voice.

“Thanks, Greta. Do you still have my voiceprint on file?”

“Identification is confirmed: Stone, Robert Jeremy.”

“Does the house allow entry?” Stone looked sidelong at Jarrat in the dim instrument lights. “They’re security happy. When you’ve seen the place, you’ll know why.”

“Restricted access permitted,” the AI told him.

“And landing clearance?” Stone wondered.

“No instructions,” Greta said levelly. “Please land in South 3.”

“Will do.” Stone cut the connection and glared at the comm panel. “South 3 is the bloody loading zone. In other words, it’s okay to show my face at the tradesmen’s entrance, but if I walk up to the front door unannounced they’ll set the drones on me!”

“Welcome home,” Jarrat said ruefully. “They called you Jerry?”

“You get used to it, but I outgrew it.” Stone turned on the finder, and homed on the house’s acquisition signal. “Just don’t *you* start.”

Jarrat laughed quietly. “I’ve been called worse things, ‘cloney-yokel’ for one. And no, they’re not getting to me, Stoney, because I got no secret itch to be an *Earther*.”

“Me neither,” Stone said in grim tones. “I’m thinking, when we get the hell out of here, nobody’s coming back. I can get citizenship on Darwin’s, just drop the whole *Earther* connection.”

“You’d do that?” Jarrat sounded cautious, not surprised.

“I sure as hell wouldn’t be coming back here without you,” Stone said flatly, “and you’re about to get the proverbial belly full in the next few days.” A chime from the automatics alerted him, and he looked out and down. “And there it is, in all it’s considerable glory.”

The lights of the city of Barcelona ambled down the coast, but the Stone estate was inland, northeast of Sol i Aire, in the wooded hills halfway to Can

Cerdá. It was one of scores of landed mansions, some of them centuries old, some new. Jarrat watched it appear as the Rand dropped in closer, and the high walls, house, outbuildings, took form among the third-generation black spruce which had colonized these hills in the years since the climate shifted. Spain had been luckier than most of Europe. Its summer had never been less than ten weeks and winter temperatures rarely exceeded forty below.

“Even before my parents were born,” Stone was saying as the Phoenix dropped in over the estate, “the climate had been tweaked back a good way. It’s not as harsh as it used to be, even though they couldn’t do the full-on terraforming thing. Spain still gets bloody cold, and Barcelona gets sea ice, but the warm season is sixteen weeks, eighteen in a good year. Going down.”

They were sinking into the cauldron of a twenty-meter courtyard, illuminated by the first of a series of floodlights which led away up the hill to the house itself. Aspen, spruce and birch lined the two-meter walls, and though the house was only a hundred meters from the expressway, it might have been in the wilderness.

The Phoenix settled on its repulsion cushion and before the jets had howled down into silence, Stone had popped the gullwings. The night was balmy, the air clean with the scent of spruce, and a bird was chattering in the woods. Jarrat swung his legs out and stretched his back, and Stone lifted out their bags.

This courtyard linked to two others via short stepways and shoulder-high wrought iron gates. The gates might have been locked, but the AI, Greta, had turned on the acquisition beam and granted access. The air was sweet with night-blooming shrubs. A light wind whispered in the aspen and birch, and beyond the trees was the firefly glitter of the southbound air traffic lanes.

A lens panned to follow them as they made their way up. Stone turned his face to it, let himself be clearly imaged. They climbed into a lake of yellow-white light he recognized. This was the back of the house, but a visitor would never have known it. The frontage was a mass of absurd marble columns and mock-Roman architecture. The back was white stucco, wide windows of chameleon glass, cane furniture, delicate plants in movable pots, which were trucked indoors when Europe’s early, cold fall settled. Stone had seen this courtyard under snow and drenched in sunlight; nothing had changed here in eight years. He had just decided that nothing ever would, when he realized how wrong he could be.

At the east end of the patio, the mesh door had slid open and a face appeared there. For a moment he did not recognize it, and then he had it, and swore. “Damn, it’s Brad, isn’t it?” He beckoned Jarrat. “It’s my cousin. He was just a kid when I left.”

“He still is,” Jarrat said, too quietly for the young man to hear.

He would be twenty-two now, Stone thought. He was fourteen the last time Tactical Lieutenant R.J. Stone stayed here, and he had been a wide-eyed spectator at the fight. For years, the senior generation had assumed that Tactical was a phase Stone was going through. He would work it out of his

system eventually, and the stint with London Tac, seconded as an officer to Chryse for the 'long tour,' would look good on his CV. He had placed his application for the NARC transfer without mentioning it to anyone. Acceptance was far from certain, and he had not wanted to live down a failure. Instead, he was issued an invitation to Darwin's World for orientation and six months at the training facility in Venice. His travel documents were provided by the department, and a new ID bearing the NARC logo had been issued. He remembered seeing the holo of his face on the card, and the tickets for the *Cygnus Atlantica*, and being too numb to feel much pleasure. That evening, he showed the package to the Stone clan elders and watched their faces pale with shock and fury.

He was little older, that night, than Brad was now, but he had not been a kid. Jarrat was right. Brad was the kind who would be carded on his way into a sexshop or a citybottom VR den. He looked as if he should still be at school, at an age when Stone himself, or Jarrat, had been in the field for years, blooded, savvy in any theater from the urban warzone to the more subtle killing fields walked by civilians. At Brad's age they had carried more than their share of scars, while Robert Bradley Stone was round-faced, with soft hands and a petulant look.

"How's it going?" Stone asked as he made his way between potted Tahitian lime and Lebanon lemon, dwarf varieties in stucco pots which matched the house. "You still at college?"

"Still. I got a few years left, to the doctorate." Brad's accent was *trans*. Not one country, nor another. His mother was Spanish-Eurasian, while the Stones were 'Euro mongrel,' Celtic, Gallic, Scandinavian, with a dash of Russian on one side and Italo-Greek on the other. The combination produced handsome results. Brad was tall, fit, olive skinned, with curly, pale brown hair and blue eyes. He was good-looking, and knowing it made him arrogant.

"And you're still at home," Stone observed.

"I am right now. I have a place in Paris, but lectures don't start again for another month, and why would you want to endure city shit?" Brad had stepped out onto the patio and was looking Jarrat over curiously. "So this is him."

"Him?" Jarrat echoed.

Stone placed himself squarely between Jarrat and Brad before the kid could say something outrageous, learned from his father or grandfather. "R. Bradley Stone, only son of my Uncle Jean Michel ... *Captain* Kevin Jarrat."

"Pleased to meet you," Brad said, though his eyes said, '*curious* to meet you.' He did not offer his hand, but stood aside and beckoned them to the chairs. "Have you had dinner? I heard your message. You said you'd just got in, which probably means you've come over from Chicago."

"Yes, we just came over, no we haven't eaten," Stone said dryly. "If my parents had been home, I was going to shove off and find a hotel,"

Brad snorted with rude laughter. "I should think you would. Fuck, that was a fight. Fifteen rounds, bloody noses everywhere, broken bones, black

eyes. And then you were gone, and the bastards didn't even whisper your name for two, maybe three years." He glanced at Stone, and returned to Jarrat. "I expect you'll want supper, then. Greta?"

"Supper for three?" the AI asked from an audio system so discreet, the voice seemed to coalesce out of the air.

"For two," Brad corrected. "Send the ..." He gave Jarrat a fatuous smile. "Forgive my ignorance. What do colonials eat?"

Stone groaned soundlessly, but while Jarrat rose to the bait, it was not what Brad might have expected. "Salt-cured goat testicles, pickled sheep's eyeballs and blood sausage, so long as it's made with genuine rat's blood, and I'm partial to pig's feet marinated in squid ink."

It was several moments before Brad realized he was being mocked, and after a moment of surprise he laughed. "Well, I don't think our refrigerators will regurgitate those colonial delicacies, but if cold cuts and salad would do, I'm sure we can provide. Turkey or primecut ... I'm sorry, we don't have rat or squid or whatever."

"Primecut?" Jarrat wondered.

"Fake steak," Stone told him, looking levelly Brad. "Vermiform, marine and fungal protein, pulverized, flavored, textured and force-molded. It's been a staple in the homeworlds since the climate crashed and suddenly they had to feed fifteen billion hungry mouths on one tenth the agriculture."

"Vermiform, marine and fungal?" Jarrat echoed.

"Worms are over eighty percent protein," Stone said dryly. "Krill ... microscopic shrimp, the preferred diet of baleen whales, also big on protein ... and fungus. Same story." He gave Brad a challenging look. "Forgive him if he's appalled. We don't eat worms in the colonies."

For a long moment Brad studied them mutely, and at last decided to be amused rather than annoyed. "*Touché*, cousin. Greta, supper for two. Turkey and salad. The Italian herb rolls. Strudel and gelati. A bottle of the white shiraz ... and three glasses. I'll join you that far," he told Stone, and settled back in the chair. "So, Jerry, tell me about your travels."

"My travels?" Stone echoed. "Academy, NARC, carriers, assignment right across the frontier. Promotion, partnership. Jobs on a dozen worlds. Earth." He nodded at Jarrat. "You know how the NARC hierarchy works."

"I know how it's supposed to work," Brad allowed. "But I never did figure out how they make it go, having a ship with two captains. When I was a kid they used to say a plane can only have one pilot."

"I said *partnership*," Stone repeated. "There's another old saying. Two heads are better than one."

"So, a NARC ship is commanded by — what, consensus? Committee?" Brad Stone wore a doubtful expression.

Jarrat leaned closer, elbows on the table. "Running with two command rank officers gives NARC the insurance to play dangerous games. Do your research, and you'll find the captains of Army and Starfleet carriers are never allowed to stray into danger's way. Our work is mostly done at street level,

and the critical work is almost always in deep cover, where one of us will be buried so far down, we couldn't contact the carrier if we wanted to."

He was probably thinking of the Equinox assignment, Stone guessed. Or perhaps Death's Head was on his mind. Brad was shaking his head, still not seeing the sense of it. "You could put any agent into the field. It doesn't have to be the ranking officer."

"It does," Stone argued. "You're thinking about the military or Tac, where soldiers have been given their orders and sent out to perform a planned task. We never have that liberty. We literally make it up as we go, and to get a result, sooner or later we'll have to jeopardize lives and probably destroy property. Soldiers without orders won't, *can't* do it. It's a command decision that has to come down from the top. They need solid authorization to put a thousand civilians in jeopardy or risk knocking over a billion-dollar building. But here's the rub: in deep cover, there's no way to get any authorization. Your agent is on his own. So the decision doesn't get made, the job doesn't get finished."

"Partnership," Jarrat added. "There's almost always one of us on the ship, and we're on the same page, kiddo. It's not 'consensus,' some half-assed committee meeting. It's two individuals agreeing on the best way to get something done."

"And if you don't agree?" Brad pressed.

"We do," Jarrat said sharply.

"But, if you don't?" Brad insisted.

"We'll ... thrash that out when it happens," Stone said wryly. "It's never been an issue."

The younger Stone seemed set to argue, but a soft chime from the servery by the windows announced dinner, and Jarrat stood. "Let me."

A hatch had slid open, and a wide bus tray, loaded by the kitchen 'Chef, was waiting for them. Jarrat dumped the tray unceremoniously on the side of the table and uncovered several platters. Bread, meat, vegetables, dessert. Stone was handling the wine, and made a face as he took a sniff.

"Something wrong with it?" Brad demanded.

"Not a thing." Stone finished pouring and passed the glasses around. "It's just not what we're used to."

"The colonies can't make wine." His tone was derisive.

Jarrat had tried the local vintage and set down his glass. "I suppose there's no accounting for taste. You wouldn't get four dollars a bottle for this in Venice. Unless you relabeled it."

"Meaning?" Brad glared at him.

"Meaning," Stone said wryly, "where we come from they'd sell it in the hardware store. This stuff'd strip paint. Calm down, Bradley, it's a difference of opinion about booze. You either want to know what we think or you don't."

For a moment the young man bristled, and then subsided. "You're entitled to your opinion, *Jeremy*." But he was glaring at Jarrat again. "You've gone native, haven't you? I'd like to say it suits you, but it doesn't."

Gone native? Stone was carving turkey, and paused to look up at Jarrat. The night wind was in his hair, the house lights glittered in his eyes. He was everything Stone had ever desired in a man, even before he had put the homeworlds behind him. "I suppose I have," he agreed. "You got a problem with that, cousin?"

"Me? No," Brad mused. "I confess, I'd wondered why you were hanging out with a 'c'loney.' Now I've seen him ..." His eyes roamed over Jarrat. "Let's say the element of mystery has been dispelled."

"He fancies me," Jarrat said baldly.

"He fancies you," Stone echoed, dumping turkey onto both plates. "Don't sweat it, kiddo. It's going to happen a lot in the humans' old backyard. They love a bit of the exotic for a cheap thrill ... at the same time as trying to convince you the 'c'loney' is a subspecies."

"I've noticed." Jarrat sorted silverware.

Across the table, Brad was seething, and Stone saluted him with a glass of the dry, acidic wine. "Don't take it personally. In our line of work you soon come to realize, you're only as good as the information you're fed. And you're getting fed way too much crap. You've been stuck in the homeworlds too long. When you finish your degree, take a few years, get out there, see how the other half really live, who they are, where they are. You might like the surprise."

The kid had his mother's dark eyes, and he was probably too smart for his own good. Those eyes were bright with unholy amusement as he raised his glass to mirror Stone's mocking toast, though he offered it to Jarrat. "Allow me to salute the noble savage."

For a moment Stone wondered if the crack would arouse Jarrat's swift, hot anger, but Kevin laughed out loud. "You know, you're not the first to say something like that." He reached for the bread, broke a roll in halves and dropped a piece on Stone's plate. "Jesse called me a cougar."

"Jesse?" Brad echoed.

"A Companion. Retired," Jarrat added. "He's a dancer now. I'll tell you, kid, if you fancy me, Jesse Lawrence'd drive you halfway out of your gourd."

"And there's thousands like them," Stone added, "but not in your own backyard. They grow up in fractionally lower gravities. Makes them long-legged, and those female features don't tend to head south so fast. They grow up bronze, because nobody has to hide from the sun in places where the ozone layer's good as new. The rest of it's just the fashion. Take the tour ... put a line in the water on Darwin's, where the mountain air is still crystal clear and you can actually drink the wild water. Lie on a beach by the lagoons on Avalon, with half the sky full of a green gas giant. Try the rain forests on Rethan, over on the big continent, where the hills go on forever and the mist comes down at dusk, and the population density isn't even five to the square kilometer."

Brad looked hypnotized, and seemed to shake himself awake as Stone fell silent. He looked sidelong at Jarrat. "You're from one of those places?"

"Me?" Jarrat made negative gestures. "I'm from one of the genuine armpits of space. The thing is, in the colonies you're not tied down. You don't like where you are? Get up and move."

"A lot of people leave here," Brad mused.

The turkey was succulent, but the salad was flavorless. Stone slathered it in the mustard-sharp dressing. "Half our crew is colonial, and proud of it. They're opening up new worlds every year, and colonization is probably going to accelerate, if the new technology proves out. This new Arago drive."

"*Weimann Drive*," Brad corrected. "The little snot's on GlobalNet twice a week. He's quite the celebrity ... and why not, I guess? He got his PhD at Floyd Webber in Paris, but he graduated at seventeen and Arago sucked him straight up, took him to Chryse for some project. Turns out, young Foster Weimann realized right then, he could twist repulsion technology into a hyperdrive. His only saving virtue is, it's taken almost twenty years to turn the idea into a functional engine, and it took the input of another little snot by the name of Yamazake to work the magic. Weimann's still only a few years older than you, Jerry, and as for Yamazake, you'll hate the sod. He's nineteen."

"Here's to genius," Jarrat said, toasting with a glass of the unspeakable wine. "From what I hear, this engine is going to send us way out, into regions we've only seen through a lens. Think about it, Brad. A hundred new colonies, reachable without months in cryo, and every one clean, fresh. We'll be able to cherry-pick the worlds we colonize, and pass by frozen rockballs like Aurora, which is damned uncomfortable even after terraforming."

Stone was investigating the strudel. "You want dessert, Kevin?"

"I'd rather have a shower," Jarrat admitted.

"There's a new fortune in the Weimann drive." Brad drained the bottle into his third glass. "Needless to say, Uncle Peppe and Aunt Carla have spun the portfolio through a one-eighty. We don't have a credit in Murchison now. The whole thing was plunged into Arago, the morning the news broke. They're pretty certain we're going to make a lot of money."

"Good for you," Stone said tartly. "You go ahead and get richer ... we'll just go play with the Weimann drive."

"It doesn't bother you?" Brad wondered. "That your parents and mine, and the rest of them, won't cut you in for a penny?"

"It used to get me mad." Stone hesitated. "Sometime in the years when I transferred over to NARC, I left it behind. Captain's salary is pretty good, and if you live long enough to retire, you're out to pasture on full pay."

"If you live long enough," Brad echoed darkly.

"If," Jarrat agreed, and changed the subject deftly. "I still want a shower. Are we looking for a hotel, Brad, or...?"

He seemed to return to the present with a start. "Pointless, isn't it? There are eleven empty bedrooms in this house. Pick one."

"In that case," Stone slid back his chair, "we'll take the one I remember best." He hung one arm over Jarrat's shoulders and looked down into Brad's too-young face. "Is Tonio still in the village? Can you still hire a set of wings?"

"You could," Brad said slowly, "but if it's an ultralite you're looking for — some things never seem to change — you could take a peek in the garage."

"You're joking," Stone challenged. "She left it here?"

"She?" Jarrat echoed.

"Cousin Rachel," Stone told him. "Two years older than me, and a natural born bushwhacker. I'm surprised she's still alive."

"She's married," Brad informed him. "She lives two valleys over, west, with Rinaldi."

"The old man or the grandson?" Stone asked suspiciously.

"The old man." Brad drained the glass and stood. "Juan's dead, killed in a depressurization accident on Callisto or Europa or one of those places. Old Vincenzo's rich as God, and he's run out of kids and grandkids. Cousin Rachel," he added with a certain glee, "is four months pregnant and counting. The dynasty of Rinaldi-Stone has begun. But Vinnie grounded Rachel for the duration, so her wings are in store, back in number three garage."

"Damn." Stone was speechless. He dealt Jarrat a hug. "You mind if I take a look?"

"Go." Jarrat ducked out from under his arm and lifted his pack. "Just show me where to dump my stuff and find a bathroom."

Brad extended one arm toward the door. "I'll show you through."

"Right behind you." Jarrat slung the pack over his left shoulder and picked up Stone's own bag. One slate-gray eye winked. "Don't be too long."

"I won't," Stone promised.

He watched Jarrat step into the house with Brad, and with a disturbing sense of unreality he took the path around the outside, past the cypress and cedars, through the moongate and across the bridge on the Zen garden's pond. Huge carp were sleeping on the surface; he wondered if they were the same fish that had been finger-sized when he went to Tactical.

Four garages were ranged along the raked-gravel drive. He stopped at the third and addressed the AI. "Greta, unlock three."

"Number three garage unlocked," Greta said pleasantly.

The lights came on inside, and he stepped in with a shiver of reaction. It was thirteen years since he had stood there. In those days his own plane was parked on one side of the plascrete chamber, flanked by bikes and work benches, tools and domestic clutter. His sunshine-yellow plane was long gone, more than likely sold or destroyed in a fit of pique. But Rachel had always shared his taste in ultralites, and her wings inspired a low whistle.

They were blood-scarlet with chameleon trim which fluoresced in the lights; and they were smartwings, which folded or extended to make the most of every breath of air under them. In storage, they were folded like those of a diving hawk. The most slender kevlex sled nestled beneath them, above a repulsion pallet no thicker than his wrist. The plane weighed perhaps twenty kilos. He could have picked it up and flown it off the balcony like a kite, and the rudimentary AI embedded in the kevlex sled would have circled around and brought it back.

He was seriously considering taking it up in the moonlight when a flare of annoyance rippled through his belly and took his breath away. It was Jarrat's anger, and as soon as Stone troubled to concentrate, he felt the immaterial caress of hands on him. On his back and flanks. His voice bounced back off the molded plascrete walls as he laughed. "Greta, lock three," told the AI as he stepped out, and jogged back to the patio.

He could *feel* exactly where Jarrat was, and in any case he could have found his way blindfolded to the rooms he had occupied as a young teen. The lights spilled out of the bedroom, where the *en suite* was a modest fog bank — and Brad was on the floor, sitting on his butt, with an outraged expression. Stone looked him over quickly, saw no blood, and laughed again.

"You tried it on," he observed.

"Well — he's a c'loney," Brad protested as he scrambled to his feet, inelegant, embarrassed. "You know what they say about them."

"Oh?" Jarrat's skin was streaming. He had wrapped a towel about his hips and was framed in the *en suite*'s doorway. "What do they say — and who's 'they,' while I'm asking?"

"*They*," Stone said, amused, "are the ordinary, street variety worm-eaters. And they like to say," he added, with a mocking look at his cousin, "that the street variety c'loney-yokel will shag anything that moves, probably because the rumor is, they're not brought up like proper little ladies and gentlemen."

"Worm-eaters?" Brad echoed, outraged.

"Read the label," Stone said glibly. "Primecut is 22% vermiform protein."

"I know, but —"

"But nothing." Stone jerked his left thumb over his shoulder. "I know exactly what they like to say about colonials, and they're mostly dead wrong. You just got away with groping a NARC captain, be satisfied. Now, vanish. We'll see you at breakfast. And thanks for the hospitality of the clan castle."

"If your parents ever find out," Brad began.

"Then you better not tell 'em." Stone escorted him to the door. "We'll be gone when the ax falls, and the only one left for them to chew on is —"

"Me," Brad finished, surly and annoyed, as the door closed over.

"Greta, lock," Stone said to the AI. He lifted a brow at Jarrat. "He got his hands on you, didn't he?"

Jarrat had seen the humor of the situation. "He snuck up behind me. At least I didn't hit him, I'd have felt bad about that."

"You tipped him on his butt. Good enough." Stone reached over, caught a corner of the towel and gave it a firm yank. Jarrat was warm, wet, beguiling, and Stone kicked quickly out of his own clothes. He let Jarrat tumble him sideways across the wide bed and looked up at a too-familiar ceiling. Nothing in the room had changed, save for the absence of his own things, most of which he had given away when he went to Tactical.

He felt an absurd humor, and though he did not actually laugh Jarrat demanded, "What's so funny?"

"This is. I am. I used to sleep here when school was out in London and I'd come here for the flying. I lost my virginity in this room, and I can't tell you how many nights I laid here, indulging myself in fantasies of actually finding someone." He reached up, and his fingers clenched into Jarrat's wet hair. "Having you here is too weird."

"Then you'd better have me," Jarrat decided, sitting up astride him and studying him in the soft light. "Hadn't you?"

"Yeah." Stone traced the planes and angles of the lean body he had wanted for so long. "Yeah, I better had." Then he pulled Jarrat down and held his head to a kiss.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Mediterranean was blue-green and punctuated by cloud shadows. The mountains were dark with black spruce and pine, and termination dust was already on the highest, though it was still only early August. The short summer was almost over. In two weeks the sky would be heavy with rain; in two more the hills would gather a dusting of snow which did not stick for long. But by the beginning of October the night lows would be below freezing and the snow plows would begin to run three or four weeks later.

At the end of the season the hills were deserted. The tourist population had returned to every corner of the world, and so long as an ultralite stayed well under the traffic lanes, it was free to go where it pleased. Most of the private estates on the slopes west of Barcelona were closing down for the year, and many holiday cottages were empty. From the air they looked abandoned.

The morning thermals were still fragile, and with two riding the scarlet plane, the wings were spread wide and the tiny repulsion generator whined intermittently, making up the difference when the warm updrafts failed. The plane's only power for lift or forward momentum was that lick of repulsion. All else was derived from the thermals, the wind, and the skill of the pilot.

More like a kite than a plane, it hovered in a headwind off the sea, making no ground-speed at all, though the airspeed indicator read 20kph — which was the speed of the wind in their faces. Helmet visors were up, and with the breeze in his face, his body stretched full-length, belly-down in the fragile cocoon of the repulsion sled, Stone knew he was flying. Warm along his right side, Jarrat was just basking in the morning sun, and in the backwash of Stone's pleasure. He would take a turn to control the craft later, but with the shields down and the empathy thrumming between them, it hardly mattered who was actually flying.

They were ten kilometers downrange of the house, with the sea a blue-green ribbon in the east and the snow-dusted mountains bright in the distance. At 10:00, the thermals were starting to gather some genuine warmth, and the repulsion was whining less often. They could stay up as long as they wanted, spiral down the coast, find someplace that was still open this late in the season, have lunch and waft back in the late afternoon.

Or, that was the plan that had taken shape in Stone's mind, before the comm in his left ear said, "You there, Jerry? You hearing me, cousin?"

"Shit," Stone muttered. "Let me guess. The parents are coming back out of the blue. They just landed and there's going to be a fist fight."

"Not ... quite," Brad mused. "You might be right about the fist fight part, but it's not the old farts. It's your ship. Somebody called — Petrov, have I got that right? And he sounds like he's shittin' bricks."

"He always sounds that way," Jarrat said acerbically. He gave Stone a sidelong look. "Never fails. Soon as you call home and tell the buggers where you are, they want you to do something."

Stone chuckled, but it was a grim sound. "Is he holding, Brad?"

"Yeah. You want to talk to him, or shall I get rid of him?"

"Patch him through," Stone said resignedly. "It's carrier business, kid, which means we're 'on.' Again. Don't have the luxury of a duck-and-run."

"You might change your mind," Brad told him, "when you hear this dude."

A moment later Mischa Petrov crackled over the extended comm, and Jarrat winced. "Where the fuck are you?" the Russian demanded.

"On downtime," Jarrat said harshly. "We told Central exactly where we'd be, which is the only reason you're finding us, so don't give me a hard time."

"I'll tell you what I'm giving you," Petrov said mock-sweetly. "You guys are getting a shuttle ride home, fast as Gable can get your asses strapped in. He launched one minute ago, and he's headed for some place in Spain. Can you be there in forty minutes, for a clean pickup?"

"Damn," Stone whispered. "Damndamn."

They both knew that edge in Petrov's voice. The man was furious, because command of the carrier had been taken out of his hands yet again. Even on shutdown, at the dock, something had happened which outstripped the XO's authority.

"We'll be there," Jarrat told him. "You want to brief us?"

"On the air, in clear? No way," Petrov said disgustedly. "You got no gear on you to handle level five."

"Five?" Stone echoed, and Jarrat felt the crawl of his belly, shared it.

Level five encryption was as high as the scale went. Downtime dissolved around them. "All right," Jarrat said sharply, "we're on our way in. Whatever it is, lock it down tight and keep a lid on it."

"Well, shit," Petrov muttered, "why didn't I think of that?"

The line to the carrier went dead, and Brad Stone said, "Uh, I couldn't help overhearing. I assume 'level five' means something big?"

"The less you *assume*, the better," Jarrat said as the plane came about in

a vast circle which fed it altitude. "The part of it you're allowed to know, you'll see on GlobalNet, eventually."

The winds were not good for a swift flight back, and with a curse Stone ramped up the repulsion. They would still make slow time, but they would not be at the mercy of updrafts and crosswinds, which could waft the plane kilometers into the west and make getting back to base an adventure.

"Downtime," Jarrat muttered, catching sight of the broad, white roof of the Stone house, tiny with distance. "It's a myth, it doesn't bloody exist."

They were back in south two, the big courtyard which skirted the road, with a few minutes to spare. Stone elected to fold up the plane and return it to storage, while Jarrat slammed their belongings back into the packs. He was zipping them when he heard the incoming thunder of military jets, and he slung one over each shoulder.

South three was big enough to land the VM-104 Corsair. Brad watched it drop in from the east, speechless. Military aircraft were almost never seen in the inner system. It might have been the first time Brad Stone had ever seen a 'warbird' outside of the vids. She set down lightly on a hot bluster of repulsion and Gable left the jets idling as he sent up the forward canopy. Helmet on, visor up, he waved over the side, and beckoned.

"Soon as you're ready, Cap," he yelled over the jet noise. "Hustle, now, we got no time to spit."

That bad? Jarrat ducked into the repulsion shimmer. "Pop the hatch," he shouted up, but the cargo hatch in the belly was already dropping open. The bags fit easily into one empty armor store, and as he palmed the lock he saw Stone jogging up from the garage. Brad had retreated to the wrought iron gate at the end of the west-side terrace, and was watching with wide eyes. Envyng the big boys' toys, Jarrat thought wryly. Stone gave the boy his hand, said something to him, and Brad shook his head, gestured — you're welcome. Would he take a tour in the colonies, discover for himself the truth about the people, the new worlds? Jarrat hoped he would.

Moments later they were in, and Gable dropped the hatch. The rear cockpit was designed for a body in armor, and it would take two with a squeeze. Jarrat ran up the harness, Stone secured it, and Gable kicked the repulsion. The shuttle bounced up like a feather in the breeze and the jets began to hammer as the nose turned up for space.

The Corsair was cutting a line for orbit, just west of the antlines of the civilian traffic, when Jarrat settled a helmet and plugged into the loop. "Nice to see you, boss," Gable said saying. "Nice day for a picnic ... or a ride back to the carrier."

"You think?" Jarrat demanded. "You want to tell us what goes on?"

"Wish I could," Gable said with a trace of self-mockery. "Petrov slammed up the shutters, and I'm clueless. The only thing I can tell you is, it's way outside my clearance until *you* guys decide where you want me."

"Damn," Stone murmured. He touched the comm, shifted up to the secure channels and selected level five. "7.1 to *Athena*."

The higher the encryption, the more the sound quality went to hell. He could barely make out Petrov's voice at this level. Bandwidth was lousy anywhere in the homeworlds, and the military channels were so squeezed, little space was left over for heavy scrambling.

"Carrier," Petrov was saying, "you're on long-range. Make it fast, Curt."

"I'm stepping on it," Gable assured him. "Chill, Mischa. Giving yourself ulcers won't get us there one minute sooner."

"Make it fast?" Jarrat echoed. "We're expecting the carrier to go up in a big blue flash?"

"Don't make jokes," Gable said darkly. "I was sound asleep when the shit hit the fan. They're running around like chickens with their heads cut off."

"They?" Stone wondered. "Petrov and who else?"

"Doc Del, for one." Gable adjusted his heading as the 104 scythed its way clear of the atmosphere. He was headed fast for the NARC docks. "The ship's like a crypt, with everybody on furlough. Even Doc Reardon's gone. He took the Mars redeye last night."

"You didn't get leave?" Jarrat was watching the civilian traffic lanes off the starboard side, while several orbital facilities appeared out of the dark of space on their port nose.

"I applied, but they bumped me down the list," Gable said easily. "I'd like a take a look at Earth, while we're here. The vids make it look like Darwin's, but stuffed with people, and a whole lot more muck."

"That about covers it," Jarrat agreed. "I didn't get to see much." Gable was from many different places. His family had followed their work from system to system. He was born on Darwin's, went to school in Eldorado on Rethan, went to college in Elysium on Avalon, and transferred directly from there to Starfleet. He had always wanted to fly anything with or without wings. The loss of his kid sister to Angel brought him to NARC, and the grief still showed through the mask of bravado, if Gable did not cover it fast enough.

"On the beam, coming in," he was saying to Carrier Operations.

Up ahead, off the port nose and seeming to rush up out of a glittering abyss, the *Athena* was one of three big ships berthed at the NARC dock. She was the only carrier. The other ships were engineers' tenders, almost as big as a carrier, and grotesque, deformed. Their engines were monstrous, designed to tow a mass the size of the *Athena* out of trouble; their hulls were almost insectoidal — multi-sectional, like yellow-jacket wasps. They were made to flex and twist, form up around the damaged section of a much bigger ship, clamp to it and seal it with drone-piloted, prefabricated structures. Inside the seals, a damaged ship could be fixed where it lay, and Jarrat had heard chilling stories of the places ships chose to strand themselves.

Most of the *Athena* was dark. She had an oddly 'dead' look, and he was aware of an uncomfortable sensation, his own or Stones, that might have been precognition. He shrugged it away with an effort as Gable brought the shuttle into one of the small hangars in the belly, and as the bay blew back up to pressure he cut into the intership comm.

"We're in, Petrov. What the hell —"

"Infirmary," the Russian said without preamble. "Just get here."

Stone had his helmet off, and handed it to Gable, who had clambered out of the forward cockpit and was sitting on the side. "Don't ask me," the pilot warned, "I just drove the bus."

"Infirmary," Jarrat said grimly, and was ahead of Stone as they went down the handholds, along the side of the Corsair.

The status boards were full of red. Security was buckled down so tight, it was a miracle there was any air left to breathe. Nothing was moving without the permission and observation of the AI, and the 'leave canceled' notices were already posted for K.F. Reardon, plus Colonel Helen Archer, as the section head of the ship's Starfleet crew, and Gil Cronin, as the senior sergeant of the combined descant units.

"What the hell goes on?" Stone muttered as they stepped into the lift.

"It better be good." Jarrat's hand hit the 'Infirmary' key. "Or Petrov's going to be in chunks, on a skewer over somebody's barbecue."

In Kip Reardon's absence the Infirmary should have been idling like the rest of the ship, but it was fully online, as if the NARC crew were heading into an action. OR 2 was bright, the morgue was open, and Jarrat swore softly as he saw an open cryogen tank there. Reardon's office was also bright, CRTs busy, but no one was there. Instead, they heard voices from the ICU, which should have been powered down and deserted.

"There's been an accident," Stone guessed. "A bad one."

What kind of accident could happen on a ship with dormant engines and navigation tank, a skeleton crew, and four idle gunships? Jarrat felt the drought of Stone's mouth and the drum of his own pulse as they stepped into the ICU. Harry Del was standing at the foot of the sole occupied bed. His hands were cradled about his skull and neck, and he was massaging both for an ache which must have been almost intolerable. Mischa Petrov stood with the duty medtech at the right side of the bed, while the left was a mass of machinery. The medtech was monitoring the machines, and Gene Cantrell was intent on the comm in his ear.

And lying naked on the bed, pale as a ghost and jacked into every conceivable machine, was Leo Michiko. He was on full life-support, with an air-hose in his throat, cardiac stimulation, an IV taped into the back of one hand, and blood transfusing into his other arm. His eyelids were purple, his lips looked cyanotic, and his skin had the waxen look of a human body hovering on the thin edge of eternity.

Slow with exhaustion, Harry turned toward them. He was hollow eyed, smudged, and Jarrat had seen this before. He had looked like this after working on Stone. Cassius Brand had been hard, physical work, but Stone had been a fight. Del had clearly invested the same effort in Michiko, and he was still struggling to recover.

"He should be dead." Harry's voice was a croak. "I'm waiting for an analysis of the drug, but it's certainly one of the neurotoxins. He's just plain

lucky I'm still here. I came back for my bags, I was headed over to the High Five Hotel to wait for the clipper, and I was right here when they brought him in ... killing time, going over Kip's data."

"I turned my back on him for maybe half an hour, and a couple of crewkids saw him collapse." Cantrell was furious. "He went down like he was shot in the head. The kids screamed blue murder, and the standby medic had him on support in under two minutes."

"A neurotoxin?" Stone was looking at Harry. "Someone tried to kill him?"

"A dart, in the neck," Harry said quietly. "One more minute, Stoney, and even I couldn't have done diddly for him. The dart's being analyzed to find out exactly what the drug is, but there's no doubt at all, he was almost murdered."

"Christ," Jarrat whispered. "Remember the scene on the docks, Stoney, at Aurora? Scorpio tried to get at Marcus Brand, the cryotank, on the shuttle? The shuttle pilots were killed this way."

"It could be the same drug," Harry said wearily. "We'll know in half an hour. But *what* the drug is surely doesn't mean half as much as —"

"How the hell somebody got at Michiko here," Stone finished. "On the ship, at the bloody damned NARC dock!"

"And why," Jarrat added. Stone looked at him with dark, haunted eyes. "Remember, GlobalNet broadcast Michiko's obituary across the colonies. The world at large thinks he's been dead for weeks. The only people who knew he was alive to cut a deal with NARC are connected directly with the services. NARC, Tac, Starfleet, and the civilian oversight body. Politicians like that bastard, Steinberg."

The implications were so horrific, a sheen of cold sweat broke over Stone's face. He passed a hand before his eyes and cleared his throat. "So who knows he's still alive as of this moment?"

Harry's face was a mask. "You two plus me, Gene, Petrov, and Medtech Patak here. Even the crewkids who saw him go down don't know I managed to pull him back."

"Six of us, and Kip, obviously, soon as he makes it back. Okay," Stone said slowly, "let's keep it that way. "What's the damage, Harry? Is he going to live — and how much of his brain is granola?"

"I'm not sure yet," Harry admitted, "which is why I've got him on support, oxygen, blood, drugs, the works. His central nervous system collapsed, this much I can tell you, but his brain was oxygen starved for only about a hundred *seconds* before we got him onto support. Lieutenant Patak deserves a medal for sheer speed, as well as know-how. There's damage to his heart valves — fixable. I can do the work, or Kip can do it surgically ... remember, I'm not actually licensed to prescribe aspirin in this system. What I did here is illegal."

"*Sod* that," Jagruti Patak muttered. She was forty, highly-qualified, barely chest-high beside Harry, tiny and fragile in surgical greens, and she was glaring at Jarrat and Stone. "I'm an *Earther*, Mumbai born and bred, Caps,

and I'm telling you flat out, Mister Michiko was history. Best I could have done is write the death certificate." She was defensive, with good reason. Under the strict letter of the law, she should never have let Harry touch the patient.

"It's fine, Lieutenant," Stone assured her, "the responsibility's ours. You did good, both of you. Go grab a coffee while you can."

"Thanks." She visibly relaxed. "I was ... wondering. You know I could lose my license and get punted right out of NARC."

"Don't stress." Jarrat nodded at Reardon's office. "I smelt coffee on the way in. Get some rest while you can, because I have a feeling all hell is about to bust loose, and nobody's going to get much sleep for a while."

Petrov was stirring, rubbing his back as if he were stiff with anger or frustration. "I've issued a recall for key staff," he began.

"We saw." Stone gestured vaguely toward the shuttle hangar. "We're locked down tight, and let's keep it that way. Recall enough of Blue Raven to get at least one gunship in the air. I want Cronin and Ramos aboard, let them pick their own crew."

"How fast did you get us buckled up?" Jarrat wondered.

The Russian's face was taut with speculation. "You're guessing the assassin's still aboard." Not a question.

"Is it a good guess?" Stone demanded.

He earned himself a glare. "Nothing, not even a suit of powered armor, got off this ship since the medics hauled Michiko's carcass in here, and according to every security log we have, nothing left the ship in the thirty minutes *before* Michiko was hit. Doc Del tells me, the neurotoxin was so fast acting, Michiko would have been going down in seconds after he was darted. Right, Doc? And that adds up to this bottom line: the bastards are aboard."

Cantrell tapped his comset. "I'm monitoring every band for outgoing transmissions, and the AI's looking at every erg of *anything* we've transmitted, from personal gossip to engineers' telemetry, in the last hour. If they've called home already, or try to ... and they will ... we'll have them."

"Good enough." Jarrat shared a moment's silent conference with Stone.

"The drug was so fast," Stone guessed, "the sheer speed is our advantage. How fast is *fast*, Harry?"

"Depending on body mass," Harry tiredly, "a victim would have between thirty and ninety seconds between the hit and the cardiac flatline. If I'm right — and I'm sure I am — the toxin produces something very like a major heart attack. Your assassins would have been gambling on the fact Michiko wouldn't be *seen* collapsing because the ship is almost empty. Even if he was seen going down, as he was, thank God, the CMO is absent. Frankly, this is way beyond the capacities of any medic, even one as good as Patak, or Jon Semler. I barely caught it myself."

"Even you thought it was a heart attack?" Stone mused.

"At first. The symptoms are exact." Harry sighed. "I spent fifteen minutes after we got Michiko hooked up, chasing phantoms through every system in his body, undoing the damage as fast as it was redoing itself. And then the

toxin went inactive, and I know exactly what drug does that.”

It was too familiar, and Jarrat groaned. “So do we. Stoney?”

“Hexadimorphen,” Stone said bitterly. “A synthetic muscle relaxant, a little like curare but a lot more dangerous. In large doses it’s bloody lethal ... and by ‘large doses’ we’re still talking tiny amounts.”

“Over two hours,” Jarrat finished, “the body’s own glycogen takes up the molecule, bonds with it. It’s gone, autopsy doesn’t find it.”

“This chemical is close,” Harry said slowly. “The molecule bonds even faster, which is another reason Michiko is still alive. As soon as the molecule has entered a bond, it’s no longer active; and the faster it bonds, the sooner the available dose is spent. I worked my tail off on Michiko, and then in fifteen minutes it *stopped*. We had him on full cardiopulmonary support, and I’d already done a lot to repair damage at the cellular level.”

Jarrat and Stone shared a bleak look, and Jarrat said quietly, “Somebody has to ask the obvious, Harry. How badly is his brain damaged? How much is he going to forget? You know what I mean. What’s locked up in that brain could nail the roots of Aphelion that are obviously still alive and kicking.” He frowned down at Michiko. “Someone out there knows what he knows, and ... here he is.”

“Brain tissue isn’t affected too much by drugs like Hex,” Harry said thoughtfully. “There are very few nerves to paralyze, so most of the damage that would be sustained is the result of oxygen starvation. We were fast, Medtech Patak and I. He was two minutes, max, without support. Inside the safe zone. Let me get in and fix the rest, he’ll recover.” Then he rethought the remark and held up both hands. “Just let me get some sleep, first!”

“There’s no rush,” Stone told him. “Michiko is safe enough for the moment, right?” Harry nodded. “And we have bigger problems.” He lifted a brow at Jarrat.

“We have assassins aboard,” Cantrell said acidly.

“Syndicate,” Jarrat added, “and what scares me spitless is how in any hell syndicate bastards got aboard the carrier, at the dock. It shouldn’t be possible.”

“It isn’t.” Petrov’s voice was heavy, the remark was final. “It fucking *isn’t*, Jarrat. Don’t lay that one on me.”

“We’re not assigning responsibility,” Stone began.

“Glad to hear it,” Petrov snarled, “because it’s the one thing that’d make me get up on my hind legs and fight.”

“Fine.” Stone gave the Russian a wry grin. “Because if you’re staking your career, your promotion, on the integrity of this ship’s security —”

“I bloody am, goddamn it!” Petrov’s voice rose to a roar.

— then all you have to do it display the logs,” Stone went on, “and you’ve done half our job for us.”

Petrov blinked at him, and Jarrat said in a deceptively bland tone, “If it’s not syndicate bastards after Michiko, who is it? We’re down to very few alternatives, none of them pleasant. Maybe this is about a security breach elsewhere. Some politician in civilian oversight, maybe Charles Steinberg

himself, got the memo, let a secretary see it, and somebody figured the intel was worth a billion dollars. They sold it to syndicate contacts.”

“That’s the positive spin on the situation, and I hope to God you’re right.” Stone took a long breath, held it, let it out slowly. “You know the alternative.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jarrat said softly. “I’m just not ready to even think about it.” He gave Harry a shove. “Get Patak back in here, get set up. Mischa, run out the security logs, go through the whole thing again.”

“I’ve been through them eight times!”

“Then run them a ninth time,” Stone said levelly. “If they’re as clean as you believe they are, we’ll know we weren’t infiltrated ... which tells us a lot.”

The look on Cantrell’s face was thunderous. “It means the killers got in on some legitimate pass. You’ll show the buggers boarding, but not leaving, and every face is under suspicion, up to General Gaunt himself. Mischa?”

“Give me a half hour.” Petrov was surly but motivated.

As he stepped out, Stone moved to the bedside and frowned down into Michiko’s waxen face. “We have the advantage, for what it’s worth.” He glanced up at Jarrat. “You thinking what I’m thinking? The gentle art of deception?”

“Yes.” Jarrat dropped a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “We’re going to ask one more thing of you, before you put your head down. You and Patak, get Michiko well out of sight. Set up in the morgue, if you can. Hide him ... let the bastards think they succeeded.”

“If they think he’s dead,” Stone added, “and if they report mission accomplished to their bosses ... he’s safe. If they know he survived —”

“They’ll try again,” Cantrell said disgustedly, “and next time they won’t bother to try and make it look like a heart attack. A bullet in the head is a whole lot faster and much harder to mend, even for you, Harry.”

“Damn.” Harry pressed his face into both hands. “What sort of bastards are you dealing with?”

“We’re not sure, not this time,” Stone said bitterly. “They could be syndicate, as Kevin suggested, if our security was compromised at the civilian level ... but if Petrov’s right, and we weren’t infiltrated, the fact is, the hit could have come from anywhere. Nobody outside the service knew Michiko was alive, which shortens our options.”

“Syndicate infiltration of a carrier at dock, or inside job,” Jarrat said in terse tones. “I don’t know which scares me the most.”

He stirred, making space as Harry called Medtech Patak and the two began to move equipment between the ICU and the morgue. Petrov had sealed the whole Infirmary on his way out, and their efforts would not be observed. Stone and Cantrell followed him to Reardon’s office, where the CRTs were still busy with the last data Harry had been reading. One screen displayed Marcus Brand’s sleeping face, and Jarrat glanced briefly at it before he turned back to Stone and Cantrell.

It was Cantrell who asked, “Any suspicions in particular?”

But Stone's dark head was shaking. "I don't know any of the senior officers well enough to have an opinion, and the truth is, the order to terminate Michiko could come from ten connections away, through the web. Tactical, oversight, some political office."

"There's no way to know yet," Jarrat mused. "I'd love to see Steinberg nailed for Aphelion affiliations, but it's not a legit suspicion. I just hated the man's guts, on sight, and you can't go into court with that!"

"Good thing," Cantrell said with astringent humor. "The powers behind this tells us plenty, though. For a start, they tell us, Michiko can destroy them. Which means it's something going way back, to the time when Marcus was put in the tank, and I busted the old Aphelion ... so it's probably not younger puppeteers behind this move. You're not looking at another Randolph Dorne, or a Patrice Dalmau. Equinox and White Lightning."

The name of Dalmau inspired Jarrat to wince, and when Cantrell lifted a brow at him he said, "One of the sims was staged around White Lightning. I know a whole lot more about Patrice Dalmau than I ever cared to. And you're right. The people Michiko's intel can hurt will be around Cass Brand's age. They were the big wheels behind Aphelion a long time ago."

"McKinnen," Stone said with a glitter in his eyes. "You might have been joking, Kevin, when you said you wanted to get McKinnen and Michiko in the same lab. Two intellects and egos that size —"

"They'd either kill each other or hand us Aphelion," Jarrat finished. He gave Stone a faint smile, and flicked the comm. "9.4 looking for Gable. You still there, Curt?"

The pilot must have been waiting for the call. "Right here, boss."

"Join us in the ops room," Jarrat invited. "Five minutes."

The morgue had been hastily converted into an ICU bay, and Harry seemed satisfied. Patak was settled in for a long haul, with an AutoChef parked in the corner, a stack of magazines, and a comset on her head. For the moment Harry could do no more for Michiko, and he joined them in Reardon's office.

"He's safe. He might even wake on his own, but if he does, Patak has orders to keep him still. There's a lot of work waiting for me. Right now I doubt he has the use of his legs, and unless I miss my guess, he's blind."

"Fixable?" Cantrell sounded appalled.

"Oh, sure." From some reserve, Harry produced a tired smile. "Trust me. So, what's the plan? You guys look like you're hatching plots."

"We are," Stone told him. "We're about to inform Central that their fully imported pigeon is a corpse. They'll want a medical dossier."

"I'll lash it together," Harry mused. "All genuine data, just ... skewed. Let me get some sleep, and I'll tidy up the documentation before I heal Michiko. When can I expect Kip back?"

"Tomorrow, unless we send a transport for him." Cantrell tapped his comm. "He just messaged from Marsport. He was actually aboard the ferry, more than halfway over, when they told him he was recalled. I didn't send him

a ride, since there's nothing much he can do here. There's a ferry back in the early hours, shiptime. He'll be on it. It gets in about noon."

"Good enough," Jarrat judged. "Any trouble, Harry, call us."

"I will," the healer said dutifully. He gestured at the vacant beds in the observation lounge. "They've been looking more and more inviting."

"Go for it." Cantrell was on his way out of the Infirmary. "We'll be in the Ops room if you need us."

Curt Gable was waiting for them. Carrier Operations was shut down, but Petrov had cranked up one bank of CRTs. He and the AI were sifting through security and comm logs, second by second, and his face was a grim mask. Gable had coffee in both hands, and as he set a mug down before the Russian he said,

"Petrov's got a trace. I think we know where the buggers are."

"He briefed you?" Stone hazarded.

"He told me some," Gable said cautiously. "Enough to know we have intruders aboard. What they've done, I don't know ... but I think we found them."

"Brief him," Jarrat said quietly to Cantrell as he and Stone moved to Petrov's side.

"You're going to Paris," Stone told the pilot, "covert and fast. Pick up Doctor McKinnen, get her back here, asap."

For just a moment Gable's eyes widened, but before he could speak Cantrell called him into the shadows on the other side of the dim Ops room. Jarrat was scanning several of Petrov's CRTs. "What you got, Mischa?"

"They got aboard with a routine freight shipment," Petrov said baldly. "Security was cleared at the NARC dock, *not* here, and the cargo run originated in Johannesburg, at Kent-Willem Engineering. It's a civvy transport with legit documents, passes all correct. *Both* the pilots were chipped, and the security gates over on the dock read the chips and let them through. They ID as Morgan Louise Briggs and Daniel Edelman, twelve years between them with Kent-Willem as transfer pilots, both resident on the Cape, no Tactical records, no financial trouble, no gambling problems, no domestic problems. Nothing. They're clean ... and they took a crack at Michiko, and they're still aboard." He looked from Stone to Jarrat and back. "The AI just picked up micropulse outgoing transmission, squat to do with Carrier Ops or any crew left aboard."

"You pinpointed it?" Jarrat asked tautly.

"They're in the interhull cavity," Petrov said with granite certainty. "At this moment they're stationary. Maybe waiting for confirmation that Michiko is dead, or looking for new orders." With one blunt fingertip, he tapped the multicolored schematic on the nearest CRT. "Got 'em. Your Morgan Briggs and Daniel Edelman are right *there*."

"They're not," Stone said grimly. "Briggs and Edelman are more than likely dead. It's their *chips* that were read by the AI on the dock when a couple of agents came up with their cargo. You know how easy it is to cut out a chip, especially if you don't care if the owner lives or dies?"

"And being chipped, the bogus Briggs and Edelman wouldn't be palm- or retina-scanned," Cantrell finished. "Fake ID would get the impostors past any human guard who didn't actually know them on sight." He frowned deeply at Jarrat and Stone.

"If the original Briggs and Edelman were regular transfer pilots," Jarrat reasoned, "somebody well up the assassins' chain of command had access to the cargo flight schedule and the dock's duty roster. It's starting to look dirty, Stoney."

"It stinks," Stone agreed. "Curt, you're still here?"

Gable jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of his hangar. "Waiting for the techs to prep my ride. I'm out of here in ten ... you better get hold of Mac, tell her to be ready to shove off, and not shoot the messenger."

"I'll call her," Cantrell offered. "She'll be less inclined to fry me alive."

"We're about to brief Central," Stone added. "Bet your last dollar, these agents are eavesdropping on our comm. Hold the transmission, Mischa, until we're close to their position —"

"Because hearing confirmation of Michiko's death will get them moving," Jarrat finished. He was studying the CRT closely. "I know where this is, Stoney. We can get after them in an engineer's pod."

"Dangerous," Cantrell warned as he waited for McKinnen to pick up.

"Give us an option," Jarrat challenged. "Normally, we'd hand the job to a couple of Ravens, but since they're on furlough we're a bit short of descant troops. The last we heard, Cronin and Ramos were someplace in North America, visiting Ramos's folks. However," he added with dry humor, "luckily, you've got *me*. After Sheckley, the interhull's a joyride."

Stone had been speaking in an undertone to the comm pickup, and as he finished the brief, terse bulletin for Central, Jarrat replayed it. The message was tagged for General Gaunt's desk, which meant it would pass through eight or ten hands along the way. And Stone had deliberately set the encryption at level three. Just high enough to avoid suspicion, low enough to make the message accessible to anyone with medium-access codes.

"She'll do," Jarrat agreed. "Hold this, Mischa, till we give you the go."

"All right." Petrov smacked one fist into his other palm. "Fuck! I don't believe we let this happen!"

"We?" Cantrell demanded. "What's this about we? It was dock security that stuffed this up, not us. If Gaunt or anybody else tries to lay this cockup on our doormat, I'll come out fighting, Petrov, right along with you."

As he spoke, a familiar voice, thick with a Parisian accent, issued from his CRT, and Gable took the sound as his cue to move. The last Jarrat heard from the Ops room, Yvette McKinnen seemed about to swab the decks with Gene Cantrell, but he was more amused than concerned. She was the consummate professional. The instant she understood the problem, she would put her life on hold.

Seldom did the regular crew see a ship so dormant, Jarrat thought. The *Athena* felt as if she were hibernating. Passages were half-lit, life support was

minimal, air vents were off, and much of the ship was ten degrees colder than it should be. Only one reactor was idling, in case of emergency. The sublight engines were 'dark,' the big Auriga drive systems were dead, and computer services were almost nonexistent. The AI had suspended most nodes, ship-wide.

If there was ever an ideal time to steal covertly about a ship, this was it. They saw no one on the way to the armory, and the facility was a crypt. Palmprints and access codes opened the guard's door to a chamber filled with menacing shadows and the smell of gunoil, but moments later they were moving again. Colt, Steyr and Chiyoda evened the odds, Jarrat thought as he primed an AP 60 and checked the ammo load of an assault rifle that was identical to Stone's.

In three minutes, they had made their way down four levels and aft three hundred meters, to Service Access 14, on the starboard side. "You realize," Stone said quietly as they palmed open the locks, "they're either top-drawer syndicate shooters or special agents. If they're syndicate, they'll have lassoed themselves a bunch of service veterans and drugged them out of their gourds, for the tricks of this trade."

"And if they're special agents," Jarrat finished, "they're doing the same job we are, with the same training." He paused as the hatch slid open, and gave Stone a mock frown. "I wonder if they're getting better pay?"

"Don't even think about it," Stone advised.

The hatch opened with a soft *thud* of releasing clamps and a waft of ice-cold air issued from the space within. Like all carriers and many big ships, the *Athena* was double-hulled. The five-meter space between the inner and outer skins was pressurized until she came under threat of weaponry or collision, but under normal circumstances only technicians ever saw the interhull cavity. The ship's power, data, and life support conduits coiled like serpents through this space; it often seemed to Jarrat that the ship's 'guts' were laid bare there, the arteries, nerves, even the bones of the vessel were naked, waiting for the attention of drones that swarmed over them.

Where drones fell short and human engineers worked in the interhull, they maneuvered by repulsion pod, and Jarrat was keenly aware of Stone's acid misgivings. The pods had never been designed to offer protection, and it was a safe bet the insurgents who had murdered and replaced Briggs and Edelman were well armed.

The pod docked just inside hatch 14 was flimsy indeed. It was little more robust than Rachel Rinaldi-Stone's scarlet ultralite, which they had been flying over the Spanish hills, four hours before. Jarrat gave his partner a bleak look, and Stone unslung the rifle. He had primed it when he touched his comm and said in a bare murmur,

"Ops room, this is 7.1 ... if our insurgents are still where they should be, go ahead and transmit to Central."

"They are, and your message is gone," Cantrell said into the loop.

"Then wish us luck," Stone said tartly. "7.1 out."

The interhull cavity was five meters wide, a hundred high and eight hundred long, the dimensions of the entire starboard side of the carrier's main body. It was a strange silver-gray gloom, where meter-thick pipes and hoses like the tentacles of great sea creatures were half-seen in a darkness punctuated at odd intervals by red, blue and green beacons. Jarrat felt the lurch of Stone's insides. This must be the most alien environment he could imagine, while for Jarrat himself there was an uncanny sense of familiarity.

As they stepped lightly over into the two-meter pod, the repulsion came up automatically. The controls were rudimentary and the kevlex sled provided enough cover to conceal them in the bed, but it would not stop a direct .50 caliber hit. Stone was on one knee with the Chiyoda pulled into his right shoulder as Jarrat cut loose the pod and gave it a tiny repulsion nudge to send it drifting toward a knot of conduits where the insurgents had chosen to roost.

The perch was eighty meters away, closer to the engine deck, and it was a bad place to fire weapons. Both data and power conduits raveled together, and a stray round could easily wreak havoc. Jarrat was grimly aware of this as he ducked down into the scant cover of the pod's high, blunt nose, and listened to the loop.

"Two marks, still in position," Petrov was saying. "Soon as they made the transmission, I nailed the buggers with thermal. No more transmissions ... and I'm routing power and data the hell away from those conduits."

It was a smart move, and Jarrat's pulse slowed a fraction. He glanced down at Stone, and Stone nodded. "Ten seconds," Jarrat guessed in a whisper, "and they have to see us."

"They'll be wondering if we picked up their micropulse," Stone added.

Jarrat cocked the Colt and took a deep breath. "Five seconds."

He was on one knee beside Stone, about to lean out around the nose of the pod, when a shot snicked through the kevlex not a hand's span over his head. Stone swore lividly, and before a second shot could find its mark, the Chiyoda barked, deafening in the silver-gray semi-darkness. A blue beacon erupted in a mass of sparks, a conduit ruptured, and if Petrov had not rerouted data and power, there might have been an explosion. A static discharge wreathed the tangle of pipes and flexhoses in cold, green lightning, and in the weird illumination Jarrat picked out two human shapes.

They wore flightcrew fatigues with the insignia of a private company on the left breast and both shoulders. Kent-Willem had lost two good, longtime pilots for this assassination run, and Jarrat shared a hot fury with Stone. The deaths of Briggs and Edelman were directly attributable to Aphelion — the syndicate's first recorded casualties in two and a half decades. Leo Michiko should have been the third.

And save for blind chance, two NARC captains might have followed him. The static discharge had got into the agents' weapons, their hands were crackling with it, their hair standing weirdly on end, and as Jarrat watched they threw down a pair of medium-weight sidearms.

Their pod was docked to the other side of the power-data node where

they had hidden, and as Stone leaned out for another shot, the agents slid aboard and kicked the sled into motion. Green static lightning crackled after them, and their Arago unit was misbehaving because of it. They lost repulsion in microsecond blackouts, falling a few meters each time, and Jarrat brought their own pod around broadside, to give Stone a clear shot.

If Stone had been trying to kill them outright, it would have been easy, but he was trying to stop their pod, and possibly wound one or both of them — immobilize them. Interrogation was on his mind. The agents were the last fragile link in their chain of command. Jarrat shared his thoughts, and his shots were sparse, careful. The insurgents were prone in their pod, flinging it this way and that to complicate their aim, and as Jarrat watched they clawed for other weapons, much smaller, much lighter. The range would be less but they were just as lethal.

They were dart guns, the same as the weapon which had put down Michiko. Jarrat's narrowed eyes saw slender plastex bodies, snub muzzles, open-wire butts and the telltale shape of a compressed gas cartridge, the size of a cigarette lighter.

"Careful," Stone barked, but Jarrat was already ducking back into cover.

"At least the darts won't punch through kevlex," he muttered. "I'm going to back off, Stoney, put some distance between us."

He could not begin to guess the effective range of the darts, but it had to be no more than ten meters. A longer shot might still be lethal if it landed, but accuracy would be so low, luck was more important than aim. The pod slowed, slewed sideways, and with twenty meters between them and their quarry he jinked it broadside again.

The Chiyoda was already lined up in Stone's hands, and Jarrat could feel the feather-pressure of the trigger under his right index finger. In the split second before he fired, he hesitated. Jarrat sucked in a breath as the rush of Stone's adrenaline hit him.

"What?"

"Kevin, look where they are. Look at where they bloody are!"

Still cautious despite the range, Jarrat bobbed up to see, and swore. Both pods had drifted aft. The engine deck was right above, the trio of reactors were dead ahead of Jarrat and Stone as they looked aft toward the armor sheathing the sublight drive, and the Auriga hyperdrive module was high above. This part of the ship was one enormous energy exchanger, and the crawling sensation on Jarrat's skin was not the prickle of dread, it was a reaction to the immense latent static charge generated by machinery the size of mountainsides. The cooling grids for Number 1 reactor — the biggest and best-protected unit, installed dead-center above the keel — arrowed up and down into the interhull's silver-gray twilight, and they shimmered with the odd, faintly blue-green haze of a million tiny static crackles every second.

"We don't dare miss," Stone said quietly. He set down the rifle. "And I can't use that. Even if I'm on target, the round'd go right through and keep on going." He drew the Steyr .44 from the holster in the curve of his back.

"Then, we don't miss." Jarrat checked the Colt. "You take the left, I'll take the right. One clean shot each, and it has be good, if we want something left to interrogate." He met Stone's eyes grimly. "On three."

"One," Stone began, and then, "Shit, they're up and moving!"

The bogus Briggs and Edelman were trying to run, but they were so close to the stern now, their options were limited. Their pod was heading up on its repulsion cushion, and in two seconds it's belly would cover them. With no time to line up a shot, Jarrat and Stone shared the kick through the nervous system of raw instinct. Two reflex shots, more Zen than pure skill, echoed back off the fortress of armor sheathing the reactors, and Jarrat grunted in reaction as he saw the two agents go down.

A moment later he swore softly as both he and Stone saw the pod's angle of drift. The two agents had been tossed heavily into the belly, and though they were still alive, neither was capable of controlling the pod. It was still going up on repulsion, but the shifting weight had slewed it, sent it drifting toward the cooling grids.

For one moment, Jarrat actually eye-measured the distance between their own pod and the agents'. In the same moment, both he and Stone knew it was too far to cover. Still kneeling in the bed of their pod, Stone yanked back on the rudimentary controls, sending them careening in reverse, back the way they had come, before the insurgents' pod hit.

The assassins who had come aboard for Leo Michiko went up in a blue-green detonation that fried them and their pod in an instant. The discharge ripped up and down the cooling grids, and arcs of blue lightning licked out toward Jarrat and Stone, hungry to make contact. They coiled along the service catwalks and emergency ladders, and a dozen conduits ruptured in a series of detonations which left the ears ringing.

A swarm of drones launched out of the fire control bays, and while he was still blinking his eyes against the green blotches of corneal overload, Jarrat saw them rush to work. Like antibodies and T-cells, they were drawn to the damage, and scores of them would be destroyed as they contained it.

The pod came to a buoyant stop, and Stone hauled himself to his feet. He was working his jaw, as if his skull was ringing like a bell. He spoke, but Jarrat could not make out a word over the roar in his ears. He knew more of what Stone was saying from the emotions reverberating through the bond. He was furious, though not with himself or Jarrat, and Jarrat shared the anger. Interrogation might have made the job easy.

"Too easy," Jarrat said bleakly, though he knew Stone could not hear him, and turned the pod back toward hatch 14.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"In other words," Yvette McKinnen said icily, "we already know we're leaking like a sieve, we're just trying to find the hole."

"And plug it," Cantrell added.

The Infirmary was still barely half-lit. The morgue door was cracked open; inside, Jarrat could see Patak and the still, pale form of Michiko. Cantrell was pacing between Reardon's office, where the CRTs had been loaded with data streamed from the Ops room, and the treatment bay where Harry Del was still examining Stone's ears. The healer should have been asleep, but he was much too sensitive an empath not to know *something* had happened, and minutes after Jarrat and Stone made their way back to the Infirmary, he appeared without being called. Jarrat's ears were full of blood. Stone's were little better, and his balance was off. Harry was still working on him, but from the look of intense relief, Stone's hearing was returning, and his middle ear was settling down.

"You want me to send an AI into DAC — again," McKinnen was saying. She looked from Jarrat to Stone and back. "We're pushing our luck." She was in deep blue skinthins and gold chain sandals, Paris style, her nails were some iridescent shade between green and blue, and she was brunette now. Her hair was ruthlessly shorn, and tipped in blond. The fashion was a little more sophisticated than the Chicago street, but Jarrat saw more similarities than differences. "Push our luck far enough," McKinnen warned, "and we'll all take a heavy fall. This is *not* the system to screw around with risks."

She made a strong argument. Jarrat shared a long moment of mute conference with his partner and asked, "Rate the risk for us."

"Percentage-wise?" McKinnen puffed out her cheeks, lit a cigarette and began to pace as the sweet scents of bel grass and jasmine enveloped her. "Personally, I'd give us one chance in four of getting caught."

"Means three chances in four of pulling it off." Cantrell held out a hand for the pack of Blue Diamonds and the lighter.

She tossed them to him, and perched on the end of a vacant bed. "It comes down to this, Gene. It better be worth the risk. If it's not, think twice before you start, because everybody in this room could be doing time ... and I, for one, have no interest in spending fifteen to twenty in a medium security prison. In fact," she added in acid tones, "you're going to have to sell me on the need to do this, never mind the wisdom, before I'll jimmy the lid off this can of worms."

The gauntlet, thrown down, landed with a leaden sound. It was Gene Cantrell who picked it up. He hooked a chair with one foot, pulled it closer and straddled it, looking up at her. "A long time ago, when it was still marginally permissible to assign a warship to the homeworlds — not to Earth or Mars themselves, you understand, but to the *system* — some of the richest business empires that ever came out of these pathetic worlds were built on rotten foundations. Angel money was behind corporations like CyberGen and Gough-Khoury *Astra*. You probably don't recall them. You'd have been a little child when they were dismantled. CyberGen vanished utterly, but after the dust settled and a lot of people began long, long sentences, one wing of Gough-Khoury survived to become Wilhausen-Gough, the insurance underwriter. They went offshore, into the colonies, to escape the stink, the stigma, of being busted for Angel cartel connections.

"But I knew the truth, Mac, even then. We all did. For every tentacle of the Aphelion syndicate we were able to cut off, another one wriggled away and vanished. I took the *Virago* into the Jupiter system and the belt. We were in half the cities on Ceres, Vesta, Cargo Fleet West, Callisto, Io, Europa, and right out as far as Itzhak Loyola. It took five *months* to flush the bastards, and I lost some good people doing it. We took down some names you should know. Dowrick. Ito. Neunheizen. Yu. Morrissey. Depasquale. We were decorated and celebrated, as if we'd hewn Aphelion off at the ankles, the way Equinox and White Lightning were finished ... but we knew the truth.

"For every tendril we lopped, another either vanished into the colonies or into the dirt beneath our feet. Martian dirt, and Jovian. We knew we'd missed some of them, but the syndicate had been scattered, and none of us expected to see it coming back together inside the years of our tenure. Now, maybe it's just me who's stuck around too long in this business! I've got one more command left in me, and the law of averages says it'll kill me. I was their age, Kevin's and Stoney's, when I busted Aphelion. Marcus Brand was tanked at the same time. You do the math.

"And unless Leo Michiko's lying through his teeth to save his ass ... which he isn't ... Aphelion is not only back, it never fully went away. We knew elements of the old cartel fled into the colonies, but we never had the resources to find the buggers. But Michiko knew them, and —"

"Michiko knows them," a hoarse voice corrected, "and by gods, he'll see the fuckers spit-roasted!"

The croak issued from the morgue, and Jarrat heard the door whining fully open. In an undertone, Patak was calling Harry, and as Jarrat turned toward the voice he saw Leo Michiko sitting up, both arms cradling his chest. His heart valves were damaged and several needles were connected, but the he had been taken off the ventilator by the time Jarrat and Stone returned. He was under several thermal blankets, and a space heater was set up at the bedside, but he still looked cold. And he was obviously was almost blind.

"Leo, for chrissakes!" Cantrell spun toward him. "What the hell are you doing awake?"

"You mean, I'm supposed to be dead, so I'd better lie down?" Michiko rasped. "You know better than that, Gene." Even now, he was capable of nailing Jarrat and Stone with a gimlet-sharp glare. "Who was it?"

"We ... don't know," Stone said reluctantly. "They didn't make it, Michiko. They fried themselves in a firelight, trying to get out."

"Shit," Michiko said, hoarse and hugging himself against the pain in his chest. He looked owlishly at Harry out of near-blind eyes. "You were there."

"I was there," Harry affirmed. "A colonial doctor."

"A Rethan mutoid," Michiko countered.

Harry stiffened a fraction, but only Jarrat and Stone saw it. "You have a problem with what I am?"

"No." Michiko dragged the thermal blankets closer. "In fact, I was about to thank you. Once, I could have rewarded you. Perhaps it would have been the endowment of a trust to nurture and protect other Rethan mutoids, for the good of us all. Now, I regret all I have is gratitude. The government of Earth has frozen every asset I ever had."

"I appreciate the thought," Harry said bluffly, obviously astonished. "I rather thought you'd scorn the likes of me."

"You?" With great difficulty, Michiko was swinging his legs off the bed. "Why do you think so? It's the moronic individuals I deplore, the imbeciles who resort to Angel because" — with a whining inflection of uncanny imitation — "their poor little lives are so 'sucky' that they just can't go on living." As if they think nasally induced sex fantasies will pay their rent or feed their children." He accepted Patak's arm for support. "Damnit, I can barely move my legs! You know my philosophy, Doctor Del. If I were permitted to vote, I'd be first in line to validate the Sorenson bill. Let nature itself get rid of the latest crop of Angel users, and the problem dissolves back into nothingness."

"Please," Cantrell said loudly, cutting across him, "for godsakes let's not go there again. It's a debate without a rationalization, Leo, because you're never ready to allow for the people who're force-addicted, like Stone, and kids who're the victims of a fraternity prank, or who just make one mistake."

"They're a sad case," Michiko said without noticeable compassion, "but they're also in the incredible minority. Acceptable casualties, Gene. Collateral damage. Deal with it, get over it."

"Ah, now," Cantrell said thoughtfully, "that's where you and I can't agree. You never held a fourteen year old in your arms while he died an Angeldeath, did you? And you never will." He looked hauntedly at McKinnen. "You asked me to rationalize going into DAC again, pushing our luck, taking the risk. My rationalization had a name. Jim Romero. Just a neighbor's kid, eight years younger than me. We played squash twice a week, and he often beat me. He was still in school when I was in college. I helped him get through math, because his brain wasn't wired for numbers ... he wrote poetry, can you believe it? Jim wrote the poems that I used to seduce women older than me, who should have known better."

Michiko was intent on Cantrell. "And this child —?"

"Collateral damage, I guess," Cantrell said harshly. "His parents were rich, they were always fretting about their kids being abducted. For some reason they guarded their daughter like she was made of cut glass and let Jim do as he wanted. One day he didn't come home from the squash court. When they did get him back, he was so Angel-soaked, he only lasted six more months. Angel's cheap. The kidnappers had used a lot of it to keep him quiet while they talked his parents out of a couple of million credits." Cantrell was looking into McKinnen's face. "Jim Romero's the reason I came over to NARC. Every one of us tells the same story.

"The point is, Aphelion supplied the Angel that killed a child, and long after Jim died a death that had no shred of dignity, the syndicate bosses vanished into the Martian sands, or into the dark between the stars of the Cygnus Colonies. I can tell you — fact, though I can't prove it — the fortunes behind some of the biggest aerospace companies, and the architects who design and build some of the biggest structures on Earth and Mars, and the corporation that built at least two of the lunar resorts, were all derived from Angel. And a lot of these projects operate under government auspices ... all of which links Aphelion to corporate Earth to Terran politics."

"Prove that," Stone said quietly, "and the whole house of cards doesn't look too safe on its foundations."

"You want to prove it?" Michiko's eyes glittered like diamonds with fury.

"You have names?" Yvette McKinnen insisted.

He was in pain, but he had wrapped a silver thermal sheet around his waist and he pulled his spine straight. "Ask yourselves where falls the line between the civilian and the politician. This year's politician is last year's civilian, and they come in all kinds, including bastards and criminals. I asked, Doctor McKinnen, if you want to prove this."

"Of course I do," she snapped, "but the whole game starts with you. Give me a hand to play, Michiko, and I'll play it."

Silence descended on the Infirmary for a long, taut moment, and then Jarrat was moving. He clapped his hands for attention. "Gene, why don't we crank up a lab, give them access to the mainframe, whatever they need. Stoney?"

"Oh, yeah," Stone agreed. "Harry, the man's holding himself like he was kicked by a horse. You want to fix his heart before he keels over again? And Mac, go configure your lab. You need anything, buzz Petrov."

"We want the Ops room on standby," Jarrat added, "but what we don't want is a whole army of people who know what we're doing. If possible, we want to keep it to the six of us here, plus Petrov, Gable, and Kip Reardon, as soon as he gets back."

"For the moment, nobody else gets privy to this," Stone said flatly, looking from Cantrell to McKinnen to Michiko. "Data sharing is on a strict need to know basis. Clear?"

Cantrell was already moving. "I'll work out an Ops room roster."

"Go to it, Gene." Stone worked his neck to and fro. "That's a million percent better, Harry. Thanks."

"You're welcome," the healer said resignedly. "Mister Michiko, you'll have to lie down again. You're aware of what happened to you?"

"Speaking of Kip," Jarrat wondered, looking at his chrono, "are we expecting the Mars return ferry?"

"Noon, shiptime, so I was told." Harry was helping Michiko back onto the bed in the morgue's open doorway. "Petrov had callbacks from the key staff you recalled. They're coming back on the next three or four upshuttles." He gave Jarrat and Stone a rueful look. "I hate to admit it, but I'll feel safer with a company of riot troops between me and ... whatever." He did not feign the shiver of reaction. "Christ! I'm going to miss the clipper home, aren't I?"

"Maybe," Jarrat said quietly, and clasped Harry's shoulder. "So get an advance reservation on the next one ... first class, on the department. Book it through the NARC office and see how long it takes some bean counter to notice they paid for first class instead of budget. You think they transport their colonels and generals economy?"

"I'll do that," Harry said with a rueful chuckle. "I'll get Michiko on his feet, and then I'll get this place up and running. I'll find out where Kip is, but you won't want a word of this breathed via comm, so he'll have to guess till he gets back here! Where will you be?"

"Ops room." Stone said with an air of resignation. "Suddenly we have an assignment to coordinate. What bugs us is —"

"It's unauthorized," Jarrat finished.

Harry cocked his head at them. "You've always said, the reason NARC carriers run with two command rank officers is so there's always an officer in the hotseat, who can make the decisions that jeopardize lives and potentially destroy a lot of civvy property. The decision is yours to make, and you made it."

"All very true," Jarrat said with bleak amusement. "The only hole in the logic being —"

"This is homeworlds territory." Stone's brows rose as he regarded his partner. "There's not supposed to be a warship of any kind on active service in this entire system, let alone docked with a front-row view of the Greater North Americas."

"Understand, Harry," Jarrat added quietly, "no matter if there was an Angel cartel operating in Chicago or Geneva, Shanghai or Tokyo, the seats of the world government itself ... or perhaps *because* it was operating in those cities? ... we wouldn't be assigned here. Worse, we're not actually allowed to do what we do here."

The healer's face had settled into suspicious lines. "This is written into the NARC charter? That the homeworlds are above and beyond investigation?"

"I ..." Stone hesitated, and gave Jarrat a curious look. "I don't know."

"It doesn't sound like the kind of clause Cassius Brand would approve," Harry said shrewdly. "It's worth taking a look at the fine print ... in case we're

running headlong into a 'worst case' scenario here."

"You mean, if we screw up, get caught, and hung out to dry." Jarrat slid both hands into the back pockets of his denims. "You're a civilian and a colonial, Harry, so you're not at risk, no matter what Mac says. You'll all tell the brass it was me and Stoney and Gene at the helm of the disaster." He gave Harry a lopsided grin. "But we haven't hit an iceberg yet."

"We won't." Stone snaked an arm around Jarrat's waist and turned him toward the doors, opposite which were the big service elevators. "We dance on the edge all the time, Harry. It's what 'command rank' means."

"In other words, this is the bullshit they pay you for." The healer had returned to Michiko's bedside, where Patak had moved aside the machines, and Michiko had been listening with a hard, pain-filled expression. "I'll buzz you when I'm done here," Harry offered as he went to work.

The Ops room remained half-dark, but Petrov had brought three more banks of CRTs online. One was set up to monitor the Infirmary; another gave them a thorough, graphical overview of the carrier's security, both internal and external. The third was monitoring repairs in the interhull cavity where the intruders had died.

A flock of drones was handling the work to the satisfaction of the AI, but Jarrat had never trusted machines to the last degree. "Issue a recall for Budweisser," he said to Petrov as Stone examined their security.

"Already did," Petrov told him. "The man is mad enough to spit. He's fifty K's up a river, somewhere in East Canada, with a cooler full of beer and a line in the water. He said you promised him three days. He's had thirty-six hours."

"Ouch." Stone sighed. "We did trade him, three for one, when we cut his leave on Darwin's."

"This job," Jarrat said acerbically, "drives saints to drink. Tell Bud there's been an accident, we need him back here, pronto."

"I did." Petrov helped himself to coffee. "He'll be in on the night shuttle. If you want him back faster, I'll send Gable."

For a moment Jarrat and Stone gave the question serious thought, and then Jarrat shook his head. "The drones are handling it, and we're not going anywhere till Mac and Michiko get a result."

Launching an assignment 'cold' was daunting. The normal assignment began with a colonial government calling for a carrier in orbit, because local syndicate activity had far outstripped their capacity to respond. Tactical would be waiting with several terabytes of data, leads, suspects, a blueprint of the colony's underworld, a route map of citybottom. Jarrat thought of Pete Stacy, Vic Duggan, Kris Janssen. The chances of North American Tactical Command's Colonel Theresa Dyson volunteering a dossier — if her department had even been given enough leash to mount any kind of civil investigation — were close to nil. Like NARC and Starfleet, Tactical took its orders from the political body, and from what Jarrat had seen already, he doubted Tac would be permitted to poke far into that strata of Earth's society.

"Here it is," Stone muttered. He had rolled a chair up to the workspace, brought another CRT online, and was intent on the screen.

"Here's what? You want coffee?" Jarrat was on his way to the 'Chef.

"Yeah, and keep it coming." Stone looked up at him over the screen. "I'm looking at the actual wording of the NARC charter. This could get interesting, but it's dense with legal-jargon, as you'd expect. It could take some time."

"Get Michiko to interpret it," Jarrat suggested. "He lives and breathes this legal crap."

Freight shuttle 374 nosed into the NARC docks two hours later, and moments after the AI reported its arrival the comm buzzed. Jarrat glanced at the screen by his elbow and dropped a hand on Stone's shoulder. Stone was still engrossed in the document, with a page of scribbled notes and several spent coffee mugs at his left hand. He looked up as Gil Cronin's voice said from the comm,

"Blue Raven 6 and party, on our way over."

"7's with you?" Jarrat asked tersely.

The tone of his voice was enough to tip off Cronin to the gravity of the situation. "He is, and a couple of pilots came up with us. Where do you want us, Cap?"

"Ops room, Gil," Jarrat told him, "your whole party."

Stone leaned back, stretched his shoulders and pillowed his head in both folded hands. His eyes moved from Jarrat to Cantrell, who was watching the CRTs, and back. "How much do you want to tell them?"

"Enough to pass security into their hands," Jarrat mused. "We're still locked down tight, but who the hell trusts machines? That's how those bastard agents got aboard. The AI sees as far as the chip it *knows* is embedded in some poor bugger's hide. It couldn't possibly have been cut out, could it?"

"Not without a lot of blood and pain," Cantrell said bluffly, "and some idiot programed the AI to think blood and pain will stop it happening. Pathetic."

No one suffered under the delusion that the perfect security system existed. The best system was a meld of machine and human, and Gil Cronin was as qualified as anyone on the carrier to set a perimeter and guard it. He and Joe Ramos appeared at the wide, open Ops room door while Stone was still making notes. Behind them were the pilots, and Jarrat beckoned the whole group inside. The gunship pilots, Evelyn Lang and Tanya Reynolds, had shuttled up together, and to Jarrat's surprise, the carrier pilot was with them. Helen Archer was still technically with Starfleet, but her affiliations had been with NARC for a long time. She was a generation older than Lang and Reynolds, and unlike Michiko, she made no attempt to disguise her years.

"Sit," Stone invited. "The 'Chef's reloaded for dinner, if you want it. I'm going to ask Gene Cantrell to brief you."

"With enough," Cantrell said thoughtfully, "so that we can dump carrier close security into your capable hands."

"Capable hands?" Cronin's eyes narrowed. "What shit hit what fan while we weren't looking?"

"All yours, Gene." Stone pushed back his chair. He picked up the sheet of notes he had made, and joined Jarrat in the lounge adjacent to the Ops room.

The view of the North Americas was magnificent, and space above was bright with the traffic lanes, busy with big ships moving freight, way-stations, passenger terminals, the civilian and paramilitary docks. Stone turned his back on the view, leaned his shoulders against the panel beside the armor-glass, and handed Jarrat the notes.

"I couldn't find word *one* in the charter about the homeworlds having any authority to exclude NARC carrier activity. I went through it four times, to be certain. There's a whole load of legal-eagle double-talk in there about the rights and obligations of NARC officers and affiliates in dealing with the public and other services, including but not limited to Tactical, Tac Fire Control, Air Traffic Control, Hazmat, the works. They go to extraordinary lengths to tell us what we can do, and what we can't, where our jurisdiction lies, and where it ends. Nowhere does it say, in concrete terms, 'NARC shall not deploy ships, nor put boots on the ground on Earth, Mars, or their celestial territories.'"

"Tradition, then, is it? The ingrained social custom." Fists on hips, Jarrat was looking back into the Ops room, watching Cantrell and the group which had just arrived. "It's been *known* for a fact, like an urban legend, that NARC just doesn't operate in the homeworlds."

"We were never invited, never assigned," Stone mused. "It's been a quarter century since the original Aphelion dispersed into the colonies with its tail feathers on fire, and since then there hasn't been an Angel problem here."

"Maybe not Angel," Jarrat said bleakly, "but I'll tell you this, Stoney. In the last couple of hours I've been running the numbers from Tactical, HCQ and a dozen other domestic sources, including bloody GlobalNet itself. There's a huge Buran marketplace on Earth, and there's a gryphon and chimera problem on Vesta and Ceres. Citybottom is officially recognized as being rotten with everything *but* Angel, and you know what that means."

It meant Angel was in there too, but unacknowledged, buried down deep and disguised by other elements. When Buran and chimera became problems, Angel was always there in the shadows. It was not enough to warrant parking a carrier insystem, but people were already dying in places like Marsport and Memphis and Sequoia. They were just not dying in numbers too big to be disguised and lost in the bureaucratic shuffle.

"They have Angel *trouble*," Stone said thoughtfully, "but they don't have an Angel *problem*, not as it's understood by the city fathers in Aurora and Chell and Elysium. It's still at a level where they can sweep it under the rug, and Tactical thinks it's in control. Not worth dragging NARC in here."

"Not when it's tacitly understood," Jarrat finished, "by politicians and captains of industry, that NARC just doesn't operate here. The idea has been concreted in place, and I doubt fogeys as old as General Gaunt will want to rock the boat. He'd be up against the likes of Steinberg, the Honorable Representative for about a billion people who vote in the electorate of Greater Shanghai-Hangzhou."

"He'd be up against Bram Sorenson," Stone added, "the Rep for the electorate of Olympus. In other words, half of Mars." He shook his head slowly. "That's a lot of power, in two hands. Enough power, that if Steinberg and Sorenson got their heads together, they could get the NARC charter rewritten to make the urban legend into the law."

"Why would they?" Jarrat reasoned. "It's not in their own interests to shut us out of the homeworlds. They're both dead set against Angel, the cartels, the whole thing. Like Michiko, it's the NARC fiscal appropriation they disapprove of. We're all on the same team, but Sorenson thinks he can get rid of Angel — and by extension, us — faster and cheaper."

"Shut off the licensed supply to diagnosed users, and when the last ones are dead, and a new generation of kids has learned the hard way that Angel means *dead* meat, right here and now ... they can retire us all and decommission the carriers." Stone's tongue tip moistened his lips. "But you know people like Sorenson and Steinberg hate NARC, specifically. It's not just the appropriation. It's ... I don't know. But I feel it. Or is my mind slipping at last?"

"No. I know what you're saying," Jarrat agreed. "I keep remembering what Michiko said. This year's politicians are last year's civilians, and they come in all kinds."

Stone took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. "We trust no one."

"Only the people who are with us on this right now," Jarrat added, "plus Kip and Bud, when they get aboard. I don't even trust Michiko. Oh, his data will be dead accurate, I don't doubt it. But he's changed sides once to keep his skin intact. He could do it again like that." He snapped his fingers. "I want him under permanent surveillance."

"He's chipped, though he doesn't know it." Stone stirred as he saw Cantrell finish up his cursory briefing. "They're done. Let's get our perimeter set, then I want to see how Harry's doing with Michiko." He was a pace behind Jarrat as they rejoined Cantrell's group, and as Gene went to the water cooler he asked, "I realize the project has been deemed 'need to know,' but do you know *enough*?"

"Enough to know when to stick my fingers in my ears and hum," Cronin said acidly. "Michiko's got somebody, somewhere runnin' so shit-scared, he, she or they were willing to risk putting a special ops hit squad on a NARC carrier. It's not syndicate, boss. I don't buy into that story, not unless there's a cartel in the homeworlds big enough, powerful enough, to have a tentacle up the ass of some freakin' politician who's got a spy in Chuck Steinberg's office. In which case, we're all so screwed, we might as well resign right now, and get the hell out while we're still on the right side of the bars!"

Curiously, it was Helen Archer who said slowly, "I have to agree with Sergeant Cronin. The theory that a syndicate put assassins aboard makes the picture too complicated. Needless so. I've always adhered to the idea that the simplest solution is probably the right one."

"The simplest solution being...?" Evelyn Lang was looking at Jarrat. "If I got even half of this right — and Cap Cantrell didn't show us too many of the cards! — the simplest answer to this puzzle of yours is, somebody who was sitting in that conference room wanted Leo Michiko dead."

"Still does," Tanya Reynolds mused. "He's alive."

"But they *think* he's dead," Lang pointed out.

"True," Reynolds agreed. "So, somebody in that room, or closely glued to them by some connection, sent special ops aboard."

"Some connection," Archer echoed. "Financial, legal? Blackmail, or the obligatory duty of the service?"

Cronin and Ramos shared a dark look, and Cronin raised both hands. "The fingers are going back in the ears, Pilot. Think about it. The less we know, the further we're gonna get believed when we say, 'I didn't know nothin', I was just followin' orders.'"

"Point," Archer agreed.

"You mean," Tanya Reynolds demanded, tossing the thick, copper-red hair back over her broad shoulders, "when 7.1 and 9.4 get roasted on a spit for this, we can slither off into the grass and leave 'em to sizzle!"

"I didn't say that! Tan, for chrissakes," Cronin protested.

She had been the Blue Raven gunship pilot for more than a year. The whole unit was tight-knit, with supreme trust. She gave Cronin a crooked smile. "I know, Gilly, but if you crack it right down to basics, that's the slurry you end up with."

"Shit," Cronin muttered. "Shitshitshit."

With a soft chuckle, Stone stepped forward. "It's no problem, people. We expect you to cover your asses. If you didn't, we'd tell you all, you were going soft. Tan's right in one way. The less you know, the less you can be accused of, if it all goes south. What are the chances of it going south?" He glanced at Jarrat, one brow crooked in speculation.

"It could go wrong," Jarrat admitted with deceptive mildness, "but there's no reason why it should. We have the brains and the resources to run an investigation. Three captains and the XO ... always supposing Petrov is with us in this. Mischa?"

The Russian had been standing in the shadows, chain smoking and listening without comment. His face was set into grave lines, but as Jarrat invited him to speak he came into the light and ground out his last smoke. "Put it like this, Jarrat, Stone. If we've reached a place where some fucking politician who didn't even run for office till twenty *months* ago — yeah, I actually ran the bastard's file — can reach us aboard our own ship at our own dock, and cut off the datastream that came out of a syndicate bust that almost destroyed a city and the population with it, and then rap us on the knuckles

and tell us, naughty boys, not allowed to play in this backyard ... well, fuckitall, you can have my resignation in the morning."

"Ditto," Tanya Reynolds said quietly.

"Ah, hell, what the Russian said," Cronin muttered.

"You can count me in, *muchachos*," Ramos agreed.

"Yo." Gene Cantrell put up his hand.

"Present and accounted for, if you're counting," Helen Archer added.

"And me," Evelyn Lang said wryly. "I guess."

She was the one Jarrat had been the least certain of, not because he and Stone had any doubts about her abilities, but because six months ago she had been a civilian, operating a business in a backwater, trying to forget the years of her military career. Roadrunner was still thriving with Art Pedley in charge, while Simon Lang, whom Jarrat had always considered a brat, had turned his life around. He was headed for a Starfleet career. He had no affinity for NARC — not yet. He had lost a brother, but he considered his sibling a fool and a coward. Simon was more likely to vote for Sorenson than 'come over' to NARC.

"Eve?" Jarrat said quietly. "There's no reason for you to be involved. Blue Raven needs a pilot, but Tan's back. You're not leaving us in a bind if you go right back on the next downshuttle and take your furlough."

But her dark head was shaking. "Like I'm going to walk out on you, and on the department, when you're up against the wall? You know me better than that, Kevin. *Captain*."

"The hell with the rank crap," Stone said with deceptive banter. "Nobody in this service cares for it. As he said, Eve, don't get into something you don't *feel* about. You've only been with us a short time."

"I was with you on Aurora." She glanced sidelong at Reynolds. "That was one hell of a ride."

"They told me." Reynolds jerked a thumb at Cronin and Ramos. "Thing is, it's like Cap Stone said. If you don't *feel* this, back out now. Nobody's going to blame you. Shit, it'd be more sensible if we all cut and ran!"

"No." Eve Lang's chin lifted. She had a smile for Jarrat, and an odd little glance for Stone. "This one's ... for Stevie."

"Like me," Jarrat murmured.

"Like you." Lang held out her hand, and he clasped her wrist. "NARC's been good to me, and if Harry's right, he'll settle the whole thing in a year or two. Less, if Cass Brand comes across with the money — and he will. We stand together, this company, right here, and we can come out of this with the dirt on *somebody* who was in that conference room. NARC can only be stronger for this. If we back off, we castrate the department. Gil?"

"Yep." Cronin had perched on the edge of the workspace before the CRTs. "That's about the size an' shape of it. And I'm in."

"All right." Jarrat took a breath and tallied up the company. The two elite riot squad leaders, the carrier pilot, two gunship pilots, the ops room controller, three captains. Plus, elsewhere aboard, the shuttle pilot, the cyber

systems specialist, the Rethan mutoid and his patient, the informant; and Jarrat did not doubt that the carrier's CMO and Chief of Engineers would be with them. "Set us a perimeter, Gil," he said levelly. "Pick your people, tell them the bare minimum they need to get the job done."

"Let's have Blue Raven prepped to fly with at least a half squad," Stone added. "And prep the carrier to maneuver, Colonel, though I have no idea where we'll be going. Mac's configuring a lab, and as soon as Harry's finished with Michiko, she'll be tackling DAC. Again."

"Ouch." Archer flinched visibly. "Then again, we got away with it before. She's had the practice, it should be easy now."

"If you want me," Petrov growled, "I'll be in the computer core. I'm going to rig the AI to transmit only baseline telemetry. Intelligence, the datastream, ain't going out." He gave Jarrat and Stone a glare of something like triumph. "And this is one job the XO can do, without a minder."

The meeting broke up without a word of dismissal. Every man and woman present was the consummate professional who did not need to be told what to do, and when. Jarrat and Stone found themselves in a half-dark, deserted ops room, where the cooling fans of many machines was the loudest sound. Stone was watching the CRTs, but how much of the streaming data he was absorbing, Jarrat did not know. He laid a hand on his partner's back.

"Hey. Second thoughts?"

"No." Stone turned toward him, caught him in both arms and hugged him briefly before fending him off. "I was just thinking about home. Down there." He nodded at the deck, and by extension, the planet far below. "If we get busted out of the service, it would have been nice to have a fortune to fall back on."

"We're more likely to get promoted." Jarrat turned away to the 'Chef and investigated the menu. "You hungry?"

"Starving," Stone told him. "I'm always hungry when I'm scared right out of my gourd."

"One thing I learned, first week aboard an Army carrier," Jarrat said as he punched for the goulash and noodles. "Fear is healthy. It keep you alive."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Leo Michiko was pale, cold and exhausted, but he was on his feet and sheer fury blazed in his eyes. He was also frightened. Stone saw the ghost of terror for just a moment before Michiko buried it. Harry Del was still deeply asleep when his patient pulled a chair up to a dormant workspace in the corner of the ops room, and took a plate of AutoChef food. At any other time Michiko would have scorned the food, but here, now, he gave Jarrat a mute nod of thanks and ate. Yvette McKinnen was at the adjacent workstation. The CRTs relayed data from her lab, where her processors were discreet, quarantined from the ship's mainframe. Stone had watched over her shoulder for some time and at last surrendered the attempt to follow what she was doing. Multicolored filaments wove themselves into a Gordian knot so complex, he wondered how the AI she had designed would unravel it.

The program was essentially the same AI she had sent into the archives of the Data Access Corporation during the Scorpio assignment. She had spent three hours nipping and tucking at it, tailoring it specifically for DAC Tokyo, and she seemed guardedly optimistic. The AI was almost ready to go now, she was triple-checking every parameter and attribute against the tight-squeeze entry and exit points in the DAC mainframes. Their hardware was located a hundred meters under downtown Tokyo, but Stone could have guessed that the entry point for the AI would be Itzhak Loyola.

The program had to enter the data conduit from a point outside the home system, and he watched McKinnen remove the current, genuine data tags, and replace them with fictitious tags which identified the search/retrieval application as originating on Sheckley. Node One on the deep space data conduit was much more than a beacon and comm relay station. Like every node in the data chain, it was a monstrous mainframe inhabited, controlled, by a 'daughter' or 'avatar' of the DAC Tokyo parent AI. Comm packages were received into the data conduit and stored until they had been accessed and downloaded by ships en route, because comm access was usually impossible from within the hyper envelope.

The dual nature of data in the conduit, both static and dynamic, made McKinnen's work possible. Comm packets were identified by their tags, and unless a security AI actually tracked the incoming search/retrieval application out of the homeworlds and tried to match it with the transmission logs from nodes further out, the incursion was safe.

"I can hack my way into Nodes 2 and 3," McKinnen was saying, hands

still flying over the keypad, “which gives us a hedge. I can’t get further than 3 because of the comm lag. Remember, this work is done in realtime or close to it. Node 4 incurs a lag of more than three hours, and I’d be noticed. It’s suicide. Understand?”

“Perfectly. I waded ankle-deep in this stuff with Tactical.” Stone was always impressed with McKinnen’s expertise. If she had not worked for NARC, she would have been dangerous. “In any case, it’s unusual for a homeworlds security AI to chase comm packages out into the data chain. You’d have to send up some serious red flags in DAC Tokyo.”

“And we won’t be doing that.” McKinnen sat back and reached for the coffee she had set down minutes before. “It’s all a question of handshaking and good manners. Think of the AI in the Tokyo mainframe as a green-eyed, jealous, bad tempered goddess with six arms, and six scimitars ... but she’s well fed, content and drowsy. The trick is to tiptoe in, leave a sweet offering, bow nicely, and tiptoe on our way. The deity lifts an eyelid, takes a sniff at the offering, accepts the obeisance, and goes back to sleep. Then we’re in, and so long as we don’t raise a riot, we’ll get what we want. Not making a ruckus is all about knowing which demigods and temple guardians to propitiate.”

“Damn.” Jarrat was listening from the other side of the wide plot table, which was as dormant as most of the CRTs. “I’m glad we’re on the same team. DAC would say you know way too much.”

“Rubbish,” Michiko said, irritable because he was tired and sore. “Most of the major AIs are designed along the same lines. Know one, you know them all, and then you just need to know what access codes and protocols *propitiate* them. They respond to human contact as if they’re alive, but the act is a simple interface to make humans feel more comfortable negotiating with a machine. Behind the ridiculous anthropomorphized mechanism is, in cyber terms, a labyrinth full of doors. Each door has a lock, each lock has a key. Know the keys, and you’d have to be clumsy to trip the security system.”

“My point being,” Jarrat said sharply, “she knows the bloody keys.”

McKinnen actually chuckled. “I do.” She glanced sidelong at Michiko from beneath half-lowered lids. “And no, you may not ask how.” She sat back and ran a final cross-check on the last segment of the routine. “Done. Now, *Mister* Michiko, it’s up to you. It’s safe to say you’ve got someone, somewhere very frightened. Fortunately, they think you’re dead, and we’ll keep it that way. You must have suspicions. Tell me what we’re looking for, and I’ll send our agent into DAC.”

For some moments Michiko was silent. His lips compressed and he glared at the plate of rice and pork, as if the future could be divined from the fall of the bean sprouts. “Come on,” Jarrat cajoled. “We know there’s a whole lot more you’ve been keeping back. You didn’t tell Gene the whole story.”

“Why would I?” Michiko demanded. “You think I wouldn’t keep back a little leverage? You thought I’d trust you not to itemize me, once I’d outlived my usefulness?”

“Now, would we do that?” Jarrat asked fatuously.

"Yes, we bloody would," Cantrell said from the other side of the ops room, where he was monitoring the shuttle bay. "Not that you or I would betray a trust, but you've seen Gaunt and the rest. The higher up the brass, the less you can trust them."

"Private agendas," Stone said disgustedly. "They have their own interests to look out for."

"As have we all," Michiko added, and fixed McKinnen with a hawkish look. "You are aware, I trust, there is a line where syndicate merges into government."

"Equinox," Jarrat said promptly. "The company *was* the government on one side, and the syndicate on the other."

"Scorpio," Stone added. "The syndicate wasn't quite government, but Pete Denehy had old Senator Brand on a chain."

"White Lightning," Cantrell was looking at Michiko. "The bastard at the syndicate helm was in public office. Not quite a pivotal member of congress, but I expect he had aspirations before he ended his life in a large explosion. Syndicate often weaves itself into government. We see it all the time, Leo. It's what makes some of the syndicate moguls so hard to nail. For every one like Hal Mavvik, who came up from muck of citybottom, there's another like Randolph Dorne ... or Leo Michiko ... who drifted into the syndicate from college or corporate industry."

"Give me a name," McKinnen challenged. "Come on, Leo, I've seen the dossier you gave Cantrell. I spent an hour sifting through it for names, dates, places. It's ninety percent Scorpio stuff, a mishmash of how the Aphelion diaspora fled and where they landed, what syndicates they bought into. We've already busted White Lightning and Equinox, and I dare say we'll be going after Basilisk in the very near future. I was looking at the datafeed when Gene called. NARC asked me to clean it up, it came in distorted by the breakdown in Node 224." She sat back, frowning deeply at Michiko. "Your Aphelion refugees in the colonies are being systematically accounted for, as one politically connected syndicate after another goes down. With your help, we'll get the last survivors, but —"

"But that information is of limited value," Michiko said grimly. "I was aware of this, Doctor, when I availed myself of Colonel Janssen's amnesty. And you're right, I've held back enough to safeguard myself." He looked across at Cantrell. "Forgive me if I was not overcome with trust."

"I knew there was more," Cantrell said with wry humor. "So?"

"So ... now is the time." Michiko pushed away the remains of his meal and stood. He was stretching his back, working his shoulders as he said, "Matthias Orlick." The name seemed to scorch his tongue. "Like many of the key Aphelion players I knew many years ago, he'll be seventy years old. The youngest of them will be sixty, the eldest, more than eighty. Some of them have been gene-tweaked, like myself, and we don't show our years. Some are like Captain Cantrell here, the 'naturals' whom gray hair seems to suit, and who don't seem to mind the wrinkles and jowls." His nostrils flared in a sniff

of disdain. "Each to his own, of course, but — take nothing and no one at face value, Doctor. I'm not the only one who had the ability, and the reason, to change my name when I changed my planetary allegiance. And I know for certain that individuals like Matt Orlick came dribbling home to Earth and Mars when the smoke cleared and they knew they were safe."

She was adjusting data input. "Is Orlick the only name?"

"Ann Marie Farinelli." Michiko's eyes were closed. "She'll be genetically altered, and don't expect the name to be the same today as it was a quarter century ago. She'd already been tweaked when I knew her. She must have been sixty, and you'd have taken her for a very beautiful thirty. She'll be in her eighties now, but indulging in preconceived notions can get us all killed."

"Farinelli," McKinnen echoed. "And?"

"Lorenzo Quade," Michiko said baldly. "He was wealthy beyond the wildest dream of avarice. His business was terraforming, but he covered his losses with syndicate dollars. It was common in those days ... not so common now, but some, like Denehy, have pulled off the trick. Quade was one of those who contrived to be elsewhere when the Aphelion bust ripped like a tsunami through cities like Sequoia and Amaterasu. I don't know where he went, but you *know* he's back. He's in asteroid mining, merchant *astra* insurance underwriting, long-haul freight logistics. In this system, this is where the big money is, and you know the wise old saying."

"Follow the money," Jarrat said with quiet conviction.

"Lorenzo Quade," McKinnen repeated as she adjusted the input.

"And that," Michiko said levelly, "is enough for now. There's more ... but again, you'll have to forgive me if I keep at least one ace tucked away."

"It's enough," McKinnen judged, "especially when we have other factors to cross-reference against these names, Orlick, Farinelli, Quade, and the age group, and the money trail." She looked from Stone to Jarrat and back. "The special agents masquerading as the pilots, Briggs and Edelman, got a micro-pulse transmission out before they were eliminated. You must have wondered where it went."

"Oh, we wondered," Stone admitted, "but speaking personally, I don't have the clearance to get into the homeworlds comm logs. You do?"

"Me? No." McKinnen nodded at the CRT, where the AI she had designed was displayed as cataracts of naked code. "But where *this* baby is going, she'll be able to tap into the logs. Once you've burned the right incense, lit the right candles to propitiate the godlings and the temple guardians, the veil is lifted on the inner sanctum and the books of shadows are laid open."

Michiko made sound like a snort of sheer scorn. Stone chuckled. "Don't mock it, old son. She's the best there is."

"She romanticizes it," Michiko accused.

"Give me a reason not to," McKinnen challenged frostily. "And I'm done here. Squirt this into the data conduit outside Itzhak Loyola, and we're in business. I even remembered to cut the signal strength to account for transit

degradation, and introduce a mild warble to make it look like this packet came in from way on the other side of Node 224.”

Jarrat had come around the long plot table, and stood with his shoulder against Stone’s, perhaps needing the small physical contact. “Launch the Blue Raven gunship ... we could call it a test flight. Budweisser’s own records show he’s been working on it since we left Darwin’s.”

“You must be psychic,” Stone said dryly. He touched the comm. “Blue Raven go to flight standby. Pilot Reynolds, Pilot Lang, prep to launch.”

“Copy that,” Gable said from hangar control, where he was wrangling air traffic. “There’s a cab inbound at this time, making its way over from the civilian ferry platform. Doc Reardon just called, he’ll be aboard in five.”

“Have him come directly to the ops room.” Jarrat was looking at his chrono. “How long, Mac, before we can expect results?”

She had anticipated the question. “Give the gunship something like four hours to slingshot out to Node One. After that, our probe will be in the system in minutes. It won’t take long to get a result, the moment she’s actually made it inside the DAC mainbrain. A lot less than an hour. If it takes longer, we’ll know we blew it.”

“What’s this ‘we’ about?” Cantrell demanded.

“Okay, so it’d be me who blew it,” McKinnen allowed. “I’ve configured the data return to transmit to Node 4, but I can pluck it out of the conduit at Itzhak Loyola, and cover my tracks. Erase the download log.”

“Interfering with the data conduit is completely illegal.” Cantrell was caught between outrage and amusement. “We’re bending a dozen laws simultaneously.”

“Bending the law isn’t the problem.” Jarrat gave McKinnen a conspiratorial glance. “Getting caught is. Give us another option, Gene, and we’ll be glad to take it.”

“Get us clearance to run these names through DAC,” Stone added, “without letting Michiko’s old friends know.”

“They’re no friends of mine,” Michiko spat.

“Figure of speech.” Stone was looking at Cantrell. “Older and wiser heads, Gene. You’ve been in this game longer than any of us.”

“Long enough to know a backdoor, if there is one,” Jarrat prompted.

“There isn’t.” Cantrell gestured at Michiko. “The second we start rummaging in DAC, we’re on assignment. In the homeworlds.”

Stone cleared his throat deliberately. “There’s nothing concrete written into the NARC charter to forbid us to operate here.”

“Except we’d never get official sanction.” Cantrell was frowning at Michiko. “God knows how high the rot goes, but with Gaunt and Dyson and Steinberg around that conference table, there isn’t a lot of headroom left.”

Silence was thick and heavy, until Yvette McKinnen popped three datacubes out of the machine and dropped them into her shirt pocket. “I’m with Blue Raven. We’re running dark, I imagine?”

“Transmit *nothing*,” Jarrat affirmed.

"Then, I'll see you in eight, maybe ten hours." McKinnen hesitated. "Wish me luck."

"Break a leg," Stone told her.

The Blue Raven launch doors were open and Gable was announcing gunship away, when Kip Reardon appeared. Confusion had supplanted his annoyance at being recalled from the first furlough he had enjoyed in the homeworlds in years. He dumped his baggage just inside the ops room, and fixed Jarrat, Stone and Cantrell with a hard look.

"This had better be good ... and from the grim looks I'm getting, I'm afraid it is." His brows arched. "Someone give me a coffee, and break the bad news. Gently, mind you."

"Gene?" Stone went to the 'Chef himself. "Take a seat, Kip. It's a long story."

Reardon's dark brown eyes narrowed. "Blue Raven's in the air? In the homeworlds? That's — unorthodox. Isn't it?"

"Very." Cantrell beckoned Reardon to his workspace. "How was Mars?"

"I didn't get any further than the transit lounge at Hera Flight," Reardon said ruefully. "There's more green on the sunward slopes. They tell me, oxygen levels are up by just under two percent in the lowlands. I caught a couple of hours of GlobalNet. Nothing to do but watch screens, after I was done talking to my brother, you understand. The only thing they're interested in talking about is the Sorenson bill. The bugger's out on the campaign trail, his face is everywhere, and wherever he goes, it's a bloody riot. Tac's being run ragged — and not by the Angelpack! It's the ordinary public, Joe and Jo Citizen, trying to make themselves heard."

Jarrat was surprised. "Even back here, in the homeworlds? We'd thought the public in these parts would be solidly behind Sorenson."

"Depends on who you talk to," Reardon admitted. "The higher up the ladder you climb, the more cruel stupidity you hear. Down at street level, and deeper in citybottom, people are the same everywhere. It's big city Chryse and Olympia that are behind Sorenson. Folks in Marsport and the outdistricts are more worried about the future of their kids. Me? I'm from a flyspeck on the map called Lassiter, and I haven't been back in years, so I don't know much more about the Sorenson crap than you do." He took a mug from Stone, parked himself in the nearest chair, and gave Cantrell a curious look. "Regale me."

"So there's trouble on the street, at least on Mars," Stone mused. "There's hope for us yet. NARC might not be as unwelcome here as we thought."

"Like Kip said, it would depend on who you talk to." Jarrat gestured at the comm. "I just told a pack of barefaced lies to the ATC. We're launching a gunship to give its engines a long-range, high-energy test. She's slinging out to Titan and back at every velocity on the scale, home in nine or ten hours."

"ATC bought the story?" Stone wondered.

"They've no reason to be suspicious," Jarrat reasoned, "and since Blue

Raven's not on assignment, she's not a paramilitary flight, just one more ship in space."

"They think." Stone fetched a tall glass from the water cooler, drank half and passed the rest to Jarrat. "Ten hours."

"According to Gene's roster, we have six off, starting ten minutes from now." Jarrat tapped his chrono. "You want to grab some sleep before it all starts?"

"I want to grab *something*," Stone allowed. He cast a glance at Jarrat's legs and sighed. "Sleep would be useful."

Sixteen hours before, they had woken in a bedroom in a mansion in Spain. Stone was still trying to put the few hours they had spent on Earth into perspective when Reardon and Cantrell stirred. Cantrell returned to the task he had assigned himself, monitoring general Carrier Operations in Petrov's absence, and Reardon joined Jarrat and Stone. Silent, thunder-faced, Leo Michiko was nursing a glass of green tea by the CRT which displayed the GlobalNet feed, and as Reardon saw him there, he gave a low whistle.

"You're looking at the luckiest guy alive."

"I thought I was luckiest," Jarrat said acidly. "I got a closeup look at the asphalt in an alley in Chell, and after that, if some guardian angel wasn't looking out for me —"

"I could say the same." Stone gestured vaguely over his shoulder, more into the past than toward Rethan. "I took a lungful of Angel."

"And Michiko," Reardon added, "was darted with something very like the crap that killed a couple of young Starfleet courier pilots, at Aurora. He was minutes from dead, same as you two, and you know the common denominator?"

"Harry Del." Jarrat was frowning at Michiko. "Gene gave you enough?"

"Sure." Reardon hesitated. "Look, I don't know that it means anything, but I spent over two hours online with my brother while I was killing time at Hera Flight. I didn't have the numbers to start putting two and two together at the time, but ... Paul works in Tactical, in Marsport and Chryse. He's in research, which is what they call old-fashioned pavement-pounding back here."

"Roadwork," Stone groaned. "You're on the street, asking questions, making observations, collecting bits of *stuff* that might turn out to be evidence when the lab's done with them. Back to base, collate, record, cross-reference, search the archives for supporting and corroborative evidence and testimony ... the thrill of it all could kill you. But whenever we tap the Tactical database, this is where the data came from." He cocked his head at Reardon. "What's your brother say?"

"Not a lot," Reardon admitted, "but ... damn, it might be nothing."

"Let us decide." Jarrat shared a sharp glance with his partner. The quick clench of the gut, the prickle of the skin, might have been intuition. It bounced back and forth through the bond, troubling them both as Reardon hunted for words.

At length he shrugged and shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "I can only tell you what he told me, and it isn't much, now I come to think back on it. He was just talking about the way the Chryse underground is seething in the last twenty-four hours. They're up and moving, as if somebody lit a slow fire under them, but it's subtle movement. Only someone like Paul, with a lifetime's experience in the region, would notice. He knows the faces, drinks in the same bars as some of these characters. You and I wouldn't know it, but the Chryse underground is heaving, like it knows something the rest of us don't."

"Some of us do," Stone said quietly. "Leo Michiko's back in town. They might know him better as Inoshiro Carvoni, but any name you label him with, he has to be bad news for a lot of people who thought they were safe."

"Damn," Reardon whispered. "There's a security breach at Central?"

"Has to be." Jarrat was suddenly tired, right through to the bones. His fatigue passed clearly to Stone and echoed back through the bond. "McKinnen was speculating about a leech, a passive monitoring device like the one Equinox infiltrated into systems everywhere, including our own. Maybe Central is infected and we're actually piping our data directly to some syndicate."

"You don't believe that," Reardon hazarded.

"No." Stone yawned, as if he had picked up on Jarrat's fatigue and must share it. "Every Angel cartel we ever knew trades data, resources, crew. If there was a leech in the AI systems at Central, we'd never get a syndicate bust. Before the carrier arrived in whatever system, the syndicate would have dispersed in every direction and taken its money along for the ride."

The logic was sound enough to be persuasive. "We're going to grab a few hours' sleep, Kip," Jarrat said quietly. "Get the Infirmary online and ... standby. We don't know where this goes, but it could get bloody in a hurry."

"Is Harry still aboard?" Reardon wondered as they headed out of the ops room.

"Sleeping in your ICU," Stone told him. "Try not to wake him. He's done one hell of a job — again — and he missed his clipper connection for home to do it."

He was a pace behind Jarrat until they stepped into the adjoining cabins, and then he stopped in the doorway while Jarrat went on, heeled off his boots and hit the mattress. "We're supposed to be two hundred meters in the air over the coast, north of Barcelona."

"Best laid plans," Jarrat said pragmatically. "Get over here."

"That sounded like an order."

"Does it have to be?" Jarrat's eyes were closed, but he turned his head toward the soft sound of the door closing, before the bed dipped beside him. He shuffled over to make space and found Stone's head on his chest. Stone let the shields drop and shared everything he perceived with a deep, resonant pleasure. Kevin smelt the last faint trace of Ice Blue, Stone's favorite cologne, bottled and exported from Mars. The tang of the cologne was fading, and

beneath it he also smelt the earthy scents of the young male animal himself.

Large hands wriggled under Jarrat. Stone molded them about his ass and clenched. "I can't give you ultralites and a white beach beside a green sea," he whispered. "The only thing I can give you right now is *this*." His lips feathered a kiss from Jarrat's temple to his mouth, and settled there.

"I wasn't asking for the vacation package," Jarrat said against his tongue, "but since you're offering ... and since there's a damned ugly assignment about to blow up in our faces ... give me a reason why not?" He could feel the hard, hot shaft through Stone's slacks, the race of his pulse and the rush of desire through the empathic link. They shared everything.

"Too much logic," Stone accused as he lifted the shirt from Jarrat's body and buried his face in the warm contours of his chest. "In fact —" He caught his breath as Jarrat's hands delved between them, unsnapped his belt and gave the slacks a vengeful tug. The thick, pale gold cock Jarrat knew so well sprang up with a will of its own, and Stone shuffled closer. "In fact, too much talking," he corrected, husky with healthy lust.

Moments later, Jarrat's mouth was too full to say anything at all, even if he could have wrapped his mind around the words. The cabin was quiet, and some time later the lights dimmed and the comm blinked pale blue, counting down to its wake-up call.

Curt Gable beat the machine by ten minutes. "Ops room," he said from the comm. "Central is messaging you, bosses. They want the whole Michiko story."

"Bump on the report," Stone said without opening his eyes. "Dead is dead, any way you carve it up. Harry put together a whole medical dossier. Has Reardon taken a look at it?"

"A couple of hours ago," Gable confirmed. "He signed off on it ... There's no mention of how the agents got aboard. You want to append a security report?"

"Nope," Jarrat said from beneath the sheet. "Let 'em think we're still guessing. Let them wonder if their agents are still hiding aboard somewhere."

"Someone might break comm silence," Stone added, "and we'll get useful data as they try to get a signal through to their people."

"Done," Gable yawned. "I'm off in twenty, boss. Petrov's coming back on. Cap Cantrell is taking some downtime, and the engineer just got in. He's mad enough to spit, but smart enough to know something just hit the fan. Where do you want him?"

Stone was awake now. He sat, stretched, rubbed his face with both hands and found his cheeks abrasive. He reached over Jarrat's shrouded shape and opened the top drawer beside the bunk. The razor buzzed in his palm as he said, "Have Bud do what he does best. Keep the gears oiled. We'll need to be ready to move fast, when the time comes. Speaking of which, do we have an operational descant unit?"

"Two," Gable reported. "Cronin's recalled enough of Blue and Gold to put two gunships in the air with forty percent strength in the jump crew, which should be more than enough. This isn't exactly Sheal or Kelso! And we," he added darkly, "don't exactly have authorization to deploy riot troops."

"Let us worry about that." Jarrat rolled over and threw off the sheet. He lay against the pillows, watching Stone shave, and when Stone was satisfied with his jaw, he caught the razor. "Any word from Blue Raven?"

A snort of wry humor issued from the comm. "Tan and Eve report 'all items on the agenda finalized,' by which I assume they mean Mac did her stuff and we're *not* about to be strung up by the gonads!"

"ETA?" Stone prompted.

"Just under three hours," Gable told him. "They're coming in fast. ATC buzzed us when the deepspace tracking net picked them up. I fed them the same story — we're testing the drive, and there's no other way to test it than redline it and see if she's good. They're happy. We just got our knuckles rapped for not giving the civvy ATC bureau advance warning, in triplicate, of the test."

"Bloody civilian red tape," Jarrat muttered as he swung his legs off the bed and made his way through into the bathroom.

"Good enough, Curt, thanks," Stone said to the comm. "Hold the fort down till Petrov shows, then get some sleep while you can."

"Will do," Gable said readily. "It's been a blast, getting a chance to wrangle the ops room at last. It'll be sweet when Petrov transfers out and you kick me up to this job! Speaking of which, the Russian is assembling a major data dump for Central back on Darwin's. Are we updating Colonel Dupre on the fly, or not? I was just wondering if there's any chance the dry rot might have spread out that far by now. If it has, anything we pipe to Dupre drops into Aphelion's lap twelve hours later."

The implications were horrific, and Jarrat and Stone shared a long, mute conference. Stone had the same misgivings, but in the absence of hard intel they had set the question on the back burner. "We honestly don't know, Curt," he said at length. "My own intuition would be to assemble the package but ... don't transmit just yet."

"We trust Dupre," Jarrat added, leaning out of the bathroom and speaking in the direction of the comm pickup, "but right now, I'm not sure I trust anything about the *system*. I'd send the dossier out to Darwin's physically, on a courier. The rub is, the whole show will probably be over before Dupre sees a word of it. It's an eight-day haul to Darwin's by courier." His skin prickled; Stone felt it clearly and also shivered. "This situation isn't going to run eight days."

Gable skipped a beat. "Hunch?" he asked then.

"Yeah," Jarrat admitted. "A hunch five K's wide. Stoney?"

"Ten K's," Stone corrected. "Leave Petrov to dot the I's and cross the T's. He's trying to keep his hands and face clean while we go wading in the muck, and I don't blame him. He's been working for this promotion for a long

time, Curt. He's due for it ... and if Kevin and I are going to find ourselves on the scrapheap before this is through, you have to know Petrov's praying he'll get the *Athena*."

"Christ," Gable said wryly. "Working under him as captain? There's too much pressure under the man's cork, Stoney ... and right on cue, he just walked in! I better mind my manners."

"You better had," Jarrat agreed, and thumbed off the comm before Petrov could get hold of them. "I want to take a look at a crew roster."

The same thought had been on Stone's mind. They ate a hasty meal as a disturbingly brief list of names scrolled through the CRT. Two gunships were operational; the Infirmary was online with minimal staff, the ops room could function around the clock on the roster Cantrell had designed, and Budweisser would have his own key staff aboard within the next four hours. Helen Archer had recalled just five of her people, including the standby carrier pilot and copilot, and a navtank specialist.

The skeleton crew was just enough to call the carrier operational — and to ensure classified data remained confidential. Stone was guardedly satisfied with the staff complement, especially since every individual aboard was a specialist in his or her field. There were no passengers, no apprentices, and many key people, like Gil Cronin, were doing two jobs. Cronin himself was monitoring both the carrier's tactical situation and armory. Joe Ramos was wrangling internal security and liaising between the hangar deck and the ops room.

"Trust them to get the job done," Jarrat said quietly as Stone continued to frown at the CRT long after he had read the crew manifest.

"I do." Stone turned to watch his partner dress, absently admiring the long limbs which were the product of an adolescence spent in lower gravity. "Hey." Jarrat looked over his shoulder, and the gray eyes warmed on Stone. "My cousin fell head over heels in lust," Stone told him.

"I noticed." Jarrat hung a fresh shirt over his shoulders and stood, hands on hips, looking Stone up and down. "I saw the family likeness."

"You didn't actually fancy him?" Stone demanded.

Jarrat gave him a look of reproach. "He's a *Stone*, which means he's just about as smart as he's beautiful, but he's a squab. They grow up slow in that part of the world. And spoiled."

"Yes, they do." Stone was still chuckling as he hunted for fresh clothes, and the comm buzzed. Petrov sounded barely rested. He was starting his shift short tempered with frustration, and Stone left Jarrat to handle him. The edge in Jarrat's voice sharpened, leaving Petrov little space for belligerence.

"I don't want to hear it, Mischa," he was saying tersely as Stone stepped into the bathroom. "Hold the data as long as you can think of a reason good enough to hang onto it, and then just *tell* Starfleet you're requisitioning a bloody courier, and they should keep their goddamn' noses out of NARC business. There's nothing, not word *one*, in the actual charter that crimps our jurisdiction in this system, much less castrates us."

Yet Starfleet's routine records would report a courier leaving the *Athena*, headed for Darwin's World, and though the bad apples in NARC Central would not know exactly what data was aboard, they could guess that it was something too delicate to be transmitted. The red flags would go up — but they already had. Kip Reardon's brother had not seen those flags, but he was keenly aware of citybottom's upheaval.

The Russian was granite-faced as they returned to the ops room. He probably felt his one chance of being promoted to carrier command slithering through his fingers, and Stone could sympathize. Petrov was wise enough to say nothing, but he was chain smoking again, and the lines about his eyes and mouth seemed to etch themselves more deeply while they waited for Blue Raven's return.

The gunship docked fifteen minutes early. The running crews transferred to maintenance, under Karl Budweisser's orders, while McKinnen, Lang and Reynolds came directly to the ops room. They had not slept, and the stress was smudged into their faces. Stone had rarely seen McKinnen without makeup. She was pale and freckled, with a strung-out look, and without being asked, Tanya Reynolds brought her coffee.

Like Eve Lang, Reynolds was tall and big-shouldered, with the hard-worked muscles that were the legacy of years in Military Airlift; and like many pilots, she wore blue contacts. The shock of red-blond hair was striking against her natural chocolate-cream skin. She and Lang were in Blue Raven flight fatigues, but McKinnen had changed into slacks and an oversized sweater that made her look curiously frail.

She took the mug with one hand and held out a palm full of datacubes with the other. Jarrat took them. "You okay, Mac? You look like hell."

The remark earned him a glare. "Thank you kindly. I haven't slept in thirty hours, I should look like a diva?"

"Sorry I mentioned it." Jarrat backed off. "I was going to ask if you wanted to talk to Kip or Harry."

McKinnen relented. "No, really, I'm just tired. Get Michiko in here, let me get through this briefing, and then I'm officially on downtime."

"He's on his way up," Stone told her. "So's Kip. He has a vested interest in all this weirdness, after the stories his brother told him."

"I'm too tired to care." McKinnen had slumped into a chair and was watching with dull eyes as Jarrat dropped the cubes into a slot.

Three CRTs came alive, and he and Stone watched a bewildering assortment of data begin to run. Petrov joined them, but Cantrell would run the package later. While McKinnen's swift collation was still taking shape Reardon and Michiko arrived together, and the CMO urged Michiko to sit.

"I'm quite all right," he protested.

"You were clinically and legally dead," Reardon argued, "so you're convalescing. Doctor's orders, so long as you don't mind an *Earther* treating you."

In fact, Michiko was already intent on the screens, and his eyes flicked

hawkishly to McKinnen. He was oblivious to the woman's pallor. "Results?"

She might have glared at him, but was too close to exhaustion. Her eyes were closed and she was rubbing her temples as she said, "You got your connection ... and it's Mars, not Earth. Your names ran. Farinelli, Ann Marie, got out of Sequoia City aboard the clipper *Cygnus-Koro*, she was in hyper before the carrier NARC-*Virago*, Captains Gene Cantrell and Dan Winters commanding, arrived in the Jupiter system. Farinelli vanished into the crowd on Kelso, but ten months later a marriage certificate was awarded in the name of Ann Marie Rousos, in a backwater mining town in the middle of nowhere. The maiden name was Farinelli ... the husband, Gareth Tyrone Rousos III, made a halfway decent living hiring mining equipment. He died mysteriously in a building fire four months after the wedding. Surprise.

"Tactical took a look at the wreckage and remains, but there wasn't much left to examine. Ann Marie Rousos cashed in the insurance, switched her name to Mary Ann on the travel permits for Avalon, and showed up again in Elysium, six months later. She bought a citybottom bar, revamped it, sexed it up, renamed it Bazaar Patois, brought in a bunch of Companions on the ragged edge of retirement ... and dealt everything from fizz to Buran under the counter. When you've snorted enough, by two in the a.m., I guess you can't tell what the Companions actually look like anymore. Or care.

"The bar turned into a successful sexshop downstairs, dance shop upstairs, boutique in the foyer. Mary Ann Rousos had a few run-ins with the City of Elysium, about taxation as you'd expect. At one point they wanted to tax the dope money, which was fair enough, since the crap was sold on the premises. But Mary Ann's in a fine fury, she sells up for a fortune, bugs out, and eight years ago she arrives back on Mars. Full circle. She started out as Anne Marie Farinelli, ostensibly with a junior partnership in an import, export business fronted by another of your names. Lorenzo Quade. No prizes will be awarded for guessing what they were importing and exporting. Currently, there's an individual named Mary Ann Rousos, age 84, with a mailing address in uptown Chryse, and a stock portfolio that's top-heavy with stock in Mount Quade Mines. The ticker is MQM, they're worth four hundred credits a share, and the 'Quade' element is your original Lorenzo. Rousos was able to shift documentation eight times, through five colonies, until the paper trail ran out. The fact is, the records are all in DAC Tokyo, but they're in terminal storage, filed under such disparate data tags, the system itself never did, nor *would*, make the connection between Rousos and Farinelli.

"As for Lorenzo Quade, he's 69 years old now, and he's tweaked." Her eyes opened to slits and she regarded Michiko as if he were a tedious insect. "He looks of an age with young Leo, here ... and why not? Your man got out of Marsport about five minutes ahead of the squad from the NARC-*Virago*, flying his own private hyper transport, and he shows up on a dozen worlds, always running a few days ahead of the arrest warrant, which was obviously delayed by comm lag. Outrunning the warrant, and the consequent freezing of his colonial assets, he was able to liquidate the majority of his holdings. He

kept right on running till he'd put himself effectively beyond the frontier, in a proto-colony that wasn't about to extradite when they were receiving hand-some bribes.

"From there, he steadfastly maintained his complete innocence of any connection with Aphelion, and he pumped a great deal of money into his defense. The best lawyers in London and Shanghai built a case that was good enough. Anne Marie Farinelli was nailed as one of the major culprits within MQM. Five individuals were using the corporate infrastructure to move vast quantities of Angel around the homeworlds. Gene cornered three of them in the Jupiter system before they could make it out, plus four others from different tentacles of the kraken. Quade's case was that his business was being used, and he had no knowledge of it.

"It took him fourteen years to prove his argument. Eventually his assets on Mars were unfrozen, he was free to come home, and he did. Eleven years ago, he moved back into his mansion in the highlands above Chryse. Three years later, Anne Marie Farinelli comes sneaking back home as Mary Ann Rousos. She plunged her money into MQM stock and suddenly she's richer than she's ever been. Farinelli is still officially listed as 'missing,' but Rousos is a well known figure in Marsport. Quite the celebrity, in fact. Engaged to be married to a man twelve years her junior, by the name of Marcel Oliver.

"Turns out, Oliver's portfolio is also top-heavy with MQM stock, but on the face of it he looks completely legitimate. He's the owner-manager of an AI design shop in Olympia, something called QuantumCyber Systems. Their brochure says they're working to develop a true biocyber intelligence to pilot deepspace exploration vessels and terraformer fleets. QCS has a test lab in the Jupiter system ... in Sequoia. Now, Marcel Oliver appeared out of nowhere almost twelve years ago. He arrives in the homeworlds with big ideas and a degree from Winslow-Mao which, as a colonial diploma, isn't worth the parchment it's printed on. But he sails into talks with Lorenzo Quade, and before you know it, he's employing fifty, on an eight-figure budget. Looks good on the surface. Tax audits are fine, no criminal activity, not even a parking ticket since he arrived in the homeworlds. But here's the rub: Winslow-Mao never heard of anybody named Marcel Oliver. He entered the homeworlds aboard the *Cygnus-Pacific*, with kosher papers, valid visas, issued on Rethan. There's only one problem ... and you have to dig through four layers of terminally-stored colonial dross, so deep in the DAC mainframe, I don't think they've ever been accessed before, and why should they be? ... somebody called Marcel Jonathan Oliver died in an air crash, in Eldorado, six weeks before a man with the same name booked one-way tickets on the *Pacifica*, Rethan to Mars. If the original Oliver had lived, he would have been exactly the same age as *our* Marcel Oliver, who is currently the owner of QuantumCyber Systems ... engaged to be married to Mary Ann Rousos.

"Meanwhile, Leo's man, Matthias Orlick, vanished utterly in Sequoia the night of the raid. Neither NARC nor Sequoia Tactical ever found him. He didn't show up in any colony. He's never been recognized in the homeworlds.

He just vanished, and for some time we've assumed he was actually killed in the NARC action. There were, admittedly, a considerable number of casualties, and six bodies were damaged beyond identification." She looked up at Cantrell; he nodded. "One of the bodies has always been assumed to be Matt Orlick, but who could be sure? There were no previous genetic samples to check remains against. Now ... no way in hell can I prove that our Marcel Oliver and Matt Orlick are the same man, but I can tell you two things with absolute certainty.

"One. Orlick and Farinelli, whom I can *prove* became Rousos, shared an apartment in Chryse. Their names appeared on the title, it's a matter of record. Orlick and Farinelli were living together twenty-five years ago, and currently, Oliver and Rousos are engaged.

"Two. The microburst transmission we tracked leaving the *Athena*, right after Michiko was darted and ostensibly killed, was bounced from one comm relay to another, over and over, until it found its way to Chryse. To the office AI at QuantumCyber Systems, to be exact.

"I'd expected *something* like this, so I'd primed my clever little probe to dig deeper, at right angles. It took a look into the recent tax audits filed by QCS, and we hit paydirt. Contributions made to charitable or political bodies are tax deductible here, as they are almost everywhere. Marcel Oliver has been making large donations in support of Senator Bram Sorenson. My probe traced the money to Sorenson's account, and while it was there, it took a look at who else was bumping money Sorenson's way. Turns out, he also gets large figures from — surprise — Lorenzo Quade. The difficulty from our perspective is, there's absolutely nothing illegal in supporting a political body, and if both Oliver and Quade believe Sorenson has the right idea, they're naturally going to fund him. Together, they can put a cruel, violent end, but an end nonetheless, to the Angel war ... and they can get rid of NARC right along with it.

"The question of *why* yesteryear's syndicate moguls should want to end the Angel trade is moot, but I'm certain there's a sound reason, because —" She was husky with talking, and took a deep breath. "I wouldn't go into court with anything I'm about to say, but consider this: Senator Bram Sorenson and Senator Charles Steinberg are both invested in MQM, are both from Chryse, both attended University of Mars, Olympia, were both on the same debating team at UMO, and are both touting the same ludicrous bill which on the surface seems to be aimed at a fast, bloody end to the Angel war, but which could actually spell the end for NARC itself, if it were stage-managed correctly. You'd be tempted to conclude the whole party of public faces and private benefactors want to be rid of NARC. And Senator Steinberg," she finished, "was in that conference room when Leo Michiko was shown to be alive and kicking."

There, she fell silent. Lang handed her a beaker from the water cooler, and Stone shared a long, dark look with Jarrat. Michiko could identify them all. He knew exactly where they had been placed in Apherion. Quade had

been exonerated, Farinelli and Orlick made their way back with new names, and their businesses were now legitimate.

Could that be it? Stone wondered. He was frowning at Michiko, and had the odd feeling Michiko knew what he was about to say. In fact it was Jarrat who said, "Legitimization? Is it that simple?"

All eyes were on Michiko now, and rather than squirming, the man basked. "There's no reason it should be any more complex. In our own way, people like Pete Denehy, Lorenzo Quade, Matt Orlick and myself are visionaries. When we're young, we catch a glimpse of how the future might be, if it were crafted, sculpted, molded. It's undeniable that what you people call 'dirty money' is necessary to plug the leaks and buttress the weaknesses of a fledgling industrial empire. It's a necessary evil. A fact we live with."

"Until you get caught," McKinnen rasped. Reynolds handed her another beaker of water and she drank it to the bottom.

"*Unless* we get caught," Michiko corrected. "Some of us don't. You almost missed Denehy. You were damned lucky to get me. You never did get Quade and Orlick." He looked up, eyes glittering, at Jarrat and Stone. "Be extremely careful what you do with Doctor McKinnen's information. This dossier is titillating, compelling, but it's mostly a pastiche of coincidence, correspondence and intuition. You're short on hard evidence, and she knows it. You can cause considerable grief for QCS, with an accusation that they received the microburst transmission issued right here on the carrier. The downside is, they have only to claim, and prove, that a third party was merely using their groundstation receivers without company sanction, and even a poor defense lawyer would slice you up for sushi. You must believe they're ready to prove this. If they were fools, they would have fallen into NARC or Tactical hands decades ago.

"The only thing you can derive from this dossier now, today, is an arrest warrant for Farinelli, and strike a deal, have her sell out Orlick and Quade to safeguard her liberty." His head shook slowly. "They think I'm dead. They're sure their agents killed me ... aboard a NARC carrier. Farinelli knows that they could reach her anywhere. There's no safe place to hide. Betray them, and she won't live a week." His brows rose, and he nodded at the CRT, where vids, images and records had been scrolling while McKinnen spoke. "You saw the pictures of her. She has no intentions of growing old anytime soon, much less giving up her life. She won't deal with you. She'll take her chances in confinement, use her contacts to live the good life in minimum security, with four-star restaurant food, uptown Companions and VR escapism. In twenty years she's out again, gene tweaked, young and beautiful — and people like Orlick and Quade owe her, big time. She'll live big, free as a bird, for as long as the therapies can hold her together."

"And if we issue a warrant," Jarrat said tartly, "we'll tip off Orlick and Quade to the fact we're one step behind them. They'll vanish again, before we can lay a hand on them."

"Back to square one," Stone agreed. "But if Paul Reardon is right, they

already suspect there's going to be a shindig. The Chryse underground is up and moving,"

"Up and moving," Michiko said impatiently, "means they're scurrying about like army ants, erasing data, closing down cutting labs, stockpiling *product* for the drought to come, recruiting expendable young idiots who'll take their chances to carry and sell the garbage, and count the money, while NARC is insystem. Meanwhile, the big boys, the ones you actually want, have gone to ground, wiped out the data trail, and they're sitting there with smiling faces and a shine on their haloes." He leaned forward, nailing Jarrat and Stone with a hard look. "You asked a moment ago if legitimization could be the reason people like Quade and Orlick — and for all I know, Steinberg as well — want to see NARC relegated to the history books." He gestured sharply in the rough direction of Mars. "The activity you're seeing right now in the Chryse underground is about legitimization. Fifty or a hundred men and women are truncating their organization, terminating office AIs, physically destroying mainframes ... and ask Doctor Reardon's brother about the number of dead bodies that have begun to show up in dumpsters, most of them missing their heads and hands."

"Sweet Christ," Eve Lang said softly. "He's right, isn't he?"

"Of course he is," Jarrat agreed, "don't let him rattle you. Every job turns sour sooner or later, this one's just different, it's going pear-shaped faster because Charles bloody Steinberg is *connected* to NARC on one side and Aphelion on the other. And as soon as we have the proof ..." He lifted a brow at Stone. "Let him run?"

"Let him run," Stone agreed, "as far and as fast as he can. If we give him enough rope, he'll lasso all of them for us — and maybe Bram Sorenson as well." He glanced at his chrono and massaged his scalp with all ten fingertips. "We're in the wrong place, people. We need to be parked over Mars."

The remark earned a general groan, and Reardon asked quietly, "And what's the game plan, supposing we can get clearance to put her in Mars orbit? None of us knows the Chryse underground."

"One of us does." Stone nodded at Michiko. "A nasty little kid called Inoshiro Carvoni knew everything about everything in Chryse citybottom."

A warning look replaced Michiko's self-satisfied expression. "It's a long time ago. Citybottom is dynamic, always in flux. What I knew then might not be worth much today."

"But it gives us a place to start," Stone argued. "The geography doesn't change any more than the senior puppet masters behind the scenes. We need to get in and get the contacts. We've done it a hundred times before. What makes this different is the need to do it bloody-damned fast."

"Paul." Reardon took a deep breath. "It's Paul you want to be talking to." he licked his lips and regarded Jarrat and Stone soberly. "He's only in research, you understand, he's not a high-flyer like you buggers. But I'd swear he can get you an in. Just — don't get him involved, if you can help it."

"Involved?" Jarrat echoed.

"Don't get him killed," Stone guessed.

Reardon nodded. "He's the only brother I have, and I like his partner, and his partner's kids from some rubbish marriage that went haywire. They're good guys, both of them, and great kids, who don't deserve to pay a price in grief because of a bunch of patented bastards."

"Hey, Kip, this is us," Jarrat began.

"I know," Reardon muttered, "that's what worries me." Then he shrugged off the misgivings and glared at Michiko, though he spoke to Jarrat and Stone. "Just figure out how the hell we're going to get parked in Mars orbit."

"Easy," Stone told him, "and bulletproof. They actually want us there."

"They what?" Eve Lang demanded.

"Harry Del's going to kill us," Jarrat rubbed his face with both hands. "Some moron at the training facility in Marsport had the gall to ask when they could expect us there. Janine Cruz and Scott Auel are probably waiting for us right now. They might be expecting us to put Harry on the Mars ferry, but I'm sure Mac or Bud can figure out a reason to send the carrier ... maybe she needs her drive ignition sequencers realigned by Arago specialists."

"She does," McKinnen said sourly. "Budweisser is about to discover the Auriga unit is running like the proverbial woolly goat. Or," she added with an exhausted smile, "it will be when he's finished abusing it."

Stone was already aware of the faint tension in his belly which always presaged an assignment. "Turns out, we got our knuckles rapped for test flying Blue Raven without giving the civvy ATC bureau advance notice. So this time they're going to get their triplicate notification with a few hours to spare. I'll inform NARC Central, and the dock here, plus Earth ACT, Mars ATC, Olympia Tactical Command and Arago Technologies that we're coming over, and why."

"And we'll just let Senator Steinberg assure his friends in low places that they have nothing to fret about." Jarrat was moving. "All right, people, let's get busy. Inform the downside crew, Mischa. I'll brief Bud and Archer. We've been prepped to maneuver for some time. Mac, get some rest before you fall on your face."

"Kip, get Michiko out of here," Stone went on, "and have Harry come up to the ops room. I'll brief him, and smooth his feathers. He's going to be mad enough to crochet my entrails ... and he can do it. Kevin, make sure Bud and Archer have the staff they need aboard, and if they haven't —"

"Have Gable run pickup duty," Jarrat finished, "we're on the same page. Three hours till we shove off?"

"Four," Stone judged. "And, Kip?" The surgeon was leaving, with Michiko. "Call your brother, Stone said quietly. "Set up a meeting. Nothing formal, just tell him you want to do dinner or something, and introduce him to some of the folks you work with. Pick a restaurant you like, maybe. The tab's on us."

"Sure," Reardon agreed slowly. "He's not dumb, Stoney. He's going to second guess what goes on. As soon as Olympia Tac knows the *Athena* is

coming over, he'll get the memo. It's his job. And he'll start adding twos."

"I hope he does." Stone summoned a smile. "Don't tell him a syllable via open comm, just let him work it out for himself. And we can also use your input, Michiko."

"Really?" Michiko gave him a withering look. "You want a tour map of Chryse and Marsport citybottom, and a bullet-pointed blueprint of the underground in both."

"You're psychic," Jarrat said darkly. "Just do it, Michiko. Earn yourself some credit. Make us trust you, the way you convinced Gene."

For a moment Michiko studied him, narrow eyed, and then he pulled his spine straight and nodded. "I'm alive only through the efforts of Captain Cantrell and Doctor Del, and Lorenzo Quade's group have made their position quite clear. Inoshiro Carvoni is back in town, his battered corpse was *not* pulled out of the rubble on Aurora, despite the GlobalNet obituaries. And Carvoni isn't welcome." He looked Jarrat and Stone up and down as if they were commodities at market. "For the moment, you people are the best chance I have at survival and prosperity." And then, "Gods help me," he added acidly, and stalked away ahead of Reardon.

"Gods help us all," Evelyn Lang muttered.

"If," Tanya Reynolds added, "you believe in 'em."

Stone had shared the same thought, and might have wished he did.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Harry Del was still furious when the *Athena's* lighter was being prepped to fly. The carrier had undocked without fuss, turned her nose outward and upward for Mars, and maneuvering engines as massive as those of any asteroid miner pushed her easily out of Earth's deep gravity well. Mars was a hundred-fifty million kilometers 'above' the mother world, and the thrum in the deck told Jarrat the engines were just above idling as they drove the big ship into the higher orbit. They would chase Mars for forty minutes, long enough for Stone to brief the healer, weather his anger and enlist his help — the term Harry used was *pressgang*, and he used it several times.

The Yamazake Apogee was silver-blue in the NARC livery, lightly armed and powerful, though it was far from a fighter like Vincent Morello's 104 Corsair. She was an executive courier, a fast, comfortable ride for up to six. Eve Lang and Tan Reynolds had flight checked it, and the engine cowls were still shimmering in their own heat haze as Jarrat slid into the pilot's seat.

In the back, Harry continued to grumble and Jarrat listened dutifully. It

was six months since Harry had ridden in this aircraft, and the experience had not been pleasant. That night, Eve Lang's home was hit by rogue elements of Death Head, just as Harry's own property had been targeted; and the shooter, Joel Assante, was killed in a scene engraved on Jarrat's brain in liquid fire.

For himself, he preferred not to remember. Deliberately, he pulled on a headset and cut into the carrier's oddly quiet loop. "Kip, we're ready to shove off and waiting for you." A few Blue Ravens were talking online, and Archer was negotiating with Arago Number 3 Dock, where a berth has been made available. Jarrat listened, and was about to call Reardon a second time when he appeared at the open inside armordoor.

A blue spinner began to strobe as he notified Control of their intention to leave, and Lang leaned down into the cab. She gave Jarrat a sober look, and offered her hand. "You watch out for yourselves. Trust nothing. If citybottom in these cities is anything like Chell, it'll be an ugly, nasty ride."

"Can't be any worse than Elysium and Thule," Jarrat argued, but he clasped her wrist. "Thanks. And you're on standby. *Git*." He watched her jog away, joining the bigger, darker Reynolds at the armordoors, while Kip Reardon hurried to drop his bag into the footwell and took the seat beside Harry.

For the third time, as the gullwing canopy whined down and locked, Stone was telling Harry that playing R&D's games was not part of anyone's agenda. The healer still grumbled, but Jarrat stopped listening as he said, "Hangar Control, this is NARC 101. Purge the bay and we're out of here."

Gable was wrangling data. "Copy that. Standby to blow down. Blue Raven is on launch alert, ops room is monitoring you. Good luck, boss."

With a few bars left on the gauges, the hangar doors growled open in the black steel decking and Jarrat shunted power to the repulsion. The Apogee bobbed up like a feather in the breeze, and dropped out into the weird red light of a planet Jarrat had heard so much about, but had never seen.

The Arago docks were in a polar orbit, well away from the civil air traffic lanes. The Apogee dropped in over Chasma Boreale, the drift ice base from which the continuous terraforming project was controlled, and Stone whistled. "You can see the difference, in eight years."

"I was impressed," Reardon agreed.

"With what?" Jarrat was angling east, toward the cities of Arcadia, and all he saw was a an ice sheet, snowcapped mountains in the south, with a hint of green in the lowlands, the vast sweeps of illuminated highways and the glittering lights of many cities.

"There's four, maybe five times more ice," Stone told him, "which means they're raising the levels of water vapor ... which means the atmosphere's getting denser, and plants are getting a better foothold." He chuckled at the look on Jarrat's face. The blue eyes sparkled with humor as Jarrat shot a glance at him. "I can see you're not impressed."

"They can terraform a whole world in twenty years." Jarrat took a

bearing on the monstrous comm arrays on the crown of Olympus, to his southeast. "They've been working on Mars for more than two centuries! I just picked up a steer-clear alert from Milankovic. What the hell is Milankovic?"

Reardon leaned forward between the front seats to see the instruments. "It's the quarantine hospital, infectious diseases crap, built into the bottom of the old crater ... steer *well* clear of the exclusion zone. They're not joking, we don't want to be there."

"I've read about their labs," Harry said quietly. "They design biological weapons. I assume you're aware of their work?"

"Oh, we're aware of it," Stone said over his shoulder. "It's not in our purview, Harry. It's Army, or Starfleet, or political ... military at any rate. NARC's not in the business of war."

"Thank whatever god you care to mention," Harry muttered.

The landscape was rusty red, reminding Jarrat of the iron oxide wastelands around Bundaberg, on Rethan, save that the sky was a pale shade of mauve-pink, through which the brightest stars showed even in daylight. One of those points of light was the Earth itself. He was picking up a commercial radio station out of Tharsis as he looped around the shoulder of Olympus to join the civil flight lanes and lost altitude.

Before the Apogee were the so-called 'shield cities' of Armstrong, Gagarin, O'Dell, named for the explorers. The Apollo Expressway connected them, and running north and south to the outlying towns and rural areas were roads and maglev tracks named for other programs. Gemini, Mercury, Soyuz, Salyut. History was all around, and even Jarrat grudgingly admitted to being impressed as he brought the Apogee in over the crater city of Sharonov and swung southeast toward Chryse and Marsport.

City lights glittered in a semi-twilight dusk. Mars was smaller, dimmer, dustier. The thin air was hazy, and beacons shafted like great blades through the pall. As the Apogee dropped low to the ground the air pressure outside the canopy was just under fifteen kilo-Pascals, and both Stone and Reardon shared their surprise. Jarrat waited, and Stone said, "The air outside is about the half the lowest density on Earth. It might not sound like much, but before humans got here, the density was close to complete vacuum."

Now, specifically engineered plants were growing on the sunward slopes, where the temperature was not much under freezing. Chryse's city fathers would have wished they could bring in the terraformers, but long before the technology was equal to the job, the permanent population of Mars was measured in the tens of millions.

North of Chryse, the great gorges of Mareotis and Tantalus glistened under their fine layer of armorglass, square kilometers of pressurized, heated, irrigated, humidity-controlled agriculture, where no insects or plant diseases interfered with the crops. It was the breadbasket of Mars, connected with the cities by maglev tracks which sparkled in the mauve dusk like diamond chains. Temperatures and pressures were still much too low to permit liquid water, but this time even Jarrat had heard about Aquarius, the AI-pilot hauler which

shunted water-ice bergs the size of asteroids in from the Oort Cloud.

The planet's water was stored deep underground, heated by the sun and constantly recycled. Its power streamed from fifteen Prometheus generators strung out between the poles, and the weak Martian gravity was adjusted by a network of Arago generators which followed the cities and highways.

"Home, sweet home," Kip Reardon said with a definite nostalgia as Jarrat took the Apogee over the dome of Chryse at four hundred meters and began to scan for his target. "I expect you're looking for Lassiter," Reardon said, amused. "If you're looking for a city, forget it. Think small."

"Town," Jarrat mused.

"Village," Reardon corrected. "See the Olympia Highway? Lassiter's about a hundred K's south of Chryse."

The highway bisected the city, swooping eastward from the mountain and then swinging south, toward the major cities of the prefectures of Hesperia and Hellas. The bulk of the Martian population lived on the great 'hairpin' between Arcadia, north of Olympus, and Hellas, southwest of Chryse, but most people were in the cities. By comparison, rural communities like Lassiter had a rustic charm.

The pressure skin spanned a single square kilometer, from the high ground in the east to the westerly planes. As Jarrat left behind the sparkling armorglass of Chryse, the Apogee's navdeck loaded the south and southwest region, and he zoomed on the village. According to the local info ghosting in the headup display, the population of Lassiter was 484 and the local industry was fruit growing. The semi-rigid pressure skin was clear enough for him to see through it, and he glimpsed several hectares of green fields.

"Berry fruits, cherries, kiwis, raspis, strawberries," Reardon told him. "It was a hell of a nice place to grow up, and I could retire back here."

"The locals aren't so dead against colonials, then," Stone guessed. "I didn't get out this far often. My work kept me in Chryse, Marsport, Olympia. The small communities didn't seem to draw Tac squads like flies."

"They still don't." Reardon leaned forward to see the instruments, now that Jarrat was on approach. "You want Gate 16 on the west side." The Apogee bobbed up, slid several hundred meters around Lassiter's perimeter, and Jarrat dropped into a hover in the scan zone beneath a wide sign reading 'Strawberry Fields.' Reardon only chuckled when Stone angled a look at him. "Hey, they grow dessert fruit here. You run a hardware store, you call it the 'Tool Shack.' You grow strawberries for a living —"

"You make your point." Stone shared the humor as the rudimentary AI in control of the gate picked them up and invited them into the 'locks.

The Apogee fit easily into a lockin-lockout chamber designed for heavy wagons. The 'lock cycled slowly, and the inner seals would not release before full air pressure showed on the gauges. Then the Apogee was inside, and now Jarrat was impressed. The sky was delicately patterned, like the shatter pattern of broke eggshells. Each miter-shaped segment was a single sheet of armorglass, three meters wide. They sealed magnetically, like the pieces of a

puzzle, building a complete structure which was locally rigid and at least marginally flexible at the global level; capable of withstanding different pressures and point impacts without failure.

Not that failure was unknown. Signs were posted right around the perimeter, reminding citizens and visitors to 'be prepared,' to always carry a rebreather and know where the shelters were. Such signs were absent in the big cities, where the AIs commanded fleets of drones, constantly working on the pressure skins, like ants shoring up the nest. Stone read Lassiter's signs with interest, and Reardon told him,

"Depressurization has never happened, but it could."

Stone shrugged off the concern. "I was thinking of old Vince Rinaldi's grandson — Vince is family by marriage, since he and cousin Rachel are together. The Rinaldi-Stones are a branch of the clan born out of necessity, Kip. Old Vincenzo's buried both his kids, and only the daughter left a child. The grandson was killed in a depressurization accident."

"On Mars?" Reardon was surprised.

"In the Jupiter system," Stone said thoughtfully, "if it makes a difference."

"It might. Their safety standards are notorious. Turn right here and look for Heyson Lane on your left." Leaning between Jarrat and Stone, Reardon pointed past the groundstation receivers.

Lassiter's interior was divided into quadrants, with each section closed off by a transparent membrane. The pressure skin was forty meters above, and the air temperature was an even 25 C. The predominant feature was *green*, trees, shrubs, plants of every productive kind. Those which were not heavy with fruit were dazzling with flowers. Several hundred low-profile buildings were ranged around the perimeter, clustering closer to the 'lock gates, but most of Lassiter was a patchwork of fields, orchards, where the trees were short, thick, gnarled and fruit laden.

"They're engineered," Stone was saying, shifting his long legs for comfort as Jarrat cruised on. "Everything here would have been called artificial a couple of centuries ago, but the fifth generation's growing up here now, and it's all they ever knew. The Arago beds are ten or fifteen meters underground. What's average gravity, Kip?"

"Around 95%, a bit less than the city. Power's at a premium out here. They shunt the juice to the heaters to keep the crops happy, so gravity can bottom out at 90% in the winter ... and this planet has long, long seasons. The temperature and humidity are controlled to suit the plants. The wind machines are on the east side. We make jokes about having a prevailing wind ... the thing I'd notice most, coming back here, is the silence. The only insects are bees, for obvious reasons, and there are no wild birds, and no plans to release any. They'd devastate the crops."

"Sheckley," Jarrat said with a curious amusement. "The only wildlife I saw before I signed with the Army was roaches. We didn't even have rats. Anything with less than eight legs was exotic." He braked down at a left-pointing sign. "Here's Heyson. What number?"

"No number. It's the big white house at the end." There was a catch in Reardon's voice. "I'm sorry. It's been a long, long time."

"Don't apologize." Jarrat let the Apogee cruise three meters above the gravel until he saw a rambling house which reminded him of Harry's place in the mountains. "It must be great to have someplace to come back to. Let me tell you about Sheckley sometime ... and I think your people are expecting us."

A tall, thickset, dark-haired, pale skinned man was standing at the end of the driveway, and as the Apogee cruised toward him, he beckoned Jarrat on up the white plascrete strip and pointed to a space between the trees. Jarrat rotated the aircraft on its own axis to fit the space, nudged it forward a few meters and let it settle on the repulsion cushion. The jets whined down, and as the canopy lifted he heard the *quiet* Reardon had tried to describe.

No birds, no chatter of insects. He heard the soft, steady shush of the draft from the wind machines in the trees; far away was the *jet-jet-jet* sound of a water cannon. The drone of bees was loud, and a hammer was ringing on the other side of Lassiter. He caught a whisper of music from a house down Heyson Lane, and voices in the vineyards to the north. Otherwise, the quiet might have been unnerving.

But Kip Reardon was smiling widely as he clambered out of the Apogee, and he grabbed his brother in a bear hug. Paul was very like him, with the same intense, dark brown eyes and the big, hooked nose. Neither man was what Jarrat would have called handsome, but both were *different*, and attractive in their own way because of it. Jarrat was out, stretching his back after the ride, and watching Stone do the same.

The constant breeze from the wind machines stirred the trees overhead, and Stone was looking up at the pressure skin. The light itself was different here, mellow, almost dusky though the levels were still high enough for the plants. A nostalgic look had settled on Stone's face, and he gave Jarrat a faint, crooked smile. Mars suited him, Jarrat thought. He was at ease here, where he had been edgy on Earth, as if he had no desire to be there, though he swore it was good to see home again. Jarrat came around the nose of the Apogee and offered his hand. Stone took it for a moment, and a sensation Jarrat could not identify, part nostalgia, part self-mockery, part pain, threaded through the bond.

Old memories were waking, he guessed, images and sounds from the days soon after Stone had buried a lover and flung himself into Tactical on a crusade. The mission was long over but the vocation remained as strong.

"You okay, Stoney?" he asked quietly.

"Sure." Stone shrugged away the memories with an obvious effort. "Remember the ghosts that jumped out at you on Sheckley?"

As if Jarrat was likely to forget. "They fade away," he began.

"And faster, if you chase them." Stone leaned closer. "You can chase 'em for me, soon as we get out of here."

"Count on it," Jarrat promised.

"Hey, welcome home, bro," Paul Reardon was saying as he released Kip. "Better late than never, and I could wish it wasn't business."

"Business?" Kip echoed. "Now, I didn't say a word about business. I just said there were some guys I work with who'd like to take a look at rural Mars."

Paul was looking at Jarrat and Stone. "You didn't have to come out and say it. You think IQ levels dropped radically in this region while you were away?" He gestured at the younger men. "I have a partnership of NARC captains standing on my driveway. I've got one hell of a shindig rampaging in the underworld from Chryse to Marsport. We have a carrier parked in Mars low orbit, and me? I've been twelve long years in Tactical, Kip, while you've been gallivanting all over the colonies."

"Gallivanting?" Kip echoed.

But the younger Reardon brother had turned toward Jarrat and Stone and was offering his hand. "Welcome. Which one is Stone?"

"I am. Why do you ask?" Stone shook his hand. "This is Kevin Jarrat, and just getting out of the plane is Doctor Harry Del, a colleague of your brother's."

"Cap Jarrat, welcome. Doc Del, I hope you enjoy Mars ... Cap Stone, there's somebody you need to talk to." Paul stepped away toward the back of the house. "This way. You remember the place, Kip?"

"Like it was yesterday when I left," Reardon assured him.

"Then make yourself at home. There's a twelve-pack in the cooler in the basement, and the fridge is stuffed. Tommy's home, he'll give you a hand to get set up. Do us a favor, bro. Keep the kids out of the way. We're in the side yard, Cap Stone." He beckoned Jarrat and Stone to follow, and Jarrat felt the sharp twist of Stone's curiosity.

"Somebody we need to talk to?" he echoed quietly as they ducked under the house's big dish receivers and shouldered between the shed and the corner of the house.

So many things were odd. There was no dust on any surface; no webs under the eaves or around doors, no rain-spots, no gutters on house or shed, no leaf damage on the plants from caterpillars, no chatter of birds or bugs. Jarrat had grown accustomed to the open skies and abundant wildlife of Darwin's, Rethan, even Avalon. Lassiter felt very different, as if he had walked into a model, a diorama where everything was full-scale, yet artificial.

Yet the side yard was full of bush frangipani, blue pacifica and banksia, and the drone of bees was almost loud. Paul seemed not to notice them, but when Harry mentioned the heavy buzz he gestured south.

"The apiaries are that way. We make a fair percentage of all the honey this side of Mars can use, and we brew the best damned mead on the planet. Orchard fruits and bees and honey and mead are all part of the same picture. Lassiter does pretty well for itself."

"I see that," Stone agreed, approving of the informal garden with its overgrowing shrubs, creepers, climbers, vines. He saw grapes alongside kiwis, avocados, olives, tangerines. And then a figure stepped out from the tangle

of lemon and lime bushes, and his eyes narrowed on the man. "Do I know you?"

He was closer to Gene Cantrell's age than Jarrat's or Stone's, and like Cantrell he was a 'natural.' His hair was speckled with silver, his jaw was surrendering to jowls, his eyes were nested in creases. "There's no reason you should remember me," he said by way of greeting, "but I remember you, Stone. I was way on up the ladder when you transferred out. I've watched you climb your own ladder. NARC suits you ... you always were a rogue, which doesn't sit well with Tactical, but NARC's another story."

"I do know you," Stone said slowly. "You were ..."

He was struggling to place the face, the voice, and Jarrat stepped in between them, offering his hand. "Well, I don't, so let's fix that right now. Kevin Jarrat, Captain."

"Commanding NARC-*Athena*." The man smiled. "Jay Friedman. Colonel. Olympia Tactical, based in Chryse."

"I'm Harry Del, civilian, working with Kip's department." Harry offered his hand, and Friedman shook it. "I won't claim to be a medical doctor, because it raises too many issues here."

"It ... can," Friedman admitted. "With idiots. I don't count myself among the morons, Doctor." He was looking Stone up and down as he spoke. "When you were with us, Captain, I was counting paperclips. I had the unpleasant chore of liaising with Tactical Command, Earthside, trying to clean up their messes before they turned into quagmire here. My job was all about negotiating extradition warrants, running their errands, tying off their loose ends. They had the knack of losing people, and where would their runaways turn up? Usually here, because it's only a ferry ride away."

"I know *of* you," Stone admitted, "I know you as the officer commanding Chryse Tactical. I'm sorry, I don't remember you."

Friedman's smile widened. "I'd be surprised if you did." He looked sidelong at Jarrat, hard-eyed and shrewd. "This one was always good. He had the intuition for it, as well as the physicality. Half poker player, half athlete." His brows arched. "And you?"

"Me?" Jarrat echoed. "I've been known to play squash. And beat him." He gave Stone a wink. "I assume Paul Reardon's spoken to you about why he *thinks* we're here."

In the back yard, three mid-late teens were arguing over a VR player. Jarrat saw two boys and a girl. The girl was the youngest, a scrawny figure in black skinthins and oversized boots. The boys were tall, sparsely built, rangy with the look of colonials. If they had grown up in Lassiter rather than in the city where the power, and gravity, were constant, they would be viewed with the same eyes, *Earthside*, as Jarrat himself. In the colonies few people noticed, much less cared. Jarrat knew instinctively, the boys would be headed out before they were much older. Today they were sixteen or seventeen, dressed in battered denims as if they had just come in from work; unlike the Reardon brothers, they were curly haired, swarthy, and he remembered Kip's

remark. They were Paul's partner's kids, from a previous marriage which had gone awry.

A moment later a deep voice shouted to the kids to come help, and Paul muttered an oath. "That's Tom, trying to get some sense out of the sprogs. Look, you guys don't want me around while you're talking business. I'm a lowlife from Archives and Research, the less I know, the better! Let me go help Tommy, before there's a riot."

The Chryse colonel watched him go with a faint smile. "He's a good man. So's his partner. Tom Soealu's an engine tech, works for Arago."

"And the kids?" Harry wondered. "Forgive me if I'm prying. I have a tribe of my own."

"The boys are Rob and Julian," Friedman told him, "and then there's sweet little Kylie. The boys are chalk and cheese, but they're both good kids. One's on his way to college, he wants to follow his Uncle Kip into the service. The other's happy as the proverbial clam to stay right here and be a farmer. The girl?" His face hardened. "She's trouble. She's fourteen years old, and she's hanging out with spacers. She's been carded and picked up in bars in Chryse and Marsport. She was stoned out of her gourd one time, strutted into a bar called Czardas, wearing not much more than paint and spangles, with a guy twice her age. It was the bastard boyfriend we were after, but we arrested the whole bunch, and imagine how I felt when the little bitch comes around and says who she is. She's Paul Reardon's stepdaughter, and we've got her locked up and filed as a transient hustler. She *looks* older. She looks sixteen, and fifteen's the age of consent here." He passed a hand before his eyes. "I made sure we lost the documentation, got both her fathers in, booked the little madam a week in rehab; and what does she do? She's out of there in three days, and we pick her up on the rink, the docking bays in Marsport, where the big ships land and the real rough trade hangs. I *think* she was trying to get a ride offworld, maybe right out of the system."

"Damn," Harry whispered. "She's going to hell."

"Fast as she can," Friedman sighed. "She's got her fathers scared shitless but short of locking her up somewhere, what can you do?"

"You can pick up the pieces after the fall," Jarrat said bitterly, "try to put them back together into something vaguely resembling what she used to be." He turned his back on the kids as both Paul and his partner — big, burly, copper-skinned and dreadlocked Tom Soealu called them into the house. "You wanted to talk *business*, Colonel, or chat about old times? If it's old times, I'm sure Harry and I can find something to do."

For a moment Friedman studied them rudely. "I assume I can trust you."

"To do what?" Stone's brows rose. "We don't know you, Colonel. We *assume* we're all on the same team, but we've had some nasty surprises since we arrived insystem."

"I've heard rumors," Friedman said quietly. "I've been told Inoshiro Carvoni made it back here, in cahoots with NARC."

"Did you hear he was killed?" Jarrat hazarded, with a glance at Stone.

And Friedman nodded. "The word was, a couple of agents got aboard your ship, and suddenly he's on ice."

"Who told you that?" Stone asked tersely.

"Well, now," Friedman mused, "that's what this is all about. I've got more action in citybottom than I've seen since the last time we had a NARC carrier parked overhead, and I was younger, then, than you boys are now. I've got people in every sleaze den we know about, listening, watching. There's a sexshop in Marsport where we just found three very dead bodies. Two of them were identifiable, the third was mutilated, head and hands gone. The usual. Last week Craig Strode and Buddy Oyama were middlemen. Money man, mule. This week they were doped to the gills on chimera in a torture garden, Papillion Rouge. They didn't make it out. Too wasted to know what was being done to them."

"Syndicate?" Jarrat guessed.

Friedman only shrugged. "Cartel. No one wants to admit there's a syndicate in the homeworlds, but ... call it what you will. And the fuckers are jumping around like fleas on a dog's butt. Strange, that they were placid and content until NARC arrived insystem, with Carvoni aboard. Then suddenly it's a three-ring circus and we're pulling bodies out of dumpsters. It's already carnage. You know what it'll be like if I put my people into citybottom to try and pull it into line?"

For a long moment Jarrat and Stone shared a grim, silent conference, but it was Harry Del who said, "Trust him. He's on the level. He's not connected with the bastards who've got a line into NARC." Friedman angled an odd look at him, and Harry shrugged an apology. "I'm a mutoid, Colonel. An empath. If you were working with the people who sent agents aboard the carrier to murder Inoshiro Carvoni, I'd know about it."

"And we'd be walking away," Jarrat added. "Thanks, Harry."

"Part of the job," Harry said darkly.

"Don't go into citybottom, Friedman," Stone said levelly. "Let them run. It's not your fight ... it's ours."

"I thought it might be." Friedman took a long breath. "Paul mentioned you were visiting, and I invited myself here. He's guessing, as we all are, not being completely dense. We don't know the details, Stone, Jarrat, and we don't want to know." His eyes hardened to flint. "I want the fucking *syndicate* out of my territory, and as for myself, there's not one goddamned thing I can do to make it happen. I just have to settle back and watch moronic little animals like Kylie Soealu-Reardon make the small jump from Buran to Angel, unless NARC can root the syndicate out."

"Angel?" Stone echoed.

Again, Friedman answered with an eloquent shrug. "It's here, like the Buran, and all the rest. Gryphon, chimera, whatever. If there was a blocker, I wouldn't give a shit. But there isn't, and I'm signing off on too many death certificates. Kids like Kylie are ten to the credit in Marsport and Olympia. They're doing it all and they don't see why they shouldn't. CityNet and the

public channels are wall-to-wall with borderline underage brats pretending to be adults, prancing about buff-naked in music holoclips with the pricetag tattooed on their asses. Buran, gryphon, sex, rough stuff? No problem. There's blockers for the dope, and when you're high enough, you think you can do anything. These kids are going rogue, and there's fuck all in the law to stop them."

"It's the same in the major colonies," Jarrat said bitterly. "I saw it all, Colonel, before I was fifteen years old. The trick is not to wade in the muck just because it's there. Or, if you have to, don't let it stick."

The remark inspired Friedman to grimace. "Good for you, son. You were the one with the brains and the balls to make it out and land in NARC. The rest of the little morons have horse shit for brains, and they know a hell of a lot more about selfishness than self-preservation. They have youth on their side, nature shaped them like sylphs, their hormones are rampaging and no way will they wait till their minds catch up with their bodies. They want it all right now, today, here, and that includes the Buran."

"It's a short hop from there to Angel," Harry said grimly.

"Kids do it accidentally," Stone added.

"Every day," Friedman agreed. They do a snort of Buran at 19:00 when they link up with their buds at the arcade, and at 03:00 they do another snort they *think* is Buran, but it's not, or it's been cut with Angel, which is cheaper. Kylie was fighting with her brothers over a VR game a few minutes ago. The game is Doomrider 5. It's sex den fodder, explicit as you like, dark, cruel, graphic, violent, the works. I wouldn't play it myself! Somebody in the classification office took a bribe and slapped a low rating on it. I'd have banned it, but Paul's boys are playing it, and bloody Kylie wants her fair share. You think she hasn't played it before? Game lore says it's best played with a load of Buran on board ... and you're wondering if Angel's a problem here? Christ, it's a problem everywhere, because it's a blast, and it's cheap, and you can use it to speedball everything else." He was so furious, he could barely speak. He glared at the younger men, as if some part of the rage were directed at them. "You're NARC. You've parked a fucking carrier in orbit. Tell me the truth. Can you get the *cartel* out of my territory?"

"Yes." Stone said without hesitation. He looked sidelong at Jarrat, and they shared the twist of their insides.

"Yes," Jarrat echoed. "Give us the keys to your citybottom, and stay the hell out of our way. That's the deal."

"Done deal, though I wouldn't let my dumb-ass superiors know about it." Friedman thrust out his hand to shake on it. "I can run interference for you, keep Earthside Tac and other departments out of your hair. Route your comm through my office, and I'll keep the buggers at least twenty-four hours out of date."

"We can do that," Jarrat mused. "The carrier's at Arago right now, for legit work on the drive ignition. You thinking what I am, Stoney?"

And Stone nodded. "Major problem with the main comm arrays. We

switch to groundstation relay while they're being coaxed back online."

"Nice," Friedman decided. "Simple, plausible. I'll make my groundstation available as a friendly, interdepartmental favor." He lifted a brow at Stone, and then at Jarrat. "What do you need?"

Jarrat had been waiting for an opportunity to request data. "Anything you've got on QuantumCyber Systems, for a start."

The colonel was surprised. "They're on the right side of the law. If they weren't, I'd know about it, and I don't. Lorenzo Quade is something of a local hero. He was wrongfully accused, and fought his way back."

"We'll share data," Stone said quietly. "Do *not* try to run your own probe into QCS or Quade. You don't have the resources we do, and you'll only trip the alarms and start the chaos early."

"But we do want you to monitor QCS," Jarrat added. "Anything or anyone moves, in any direction, we want to know about it."

"Done," Friedman agreed. "And?"

Stone shoved both hands into the hip pockets of his slacks. "You offered us the keys to your citybottom. One of the keys we need is an informant, your favorite snitch, the one who knows everything about everything."

"The one," Jarrat said pointedly, "who was able to tell you Inoshiro Carvoni was back in town."

"And Carvoni was the source for your intel on QCS?" Friedman's lips compressed. "I can tell you now, my man's not going to be happy."

"Nobody said it would be a party." Stone gave the Tactical man a hard look. "You want to play, or not? We already told you more than you should know. It's too late to back out cleanly, Colonel. There's strings attached."

"There's always are, son," Friedman said sourly. "And no, I'm not about to back out. But you'll have to give me a while to contact my man and set something up. He's skating on thin ice already, and you bastards are not going to make anything easier."

"Call us," Jarrat invited, "soon as you can put it together. Would he come up to the carrier?"

The colonel barked a laugh. "Not in a million years. Leave it with me. I'll make my groundstation available, and I'll set up surveillance on Quade's offices and his house. Good enough?"

"Good enough," Stone judged.

On that note, Jay Friedman was already moving. "I'll be in touch."

For several minutes Harry had been silent, hands deep in his pockets, intent on Friedman. As the colonel strode away into the house, he stirred. "We *can* trust him. He's excited, hatching plots even now. Still, he might need a day or two to arrange something, which leaves me wading in it."

"Not necessarily," Stone argued. "Maybe the best way to get R&D off your back is to confront Janine Cruz and Scott Auel face to face. You can be bloody persuasive, Harry."

"Talk them out of it?" Harry sounded doubtful. "Cruz has to be insane."

Jarrat dropped a hand on his shoulder. "There's three of us, and I can't

believe Scott Auel wants to do this. We'll have her, four to one."

"It's not a ballot," Harry remonstrated.

The sounds of an argument had been escalating in the backyard, and as they heard Kip Reardon's voice, Stone headed around the end of the house. The Reardon brothers had been reasoning with Tom Soealu's kids, and they had scored two out of three. Kylie was stomping away with a furious gait, and Paul snaked an arm around Tom's waist. "Some arguments, you can't win," Kip was saying. "You want me to talk to her?"

The younger Reardon was not so sure. "You can try. She might respect you, since you're a ranker in a big, bad department. As many kids think NARC is 'too cool' as call them 'like, brak'."

"What the hell is 'brak,' and who says we are?" Stone demanded, halfway across the wide lawn with the others a pace behind him.

The Reardons shared a rueful grin and Paul said, "Apparently, 'brak' is the sound you make when you're throwing up after three beers too many, a nose full of fizz and a nasty VR ride. Speaking personally, I don't have any experience with it. And yeah, Kip, if you want to try talking to her, go ahead. She can be a little demon, she's got a foul mouth on her, and a temper. Takes after her mama, so Tom says."

The *Athena's* CMO was regarding Jarrat and Stone with a deeply speculative expression. "Friedman gave you something good?"

"Enough to start with," Jarrat said cautiously. "You want to stay here, Kip? We're wanted over at the NARC facility, but we'll be back later."

"For dinner," Paul offered. "I can promise you peace and quiet, even if I have to foist the rotten kid on her grandmother for the evening. Local chicken and produce picked this afternoon, and the best chianti we churn out."

"Set three extra places," Stone told him. "This won't take long."

"R&D?" Kip's brow creased. He knew exactly what was on the agenda.

"Like he said," Jarrat echoed as he plucked the key to the Apogee from his hip pocket, "this won't take long."

"Famous last words," Harry accused, but he followed them back around to the aircraft.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Northwest of Marsport, off the sweep of the Olympia Expressway, the NARC facility was freestanding, not part of the city's multi-domed enclosure. The building towered more than a hundred meters, with several pressure skins angled like the sails of an Arab dhow about its feet, and the facility sank forty levels into the Martian bedrock. The caverns were tricked out for every

conceivable simulation, from the cityscape to zero-G. What simulations Auel and Cruz were running, Stone could not guess, but if they were even a fraction as demanding as the series he and Jarrat had done on the way in from Darwin's, they would be counting the days till completion.

The NARC Airpark was busy, but the Apogee was expected and the ATC put other traffic on hold to rout him in. Stone landed lightly in the east parapet hangar, and followed the blue running lights to the place set aside for him. The jets were whining down as he released the harness and turned in the pilot's seat to look back at Harry.

Anger still simmered just below the surface, but he had drawn a mask over his face. He looked merely disapproving, uncooperative. The canopy was still going up when he swung his legs out of the cab. "Let me check in and see if the maniacs are even here. If they're not — we're leaving. They can chase me down, and they'll be lucky to bloody find me!"

He marched away to the reception kiosk by the lifts. Stone twisted to watch him go, and then relaxed back into the seat. "Oh, he's pissed."

"So would I be." Jarrat turned, wedged in the seat contours, to study his partner closely. Unruly, rebellious emotions were churning through him. Stone felt them clearly, and waited for him to speak. "Right from the start we swore up and down, we'd never let R&D get their hooks into us."

"They haven't." Stone touched his face.

"Yet, here we are." The slate gray eyes closed and Jarrat's voice was hoarse. "Too many ghosts, Stoney. Too many simulations where I held you while you died, or you held me, and the memories are so *real*."

"We let R&D use us for a reason." Stone cupped his cheek, leaned over and kissed him lightly. "The reins are still in our hands, and — here we are."

A shiver took them both unawares, and images Stone thought he had banished crept out of the crannies of his memory. They were so real, only the living Kevin Jarrat beside convinced him that the bloody mess he remembered holding in his arms while it struggled through its death throes had been a simulation. Jarrat's eyes had looked up at him out of the mess of wounds. In the moment before they darkened he found the breath to rasp out the words, and then he was gone. *I love you*. Stone felt the cold, the emptiness, the killing weight of grief crushing his chest, and then —

"Don't." Jarrat's hands caught his face, and Stone's vision cleared. "You're back in those goddamned sims, aren't you? Don't go there, don't let some R&D bastard *make* you go back there when we debrief."

"I won't." Stone caught him bodily, hauled him into an embrace which tested Jarrat's ribs.

In that moment he needed to feel the heat of him, the solidarity of hard young muscle. He buried his face in the sun-blond hair and supplanted the sim ghosts with the *real*. Jarrat offered his mouth, and Stone took it, deep and unrelenting, while his hands were everywhere, searching the lean body, the long legs, the warm, tempting bulk at his groin.

Harry's voice intruded at the worst moment. "You two want to be alone?"

With a curse, Stone let go and sucked in a breath. He blinked into bemused gray eyes and sat back. "We were ... laying some ghosts to rest."

"VR ghosts?" Harry guessed.

"Ugly ones," Jarrat affirmed. "And yes, we'll take you up on the offer, Harry, soon as we give R&D whatever dumb-ass debriefing they order. You can work your magic, mute the memories, blur them, whatever. I don't want them in my mind."

"I read the scenarios, and the scripts," Harry said darkly. "I told you before you started, they weren't healthy. Sane minds aren't full of memories of being maimed and raped and repeatedly bereaved. I don't know how you cope with the baggage you're carrying around."

"Training." Stone gave the building a glare. "That's what this facility is all about. Every scenario, every loss, and triumph, and shame, the drugs, the sex, pain, fear, torment, rage, joy, desire, dismemberment, death ... they're all simulated here. Before a NARC is assigned to the street at command rank, there isn't anything, and I mean *anything*, he or she hasn't experienced."

"Except Angel addiction itself," Harry said pointedly.

Stone swallowed hard as his throat constricted. "You're right. Kevin and I don't want to be here any more than you do, but if we want a crack at Aphelion, this is part of it."

"I know." Harry stepped back to let him close up the Apogee. Jarrat was coming around the hot jets. "It's the only reason I agreed to show my face here. The AI just logged us in, and Auel and Cruz are in the building." He gave the younger men a baleful look. "You said this wouldn't take long."

"It won't, I can guarantee it," Jarrat rasped, and headed for the lifts.

It was eight months since they had met Scott Auel, and neither Jarrat nor Stone had ever met Janine Cruz. Auel straddled the line between colonial and Earther, born in the Jupiter system but transplanted to Kelso, Rethan and Darwin's as he grew up, and his parents followed contract work from system to system. He had come over from Starfleet four years before, unlike Cruz, who was solidly Army; and he was almost laconic, the complete opposite of Cruz, who was as tightly-strung as Petrov, with a hair-trigger temper that burned hotter and longer than Jarrat's.

The temper was the factor, Stone had guessed for some time, which had kept her on the waiting list for command until she felt she had something to prove. She was three years older than Stone, while Auel was four years younger. At 28, he had the lines of maturity and more than a few flecks of silver in his dense black hair, which he wore as long as Jarrat's. Laugh lines had come in around his startling brown eyes, and he had the hard, muscular physique that accompanied the job. He looked good, in clinging gray slacks and tunic, meeting the Earthside chic halfway.

Cruz was already 35, hard but brittle, with long hair colored fiery red and ebony skin against which green and gold eye makeup was striking. She wore gold contacts, and the talons of her fingernails were also gold; she was taller than Scott Auel, with a gym-sculpted body, and she was augmented, Stone

saw. She was from the city of Calleran, on Brennan, a world of green skies, massive storms and fractionally lighter gravity. Her homeworld gave her the same coveted, long-limbed body morphology as Jarrat, but while most of nature's own curves had been purged by long hours in the gym, others had been enhanced. She was in burgundy skintights and a lot of amber jewelry, the flame-red hair was clasped up on top of her head, and breasts that would have challenged any uptown Companion strained the fabric.

The 'look' was striking, and Stone knew she had designed it the way Jesse Lawrence had designed the 'look' for Jarrat, when he helped McKinnen construct one of the VR-sims. Janine Cruz had manufactured herself, head to foot, to do a job. On the inevitable deep cover assignments, she had no intentions of sliding invisibly into citybottom, which was Gene Cantrell's trick. Nobody even noticed Cantrell, and eventually he made himself indispensable, wormed his way into confidences, was handed the security codes and asked to lock up after himself. Cruz would go in barnstorming, bludgeon her way into mansion or office or facility by the main force of knocking a majority of men and a good many women flat on their backsides and then trampling them.

Even Stone, who did not often lean in that direction, looked twice; and Jarrat, who had a history of swinging both ways when he was unattached, whistled softly. Stone's elbow hit him discreetly in the ribs, and his voice was a bare murmur. "Dance with the one that brung you."

"Who said anything about *dancing*?" Jarrat turned back to him, eyes glittering with amusement. He dropped his voice. "I haven't gone blind lately ... though, a waltz or two with this one, and I think you would, when you've had your eyes scratched out."

She looked dangerous, Stone decided, and the pairing of Cruz and Auel began to make sense. Jarrat had gone ahead to meet Auel, whom they had both known for years. Scott embraced him, kissed his neck in greeting, and then opened his arms for Stone. "Long time, no see," he was saying easily. "Damn it, you guys look good enough to eat alive! How come the fantastic ones are always handfasted?"

"We're not handfasted," Stone told him.

"I'm shocked." Auel chuckled. "Then again, I don't suppose you need to be. You're already stuck faster than a vacuum weld. The empathy thing."

The empathy thing? Stone shared a look with Jarrat, and offered his hand to Cruz. "We've heard about you, Captain."

"Likewise." Cruz's shake was hard and cool. She took Jarrat's hand for a moment and turned her attention promptly to Harry Del, who had come no further than the door.

They were in a north-facing lounge, high in the NARC tower, with a view of the Amazonis. Domed craters and pressure skins shone dully in the late afternoon sun, curtained by airborne dust, and the sky was taking on deep purple shades. According to Thule commercial radio, the forecast was for dull conditions for the next week due to dust clouds out of the southeast, surface

daytime temperatures would be just above zero Centigrade, with nighttime lows of twenty below. Stone turned his back on the view and acknowledged the dove gray and cerulean lounge with one glance.

"Doctor Del," Cruz was saying, "I look forward to working with you."

She offered her hand; Harry shoved both of his own into the pockets of his dark green canvas jacket. "Then you're about to be sorely disappointed, Captain Cruz. I didn't come here to participate. I'm here to close the files, sign off, officially, on the documentation, and put an end to this foolishness once and for all."

The woman physically recoiled and for some moments was speechless. It was Auel who cleared his throat and said quietly, "I don't quite understand, Doctor. They told us to expect you, and we should prep for a series of heavy-duty lab sessions."

"Then *they* told you wrong," Harry said tartly, and arranged his large frame in one of the lounge chairs under the long observation panes. He studied Cruz with a frown. "Look, Captain, I can see this comes as a shock, but I never gave R&D any reason to assume my cooperation is negotiable. I suggest you find some other outlet for your ... skills." He regarded her body with a doubtful expression. "I'm sorry, but I can't, *won't*, do this work. I'm a healer, and even as far afield as Rethan we take the Hippocratic Oath seriously. R&D has had scores of messages from me, I've told them repeatedly, to bond you and Captain Auel, one of you must be severely Angel damaged. No medical practitioner worth his diploma will knowingly injure a patient, endanger a life, just so he can deliberately meddle."

"I ..." Cruz swallowed. "But, we thought ..." She looked away.

"You thought what?" Stone had the proverbial bad feeling. "Some idiot in R&D told you to prep for the work?" A chill settled in his belly, and he knew Jarrat felt it too. "Tell me you didn't do it."

Every defense mechanism had activated. She was bristling with porcupine quills, and Scott Auel, behind her, took her by the shoulders. "Settle down, Janine. Everything in life is negotiable."

"Not all things," Harry said quietly. "Captain Auel, you don't mean —?"

"I've done it in simulations a hundred times," Cruz said icily.

"It's not the same." Stone's belly turned over. "Nothing you've done in sims prepares you for the reality. The dreams, the fantasies, are one thing, and they *can* be simulated. A good VR trip takes you there. The comedown, the craving is something else." He met Auel's eyes levelly. "You can't imagine it, Scott."

"I can," Auel said quietly. "I buried someone, Stoney, same as we all did. That's why I'm here. She ... thought she could handle it."

A shaft of pain took Stone by surprise. He heard Jarrat's sharp intake of breath in reaction to it. Auel had been watching them closely, and saw it too. "You can't handle it," Stone told Cruz. "You think you can, but — I've been there." Her eyes were wide, she was breathing heavily, taking up every word he said as if by osmosis. "There are two reasons I'm still alive," Stone said,

and finding words was difficult. "They're standing right behind me. Earthers call Harry Del a mutoid, and they're not quite sure if they should trust him, but he's half the reason I'm alive."

"The other half?" Cruz was looking at Jarrat out of bruised eyes.

"I love him," Jarrat said with raw honesty.

"And *that*," Harry whispered, "is the secret. This is why it works. There was already a bond between them before I got in there and — what was it you said, Captain Auel? They're stuck tighter than a vacuum weld. The truth is, they were already 'stuck' before Kevin brought Stoney to me, riddled with Angel and with a few weeks left to live."

"Call me Scott," Auel invited. He gave Cruz's shoulders a squeeze and let them go. "Looks like you wasted your time and brain cells, kid," he told her. "It's a no-show."

"But, I ..." Cruz's throat bobbed as she swallowed. "I staked my career on this. They gave me the promotion on the understanding they were opening the doors on the grand experiment."

"They?" Stone frowned at Auel. "You mean Central authorized this partnership specifically to test the bonding?"

"Come on, Stoney, they're not that lame," Auel remonstrated. "She's been due a promotion for years. This was just the right opportunity. Sure, they want to test the bond, why wouldn't they? You guys keep telling them where to go. You won't play, so you shouldn't be surprised when they find somebody else who will."

Stone felt a shiver of something very like anger. "You think it's some kind of a game?"

"Figure of speech," Auel said easily. "Shit, man, what's the big deal? You're here, you're alive, you could suck Angel up both nostrils and only get a sneeze out of it — and you're not the only one. Doc Del did the exact same thing for a kid back on Darwin's. We saw the vids."

He meant Tim Kwei. Stone turned away, pacing between the plush chairs and the end of the observation lounge where ficus and philodendrons rambled before a water feature. He needed no special empathy to know that Harry was within seconds of walking out, and oddly, it was Jarrat who made the peace offering.

"Look, Scott, it's not going to happen. Harry's a civilian, and it's his choice as a doctor to follow his conscience. It's not as simple as you seem to think ... but you're going to find out pretty soon. I assume you intend to stand by her, while she goes through it?"

"While she what?" Auel echoed.

"While she turns into an old Angelhead," Stone said quietly. "She won't be able to avoid it, Scott. You know how it goes. First it's a couple of snorts a week, and then it's three, and four, then every day, then even that isn't enough. The brain wiring is tangled, the neurons are cross-circuiting. Your body doesn't belong to you anymore, it's like there's a demon has crawled inside your skin and all it wants to do is fuck, and fuck, and be fucked, and

then do it all again, and the weird thing is, the constant rage of lust is actually one of the side effects of the drug. Tell them, Harry."

"They should know." Jarrat's voice was sharp with a cutting edge. "It's part of the job to know the pathology, biology, pharmacology."

"We do know, goddamn it," Cruz rasped. "I've run the sims."

"And you think the reality's going to be the same?" Stone turned back from the view out over Amazonis. "You can turn a sim off. You leave it behind and go home for the night. You can stop thinking about it, till you're back on the job. The *reality* of it is, the poison's in your body, in your brain, and you obsess, you can't stop, even when you start to frighten and disgust yourself. You can't sleep for the dreams of having your ass pounded by someone, something, anyone. You wake in a terrified sweat, straining to get off, and as soon as you're spent, it starts again, tingling in your nerve endings, skewing your thoughts into the darkest erotic directions you never even imagined before ... and eventually you sleep, because you're so exhausted and you haven't slept longer than an hour at a time in days."

"Stoney, don't," Jarrat began.

Stone might not have heard him. "Then the dreams kick in, dreams of needing sex so bad, you're in a citybottom den, *wanting* to be trussed up, flogged and fisted, if only somebody can make the craving go away. And that," he said, hearing the rasp in his own voice, "is the point where you're so desperate, you stop trying to kick the habit, you surrender, take the Angel again, your next snort, because when the Angel hit is new, fresh and strong inside you, the dreams are golden as dawn, and somebody's in love with you, and it's not raw, bloody sex, not mindless rutting, it's lovemaking, like you always dreamed of, and never had."

"Christ," Auel murmured. "I'm on the outside, looking in."

"You all are," Harry said very gently. "The three of us have been there on the inside. We shared it. We know more about the ugly side of Angel than any sane person should have to, which is why we still can't believe you went ahead and did it, Captain Cruz. The point Stoney's trying to make is, when it's real, you can't turn off the sim. It's with you every minute, every day. No relief, no escape, no way back. And you did this to yourself, deliberately." He was looking at Cruz with eyes full of accusation.

She spun and began to pace, fists clenched, boots noisy on the silver marble terrazzo. "All right. Mistake. Big mistake. So get it out of me."

"I can't," Harry said with deceptive mildness. The shock of the simple statement ripped through Stone and rebounded off Jarrat. Cruz shuddered visibly and turned back toward the healer. "I physically can't do it," Harry told her, "not so early in the addiction. How long's it been?"

"Three weeks," Cruz said windedly. "I use it once a week, and then there are a lot of sims we run, the other days." She gestured distractedly toward the labs. "I guess you'll tell me the VR's playing Angel games with my head, making it easier to get from one hit to the next."

"Yes." Harry sighed heavily. "They're mostly sex simulations, aren't they,

or at least sex plays a large part in them. You're the virtual Companion, or in deep cover as one, or you're using your physical allure to screw your way to the intel that'll bust a syndicate."

"You know a lot about this," Auel observed.

If Cruz's ebony skin could have blushed, she might have been crimson. "It's the job, Doctor. We're all trained for it."

"There are other ways," Jarrat argued. "I've never yet gone into deep cover as a hustler, except in a sim ordered specifically by R&D. They're playing mind games with you, Cruz. I've been a shooter, I've been a pilot, a smuggler. Once, I went in as a professional gambler. There's better ways."

"Tell it to the bastards pulling our strings," Scott Auel said darkly. Anger had begun to color his voice.

"Oh, I will." Harry was frowning at Cruz, who had hugged both arms around herself and was staring blindly through the observation panes. "The truth is, sex is powerful and I'd be a fool to deny it. The whole Angel trade — from the rich sons of bitches who manufacture it to the deadheads who use it — feeds off this power, and the people pulling your chain, Scott, probably figure they can get faster, cheaper results using somebody like Captain Cruz here. She looks like ... well, she knows what she looks like. Now, imagine if she was Angel-immune, like Stone."

"Make me immune," Cruz whispered hoarsely.

The healer's eyes closed. "I can't, not until the brain damage is much, much worse than anything you've sustained in three short weeks. Understand this, Captain. When I go into your brain, I key on the damage. It's like a road map, telling me where to go. Red and purple lights flash on saying, 'Fix me, I'm the part that's busted up.' Until the damage is done, I physically can't do it. I'm a healer, just a Rethan 87/T mutoid, not some kind of magician."

She was mute now, frozen in place like a statue. Jarrat extended a hand to her, a gesture of simple compassion, but she seemed not to notice. Stone took a step toward Auel. "She's going to need somebody."

"I, uh, don't know how long they'll keep me here," Auel admitted. "Before all this bullshit started, I was supposed to be retraining. They took me off the *Avenger* right after you guys busted Death's Head. I thought they were going to give me the *Huntress*, with Gene Cantrell. Then this came up, and it looked promising."

"Promising?" Jarrat demanded.

"Give me a break, Kevin, it didn't look this way when R&D sold it to us, all right?" Auel lifted both hands as if Jarrat had him at gunpoint. "As of now, since this whole project is thoroughly fucked, it's a safe bet they'll rotate me back where I started. Retraining, with the *Huntress* launching so soon."

"Don't let Mischa Petrov hear you say it," Stone advised.

"Petrov?" Auel echoed. "He's still alive? He looked like heart attack material last time I saw him."

"He still does," Jarrat said dryly. "Harry?"

The healer was watching Cruz. "Are you all right, Captain?"

"Of course I'm not all right, goddamn you!"

"Jan, cool down," Auel began.

"It's okay," Harry said quickly. "It's natural to be scared, desperate, angry. It'll get worse before it gets better, but ... I'm going to leave you a number to call, Captain Cruz. My home, my private line, on Rethan. For the moment, don't even try to fight the Angel. Take it whenever you want it. Use it to banish the nightmares, as Stoney described. Use it to shut out the darkness. In six months or so, when you're using it every day, call me. Book yourself on a clipper and come out to Rethan. You're welcome to stay at my home. I won't be returning to Earth."

"None of us will," Stone said quietly.

Auel gave him a sharp look. "You were born here. It's your home."

But Stone made negative noises. "I was born here, but it's not my home. I'm as much an alien here as Kevin or Harry."

"That's too bad, man," Auel said thoughtfully. He looked at his chrono and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We're late."

"For what?" Jarrat demanded.

"We were supposed to meet you," Auel told him, "take you to the lab, show you around, and then a couple of the boffins would arrive and do the presentation before we all went down into Marsport for dinner."

The proposition was enough to galvanize Harry. He was moving before Auel fell silent, needing to get away before any authority could catch him, pin him down. "I'll call you, Captain Cruz, before we ship out, give you my contact information. Till we meet again, will you take my hand?"

Still mute, shocked, she took it for a moment. Stone felt a rush of raw sympathy. She had been duped, he thought, fed incomplete and erroneous information, and then handed a death sentence. The next six months would be rough on her, and her NARC career was as good as over.

"We'll catch you later, Scott," Jarrat was saying. "If we get the chance, we'll be at the launch of the *Huntress*. It'll be quite the party."

"I'll be there," Auel said with artificial good cheer. "With any luck I'll be watching my own ship launch. Later, Stoney, Kevin. Take care."

They were back in the hangar moments later, and Jarrat caught the keys to the Apogee as Stone tossed them to him. He was too consumed by his thoughts to fly, and Jarrat knew. The ghosts of Angel were ugly, rotten, snapping at the corners of his mind as he slid into the Apogee and ran up the harness. The jets howled into life, but Jarrat waited several minutes for clearance to leave. His hand fell on Stone's knee, squeezed there, and he said quietly, "Don't let it get to you."

"Too late," Stone whispered. "It already did."

"Yeah, but I —" Jarrat stopped as the comm chimed for attention, and rather than pulling on a headset he put the call on audio. "Jarrat, go ahead."

They might have expected Petrov's voice, or Cantrell, and to Stone's surprise they heard Jay Friedman. The abbreviated vowels and clipped consonants of the local accent were unmistakable. "Are you available?"

"When?" Stone looked at his wrist for the time.

"Any point in the next thirty hours," Friedman said tersely. "I've got my man talked into meeting you, but it has to be on his terms. He picks the time and the place, not me, not you."

"I don't blame him," Jarrat said acerbically. "Where?"

"Don't know," Friedman told him, "and we won't know till he sets it up. We'll get one hour's warning of the place and time, and if you're not there, we've blown it."

Stone's brows arched. "Your man's on the run."

The Tactical colonel snorted. "He was top of the shitlist, supposed to be one of the bodies we've been pulling out of dumpsters between here and Olympia since you bastards arrived insystem. Like I asked, are you available?"

"Of course we bloody are," Jarrat rasped. "Soon as he tells you where he'll be, you let us know."

"Don't go far," Friedman said mock-sweetly, and killed the line.

"He's right," Stone mused. "If we return to the carrier, we'll never make a citybottom rendezvous in under an hour. We're grounded." He paused as Jarrat lifted the Apogee on the hot bluster of its repulsion cushion. "You want to go back over to Lassiter? Paul and Tom might have space for us to crash. If not, we'll find a hotel in Chryse."

"That's a plan, if Harry's agreeable," Jarrat decided as he took the Apogee out of the hangar, into the deep, purple haze of the Martian late afternoon.

The east was full of stars, the west was bright with the setting sun, and every size and shape of pressure skin gleamed like a lake of liquid water, as far as the horizon. It was a mirage. Mars would not support liquid water on its surface for another thirty or forty years. In another century, the pressure skins and domes would be dismantled, the atmosphere would be dense enough to sustain humans accustomed to high altitudes, and green plants would have colonized much of the surface. The planet would be as hospitable as Aurora, with artificial gravity holding the atmosphere and a deliberate greenhouse system holding in the heat.

"Harry, is it back to Lassiter, or a hotel in Chryse?" Jarrat was asking as he took the aircraft southeast.

"I don't care," Harry said darkly, "so long as you get me the hell away from this place before some goblin can come charging out of some dungeon of a lab, and get the manacles on me!"

"Lassiter it is," Stone said with bleak humor.

In the gathering dusk, the ghosts haunting Stone were not easy to set aside. Jarrat often glanced at him, on the point of asking what he needed, and Harry was well aware of his stormy feelings, but in that moment Stone was tired of hiding. He wanted to confront the demons, not have them scared off, as if they could be exiled permanently.

The lights of cities, towns and tiny communities like Lassiter shone in the twilight. Ground commuter traffic was thick on the Olympia Expressway, a

dazzle of colored lights in the dusty, mauve dusk. Mars's two moons scudded overhead like fireflies among the points of light marking the many platforms, orbital docks and skycities. Mars had its own beauty, and people like Kip Reardon, born and raised in the area, viewed it with nostalgic eyes. Stone had different memories of the cities, and of the Reardon clan, it was the wildchild, Kylie Soealu, who probably shared his vision of Mars.

The spacers came into Marsport, shorthaul freighter crews from the marshaling yards in the Jupiter system, miners down from the belt, smugglers from other systems — hard-eyed men and women with the accents of distant places, the swagger of the mercenary, and big money to lay down in the gaming clubs and citybottom dens. Young men whose faces and voices were filled with the exotic — other worlds, unspeakable hazard, unimaginable reward — had fascinated Stone, too. They used bars, dreamshops, sexshops, VR arcades, where the underage should have been scanned and bounced right out, but too often kids were invited in.

In the early weeks of his tour with Chryse Tactical, Stone had lingered on the Marsport rink, drinking too much, smoking the wrong kind of weeds, mesmerized by mercenaries and smugglers. They never hit the street on Earth, or if they did, they were never seen in the places Stone had lived. Mars was different. Even now, it was still the gateway to the frontier. The locals liked to say, 'Mars isn't in the wilderness, but you can see it from here.'

The 'wilderness' actually began beyond the Jupiter system, but parts of the belt were wild beyond an Earther's worst dread. Stone had never been there, but by all accounts Sheckley was urbane and sophisticated by comparison. The Marsport rink was as deep as he had waded into the wild, and the memories could still inspire a shiver. You could pick up the spacers, if you had the looks and the desire. Several times, Stone did. The ride was as rugged as the men themselves, intense and exhilarating. The bruises lingered almost a week; the raw excitement, tinged as it was with fear, still endured in memory.

The Apogee was dropping in toward the Lassiter pressure skin and Jarrat was talking to Kip Reardon. He angled a curious frown at Stone, feeling the shiver of reaction to the storm of memory, and wondering what inspired it. Not for the first time, Stone was glad Jarrat did not share his actual thoughts. He would explain the churning of his feelings as sim ghosts, memories of events which had never taken place. The reality was complicated, and he had no desire to delve years into the past, long before Jarrat had been assigned to the *Athena*. Kevin had his own wild times, and he rarely spoke of them. Stone was not about to intrude. When Jarrat wanted to share something, he would say it.

"There's no room in the house here," Reardon was saying, "but you're welcome to crash at the shack — the cottage on the Peach Gate, maybe fifty, sixty meters away, other side of the berry paddock. Nobody's there right now, Paul says the keeper just shot over to Tharsis, some family squabble. He won't be back for a couple of days. The fridge should be stocked. Make yourselves at home."

"We will," Jarrat assured him. "Like I said, we're grounded till whatever Friedman's setting up comes together. This works out fine."

"The lock code is 788896, got it? I'll catch up with you tomorrow," Reardon said easily. "We've got family coming out from the city tonight, it's going to be quite the reunion. There's a couple of decent games on, if you're interested. The rugby's streamed from Earth, but the aeroball's homegrown. It's the playoffs, today and tomorrow. The Mons Bronze, out of Olympus, play the Barsoom Boomers, from Tharsis, tonight, then the Marsport Red-sands play the Chryse Goldiggers tomorrow."

"Welcome home," Jarrat said with amusement. "Later, Kip. Enjoy."

As he shut down the comm the Apogee cruised out of Gate 16, and the lights of Lassiter were coming on, right across the settlement. The brightest lights were from the town itself, forming a crescent along the perimeter, but shacks and cottages were scattered right across the 'paddocks' where fruit grew in profusion.

The water cannons were on in the purple dusk, spraying great arcs across orchards and vineyards. Jarrat took the Apogee up to almost the height of the pressure skin, and they saw the shack, nestled in between the strawberry paddock and the stone fruit groves. Beyond were grapes, olives, tomatoes, apiaries, and more keepers' cottages.

The air temperature was falling with evening. Outside, on the unprotected surface, it would already be freezing. Inside, it was 16 C, with a light, warm breeze, and the *jet-jet-jet* sound of the water cannons. The air was sweet with blossom, laden with moisture, while the stars were already blazing. Stone went ahead to open up the shack while Jarrat called the carrier and briefed Petrov. Harry stood just inside an arched garden gate where cherries and avocados grew cheek by jowl with almonds and tangerines, all of them genetically redesigned to thrive in the same conditions.

"Reminds you of home?" Stone guessed as the shack opened itself up. The lights were coming on, the a/c and the comm system. Jarrat was still in the Apogee, talking to the ops room.

"It does, but it doesn't," Harry admitted. "It's too perfect, if that makes sense. At home, it's too hot, or too humid, too windy, the air's thick with mosquitoes and the stink of the manure on Tansy's roses, you're watching for snakes out of the forest, the yellow-jackets are after the burgers you just set out for dinner, the neighbor's dogs are barking up a storm, and somebody upwind just top-dressed his vineyard. God, I miss it."

Stone shared the moment of humor. "It must be great to know where you're from, have a place to go back to and feel your roots in the ground." He gestured upward, through the pressure skin, at the bright blue spark in the eastern sky. Earth was rising, beautiful and deceptively serene. "They say you can't go back, and they're right. I felt like an alien. Kevin did the tourist thing, he didn't mind being an alien, but ... damnit, I don't know what I'd expected."

"Let it go," Harry advised. "Seriously, Stoney. In your mind you're still trying to go back when, academically and emotionally, you know you can't,

and it hurts. Let go, look forward. Where do you want to be? Focus on that."

"Where do I want to be?" Stone dropped his head back, worked his neck to and fro. "I don't know, Harry, and that's the truth. NARC's the only place I belong, but it's unraveling, isn't? People like Sorenson will take it apart."

"Not if he's connected to Aphelion, and you bust him."

"Aphelion." Stone squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and then stirred with an effort as Jarrat lifted himself out of the Apogee and dropped the canopy. "One thing at a time, Harry. You hungry?"

"Ravenous," he admitted. "Getting furious works up an appetite. Kip tells me there's a diner down in the town that used to do decent yiros and sushi."

"I heard that," Jarrat said as he approached. "Petrov and Cantrell have the situation covered. McKinnen's following up data leads she teased out of the DAC intel. She's after this Marcel Oliver character, digging deeper into the QuantumCyber documents, which she can do legally, up to a point, because it's a public company. Budweisser's liaising with Arago ... our comm arrays have mysteriously gone dark, or will in the next ten minutes! Messages are accumulating from Central, demanding reports on the death of Leo Michiko. Gene's handing out the official version, with Harry's file appended, including the virtual post mortem results. Michiko himself is well enough to be getting right up Petrov's nose, riding him about security. Blue Raven is on launch standby, more or less around the clock. End of mission report."

"Dinner," Stone decided.

The diner was a truckstop on Gate 14, where twenty heavy wagons were drawn up in a rank outside the pressure skin, at the head of the access road from the expressway. The music was too loud, the company was rowdy, but the food was good. They were finished dinner when the convoy crew from Tharsis left, and house grew quieter. Locals glared after them, but the truckers were big-spending regulars, too good for business to be barred. Stone waved for the waiter and another Irish coffee, and as Harry slid into an intimate discussion with Lassiter's resident physician, he felt himself begin to unwind at last.

Jarrat had been watching him for an hour, apparently waiting for the tight-wound springs to relax. "About time," he said quietly, sketching a salute with his mug. "You want to talk about it?"

"No," Stone said honestly.

"It's not healthy to seal it up inside," Jarrat observed.

"I don't want to do that either." Stone sat back, regarding his partner through a veil of steam, caffeine and alcohol vapors. "There's nothing to talk about, Kevin. But I'd welcome the chance to lay some ghosts ... as well."

"As well as —?" The gray eyes were closer to green-gold than silver in the diner's lights, and glittering with amusement. Jarrat drained his mug in one swig. He left a handful of five- and ten-credit bills on the table and gave Stone a sultry look over one shoulder, on his way to the door. "We're leaving, Harry. You remember the key code?"

"Not a chance," the healer called from the table in the corner, where he

and the local doctor seemed settled in for the evening. The woman was tiny, ancient, frail as a little bird, with more than a century's experience. Harry was picking her brains, and she was amused to know it. "So don't lock up," he sang after Jarrat as he stepped out.

"Don't hurry home," Jarrat warned.

Harry shot a look at him, chuckled into his bourbon, and turned back to the country doctor. "Boys will be boys."

The shack was dim, warm, companionable. The keeper who roomed there liked camellias, drank vodka, smoked kip grass and jasmine, and preferred a band called Aries. The three rooms were a comfortable clutter of abandoned magazines, music cubes, empty bottles in odd places. The bed was wide, firm, but neither of them made it so far. The hunger had been growing in Stone since they left the facility outside Marsport, and Jarrat was not surprised to be jumped on the threshold.

The windows were open. The constant breeze from the wind machines carried the heavy scent of night-blooming flowers. The water cannons had stopped now, and the night had become unnaturally quiet, to the ears of one accustomed to Darwin's, Rethan or Earth itself, where background sound was perpetual. Stone listened to it for a moment, unable to shake off the oddness of hearing only silence. Even Jarrat, who had grown up inside a 'gas can with lights', was aware of the quiet. Sheckley was never silent, always thrumming with the constant noise of machines.

And then Stone set aside the strangeness and caught him in both arms. Jarrat let himself be caught, welcomed the hands that deftly stripped him, and when he found himself in a tangle of cushions and throw rugs on the floor under the windows, he only wriggled to comfort and gave Stone the same sultry look he had seen at the diner. Stone dropped his own clothes fast, with little regard for where they were strewn. His eyes were on Jarrat, bare and amber in the soft lights, and he was haunted by the mirage of the Companion who had never existed outside a VR simulation. His belly twisted on the memory, and Jarrat took a sharp breath.

"What is it? Stoney, goddamn it!" He reached up, caught Stone by the shoulders and dumped him into the cushions.

"There's better things you could do with that beautiful mouth than talk," Stone said ruefully. He traced the line of Jarrat's lips. "Not now, Kevin. Later, when we're through with Aphelion."

Jarrat sighed resignedly. "I guess you know best."

His breath was hot on Stone's skin, his tongue left a moist trail from breast to belly, and Stone could barely breathe as he was mapped, feature by feature, by hands that knew him as well as he knew himself. Jarrat's teeth raised swift brands along the line of his hip. Darts of sensation whipped along his nerve fibers and sent the blood pulsing into his cock, and Stone cried out as Kevin's right fist clenched about him. The empathic shields had fallen and were forgotten as Jarrat sprawled, hot and hard along his side, and Stone hunted for his mouth. The kiss stole the breath out of his lungs. His arms

closed around Jarrat, holding him in a desperate embrace, as if he were afraid of losing him.

The empathic bond sang with shared resonance. Stone could no longer tell which were his own emotions and sensations, and which were Jarrat's. He knew he was leaving bruises along Jarrat's arms — he felt them in his own sinews — and when Kevin lifted his head to breathe, Stone willed himself to relax. He mumbled an apology, but Jarrat would have none of it.

"You're not going to break me," Kevin said breathlessly. "I'm a big boy, Stoney. I know what you want, and how you want it. I can *feel* it."

"I guess you can." Stone took a breath and took Jarrat's face between his hands. "I meant what I said about laying ghosts. To rest, that is."

"I know what you meant." Jarrat leaned down and kissed him. His tongue was restless in Stone's mouth and he said huskily, slurred against Stone's lips, "Turn over."

Desire was overwhelming, the need to be possessed, to feel Jarrat big and hot in him, driving out the thoughts that harassed him. Stone's heavy eyes surveyed his partner's body from the long, bronze legs and the daunting erection, to the wide shoulders and the smooth planes of his chest. "I haven't said it in a long time," he whispered. "You're beautiful, and I love you."

The bond rippled with emotion, a melange of lust and love. If feelings were colors, Stone felt the whole spectrum. Jarrat smiled. "You don't have to say it. You *feel* it. Like this." He closed his eyes, and the riptide of emotion hit Stone like a body blow.

He caught his breath, tipped back his head and savored it. Words were a pale substitute, he thought, and he wondered fleetingly how ordinary people muddled through, denied this communication.

At last Jarrat laid his lips against Stone's ear and whispered, "Turn over."

He looked up out of slitted eyes, and with a soft sound that mocked only himself, did as he was asked. He had only to relax into the mound of throw rugs, and Jarrat's hands were on his back in one long caress that began at his nape, flowed to his buttocks and spread him. He groaned as saliva slicked him, but moments later it was Jarrat who gave a deep, bass rumble, like the rasping purr of a big cat, as he was inundated with everything Stone felt, from the eddies and currents flowing from raw nerve endings to the most tenuous emotion.

The bond fluoresced in rainbow colors behind Stone's eyelids, and the last remnants of coherent thought spiraled away in the storm of pure sensation.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jay Friedman called at late twilight with an edgy note in his voice that, in an instant, dispelled the languor of the day's waiting. Jarrat set aside the iced soda water he had just poured and the Apogee's keys were in his hand as Friedman said tersely,

"You have fifty minutes dead, Stone. He'll be at one specific place in Goldstream Stadium, Chryse, and he'll wait for ten minutes. Where are you?"

"Not far away. We're in Lassiter, and we're leaving right now," Stone told him. "Goldstream's not just going to let us walk in."

"They'll bloody invite you in, if you're with the Tac security corps," Friedman said in brittle tones. Meet me at Gate 4, on the south boundary, in twenty minutes. I'll have the ID to get you where you need to go. And then, for chrissakes be careful."

Jarrat's head lifted. "There's trouble brewing?"

The Tactical man skipped a beat. "There's always trouble brewing, Jarrat. Between you and me, I'd string Bram Sorenson up by his balls, but try saying that on the public nets in this system! There'll be a protest at the game. The Redsands are playing the Golddiggers, it's a sellout, GlobalNet is streaming it everywhere. It's the perfect venue for a protest, and we can just pray to any god you want to mention to make it well behaved."

They were out of the keeper's shack, and the Apogee's canopy was whining up. "Gate 4, south boundary," Stone said to the comm, "in twenty. Just be there, Friedman. Your man's set up his meet in public, in the middle of eighty thousand game fans, in front of about a hundred viddrones. We're lucky to get this — the fact is, he doesn't trust Tactical or NARC to protect him. He'll be too twitchy to give us a second shot."

"And I don't blame him," Friedman said acidly, before the line went dead.

"Fifty minutes isn't long," Jarrat warned. "Who's flying?"

"Let me." Stone held out a hand, and Jarrat tossed the keys into it. "I know this area pretty well. A blind man couldn't miss the stadium, but you could easily spend ten minutes trying to connect with Friedman." He settled himself in the pilot's seat and brought down the canopy.

"9.4 to *Athena*," Jarrat was saying to the comm. He had jacked into the onboard system and set the encryption at level five.

"Ops room." Cantrell's voice. "Showtime?"

"Showtime," Jarrat affirmed. "It's Goldstream Stadium, Chryse, and Friedman just told us there's going to be trouble."

"It's been on the newsvids," Cantrell told him. "There's a protest group from the victim support group, Vista, which is some acronym —"

"Victim Support and Therapy Association," Stone said grimly. "They've been around for decades but they're local to Mars and the belt cities. They're legal, funded by public donation. Doctors and lawyers donate their time. If they're behind the protest, it won't be a riot."

"You mean," Cantrell argued, "it'll be *planned* peaceful, the same as the protest at the docks over on Darwin's, the day you got in on the *Stardust*."

"Yeah," Jarrat allowed as the Apogee lifted and Stone took it high up over the paddocks, back to the Gate. "Why don't we launch Blue Raven?"

"Why don't we?" Stone agreed.

"Done." Cantrell paused to cut into the intership loop. "Blue Raven, launch procedures." Then, to Jarrat and Stone, "I'll crank up the ops room and call Friedman. The gunship launch is supposed to be his call, since we're not actually on assignment here."

Stone dropped the aircraft neatly into the 'lock. "I doubt you'll get an argument, Gene. You're tracking us?"

"We've got you," Cantrell assured him. "You're leaving Lassiter ... you'll make Chryse in fifteen — ten, if you don't keep to the civvy traffic lanes."

"Call it fifteen," Jarrat mused. "This is not the time to get pulled over by some zealous Tac squad. And Friedman won't be showing at Goldstream for twenty. He's arranging ID, without which we'd never get in at all."

"Copy that," Cantrell said bitterly. "You guys keep your eyes wide open. There's one hell of a shindig brewing. I'm monitoring the Tac high bands right now. They're setting up a mobile command at the stadium right now ... it's not Vista that's the problem. They've had tipoffs, there's elements of three or four rent-a-riot groups, all with valid tickets and probably already in the stadium. Goldstream security isn't qualified to cope, but they're trying."

"Thanks for the heads up." Stone nudged the Apogee on through the 'lock as it cycled. Before it had closed behind him, he had taken the plane in a wide arc over the angle of the Lassiter pressure skin, and ramped the jets.

They joined the air traffic lanes which followed the sweep of the expressway, and Stone shut back the jets to match speed with the fast lanes. The pace was infuriating, but Tactical was abroad in force tonight — they saw three squaddies within the first twenty kilometers of the Lassiter exit. Tac was prepared for trouble tonight, and they would certainly stop a maverick. Jarrat was eavesdropping on the carrier's priority comm and said quietly,

"Blue Raven is in the air. Tanya Reynolds is flying, Eve and Curt are in the ops room, wrangling flight data, Bud has the engineer's tractor on standby. We're covered."

"You feel safe?" Stone asked acerbically.

"Nope." Jarrat had twisted in the seat and was punching a key code into the locker under it.

From the molded interior he lifted a matched pair of Colts, both carrying a complete load and full charge of power and gas. The weapons were slightly

different from his own, newer, not as customized, but there was still a comfortable familiarity as one of the pair fit into his palm.

The comm loop was strangely quiet. The whisper of background voices from the hangar crew was absent, and from the ops room he heard only Gable. In the foreground, Reynolds reported the gunship on descent vectors, and from the jump bay Gil Cronin was saying to Gable,

“We can put five on the ground, and stretch it to seven if we field the medic and the field tech. What do you need?”

“Refer that one to Raven Leaders,” Gable advised. “9.4, 7.1, you listening in?”

“We’re online,” Jarrat affirmed, “but I’d hold up, wait till we get a look at the situation, firsthand. Friedman seems to have put everything he has in the field. Tactical might be able to lock this down on their own, no need for us to butt in. Give ’em a chance to do their own job.”

“Copy that, easy money,” Cronin responded. “We’ve got the game on here, they just said it’s a sellout, old rivalry between Marsport and Chryse. Whatever Tac’s gonna do — shit, or *us* — we’ll be performing for every homeworlds vidnet.”

“So make it clean, guys,” Stone said wryly. “Give ’em nothing to bitch about in the morning.”

The flattened, ten-kilometer dome of Chryse was brilliant in the gathering night. To the north, the Arago tower was illuminated like a light sculpture; to the south, Goldstream Stadium was connected to the main pressure skin by the kilometer-long Meridian Mall. And Stone was right, Jarrat decided. The place was a maze, more complex and confusing than Chell’s dockside warren because Chryse and its environs were designed around an array of lockin, lockout structures. The parking garages were ten levels high with another twenty sunk underground, and the entry lines were already so long, it would take the better part of an hour just to get into Chryse, much less into the stadium. Jarrat was looking out for Tac 101 — he had picked up their comm minutes before — but it was Stone who saw it first.

“There they are, the comm truck set up on top of the GlobalNet building, see? I’m heading that way.”

The building was four distinct towers, linked and interconnected with more than a hundred transit tubes which formed a glistening web, filled with light and the moving ant-shapes of people. It stood just south of Gate 4, beside a massive neon board reading, ‘Chryse Portal 4, best for Goldstream, Meridian, south-nine residential and crosstown exchange. Form four lanes.’

The Apogee bobbed up out of the traffic stream, and at once two Tactical squads dropped in on its flanks. Stone gave them a wave and switched down to the public band. “Hi, guys. We’re headed over to GlobalNet.”

A taut, stressed voice that might have been female, demanded, “What’s your business there?”

“Colonel Jay Friedman is coming in. We’re supposed to meet him,” Stone said with deliberate calm.

"Pull up and stay put right where you are," she barked. "We'll clear you to proceed — or not. Hold, now."

"Holding." Stone braked the Apogee to a buoyant dead stop. It wallowed on its repulsion cushion and he kicked on the parking tractors to hold it in place. To Jarrat he said quietly, "Friedman better not be late."

"He wants this as bad as we do." Jarrat adjusted the comm. "Raven Leader, looking for Colonel Friedman."

A crackle of static white noise sheeted out the band before Friedman said, "I'm three minutes out, there's plenty of time, what's your rush?"

Stone was watching the Tactical squad flyer to his right. "I'm looking at Chryse Tac squad 424. They're waiting for confirmation that we have any right to be in this zone ... and they'd love to bounce our asses right out. You want to buzz 'em and have a quiet word?"

"Will do," Friedman said darkly. "424?"

"Yep." Stone sat back and handed the Apogee to the automatics.

The traffic around the city was doubly bad because of the game, but the main freeways in most cities were comparable. What made Chryse more difficult was the airlock system. Locals would not even notice the delays at the Gates, but Jarrat felt his patience fraying around the edges. He glanced at his chrono for the fourth time in three minutes, and was about to make some blistering remark about Tactical in general and certain squads in particular, when 424 was back on the air.

"You check out, Apogee. Go ahead," the woman said grudgingly.

"Thanks, and take it easy." Stone spun the aircraft in its own length and bobbed high up above the GlobalNet roof, where the big, squat shape of the Tactical truck was parked at the middle of a knot of official vehicles.

The whole airpark was enclosed by a deceptively filmy pressure skin with 'locks at the cardinal points. Stone followed the running lights to the south 'lock and had dropped into the queue there when a starlight blue Chev Vantage nosed up alongside.

"You're on time," Friedman's voice said from the comm, distorted by heavy encryption. "I have your ID, and the security squads on Meridian Mall are expecting you. They've been told you're specialists who'll know the key players in the riot scene on sight. They're under orders to get you into the stadium fast."

"We have thirty minutes," Jarrat observed.

"You'll need all of them." Friedman paused as the 'lock depressurized to admit traffic, and the Apogee, the Chev and two smaller vehicles nosed in. Red lights stopped them while the 'lock blew back up to pressure, and Friedman went on, "You're meeting the man in the A27 corporate box. It belongs to QuantumCyber Systems, and he's in possession of a season pass. No one should be using the box tonight, this only being a quarter final. The big noises don't come in till the semi, and the real deal. Look at your CRT."

It was streaming data from Friedman, and Jarrat recognized the plan of the stadium. Friedman had already marked the fast-access points to get in

from the gold pass gates on the mall to the corporate level. Forty corporate boxes lined both long axes of the stadium, and A27 was flashing.

"Got it," he said quietly. "Who's your man, Colonel?"

An image of a male face replaced the chart. Jarrat leaned closer, for a better view of the small screen. Their contact was probably Eurasian or Latino-Eurasian, and past the first flush of youth — which described vast swathes of the population.

"Name?" Stone prompted.

"Jimmy Lo. He's has been an informant of mine for years now, and I've protected him, though there was a time he ran with some rough characters. Then his kid turned into an Angelhead, same old story. Popped the horse shit at a party, thinking it was chimera. The boy's still alive, but so brain damaged, he doesn't know what planet he's on. So ol' Jimmy Lo gets on the Vista bandwagon, suddenly he's trying to raise money for a cryotank for his boy, while there's still something to save. He's also an insider at QuantumCyber, albeit extremely junior. We were both hoping he could worm his way deep into the company, get the dirt on individuals I've been watching for months."

"You said QCS is legit," Jarrat said sharply. "You told us the company and its boss, Marcel Oliver, are on the right side of the law."

"They are, Jarrat," Friedman said shortly. "Oliver hasn't shown up on my personal shitlist — yet. You people seem to have data on him I don't. Fair enough, this is your show. I've been after others, but Stone'll tell you, from Tactical's perspective, just because your suspect works at a major company doesn't automatically put the company on the wrong side of the law."

"I know that, Colonel," Jarrat snapped as the Apogee cruised in to park at the back of the Tac 101 vehicle.

The canopy popped, and he swung his legs out. Friedman was parking on the other side of the command truck, while Jarrat settled the Colt in the curve of his back, concealed by a light canvas jacket. Stone had remained in the Apogee, and the jets were idling. The repulsion blustered, hot and dry, as Jarrat made his way around to the Chev. Friedman was out, and reaching back in for a handful of simple lapel tags. He peeled two off the top and slapped them into Jarrat's palm.

"You're already in the system. The Goldstream AI knows you. This ID will get you in, and get you anywhere. Just ... for godsakes watch out. To begin with, citybottom shooters have already taken two cracks at Jimmy Lo since he started to speak out on the city nets against syndicate bullshit. They can take another shot anytime, anywhere, and it'd be easy to get in their way. Add to that, there's one hell of a situation coming to the boil, and sweet fuck all I can do to stop it."

"They told us." Jarrat nodded upward, toward the carrier which was parked overhead, at Arago. "You spoke to Gene Cantrell? We can't field a full descant force, but we can put seven down, wherever you need them."

For a long moment Friedman looked sorely tempted. At last he licked his lips and said quietly, "I'll let you know if it gets away from us. This is the

heartland of Mars, Jarrat. Jesus God, riot troops on the street here? I could get skinned alive for authorizing yet ... but at the same time, there hasn't been this kind of riot on this planet in thirty years."

"Bram Sorenson," Jarrat observed.

"Speaking of whom," Friedman said bitterly, "he's at the game tonight. About ten percent of all the security Tac and Goldstream can rake together is guarding him, and I ask myself why I'm bothering. Let some young punk put a fucking bullet in him, and his bullshit's over."

"Is it?" Jarrat was not so sure. "You let him be martyred to the cause, Friedman, and somebody else with the power, like Charles Steinberg, moves in to fill the gap. They call Sorenson their dead hero, and the crusade is on."

"Maybe," Friedman allowed. "Christ, who knows? And we don't have time to stand here chatting about it! Move yourself, kid."

Jarrat indulged himself in a chuckle. "I had a drill sergeant who sounded exactly like that. I wonder if you're related?"

The colonel lifted one finger at him as he jogged back to the Apogee, and before he had run up the harness, Stone was off. One ID tag clipped through the fabric of his own shirt, the other grabbed into Stone's. The tiny claws were smart; the tags could not be removed without the remote key. Jarrat settled a comm over his ear and said quietly into the NARC loop,

"9.4 to Blue Raven 6, where are you?"

"Close enough to Chryse to see the city lights," Cronin told him. "We're going to hold up here."

And Reynolds: "Any special instructions, Cap?"

"Not right now ... but stay on station." Jarrat was watching the traffic flash by as Stone dropped vertically through the lanes and nosed up to the 'locks at the foot of the pressure skin. Two Tac squads were parked there, waiting for them, and at a quiet word from Stone, the 'lock began to cycle.

Two meters inside the inner door, the flak-jacketed and helmeted figure of sergeant was waving for Stone to land inside the yellow-taped Tactical cordon. A pale blue Marshall runabout was idling there, red and white spinners strobing on its roof. In the interests of his irises, Jarrat looked away, and whistled softly.

Above and before him, expanding in every direction from the 'lock, was the city of Chryse. 'Monstrous' was too mild a word. Buildings grazed the pressure skin around every part of the periphery, while the heart of the city was a park, a square kilometer of tall trees and open water, mown grass and topiary, bisected by walking trails. Beyond the trees, the city reared like a fantasy backdrop, sparkling with light of every color, and the air was filled with scudding traffic.

He had time to give it all one glance before the sergeant who had waved them in to park was shouting at the driver of the runabout. "Get it in the air, Kirby. You know where you're going?"

Kirby was a young woman, shoulder-high to Jarrat, bulky in the customary flak-jacket, anonymous in the helmet. She gave the sergeant a mock

salute and beckoned the NARC men to the vehicle. "Get in, you don't have a lot of time."

"We have a fifteen minute window," Stone said with a glance at his chrono as he and Jarrat fed themselves into the cramped back of the runabout. "It should be plenty of time."

"You don't," Kirby argued in the clipped, brittle accent of Chryse as the Marshall hopped up over the trees, undercut the traffic lanes and headed fast for the gold pass portals to the stadium. "There's a lockdown in progress, they're not even sure the game is going to kickoff. It could be canceled. Jesus! We've got over eighty *thousand* in the stadium, including the bastard himself, Sorenson. If they cancel the game, there'll be hell to pay."

A lockdown? Jarrat glanced sidelong at Stone. "How long?"

"Ten minutes, max," Kirby guessed as she brought the Marshall to a shuddering stop in a short line of luxury cars. The gold pass portal was a three meter gate set in the bottom of a light-studded plascrete chute. Garish signs over the checkpoint proclaimed, 'Gold Pass entry only. Silver Pass turn left. Other ticket holders turn back. Stadium is closed. Prepare to be scanned. Speed zone 20.'

"A lockdown won't stop the riot," Stone warned. "You can order everybody with a ticket to get in a seat and stay in it, but that just gives the element you're trying to control a clear shot. They'll run right over the folks who're doing as they're told."

She twisted to look back at him. "I've never seen that."

"Not on Mars," Stone said bleakly. "How old are you? There hasn't been an Angelpack on Mars since before you were born."

"There isn't one here now," Kirby said levelly. "It's Vista protesting tonight. They're not some half-assed Angelpack. They're the opposite."

"You've also got rent-a-riot in here," Jarrat warned. "They take a serious, peaceful demonstration and turn it into a battlefield. You saw the vids from Darwin's? We were in the middle of that."

Her eyes narrowed. "NARCs. You *have* to be. The scuttlebutt is, the carrier's in orbit. The *Athena*. True? She was on GlobalNet when she drove insystem. Everybody watched it — damn, what a sight."

"Just get us into the stadium." Stone was looking at the time again, and he felt the clench of Jarrat's belly.

"One minute," Kirby swore, "soon as the gate clears. The gold pass access lanes run under the arena. I can drop you at the security lift for the A section. Ride right to the top and turn left. Box A27 is maybe forty meters away. Got it?"

"Got it," Stone said dryly. "You enjoy this job, don't you?"

She shot a half-guilty glance back at him and grinned. "I *love* this job, Captain. I'd tell you it was better than sex, but mama told me it's not polite to lie. And here we go."

The gate was barely open when she slewed the Marshall over, skidded around the queued Volvo and Rand limousines, and bounced through into the

transit tube ahead of them. The speed zone might have been 20kph, but Kirby's foot was flat on the firewall. Strip lights in the plascrete ceiling and walls stretched and merged into neon-white lines, until she was braking again, as hard as she had accelerated. The runabout slammed to a halt in the yellow-striped 'no standing' zone beside the tall, black enamel lifts.

It was still rocking when Jarrat slid out. "Thanks for the ride, Kirby."

"Pleasure's all mine," she assured him. "I'm supposed to park it here and wait for you guys. Make your way back when you can ... *if* you can."

If? Jarrat lifted a brow at Stone, and they switched both comsets down to the Tac bands. They had been listening to Blue Raven and the carrier, calm and quiet crosstalk, and Jarrat felt the kick through every nerve as Tac signals replaced the NARC radio chatter. It seemed twenty squads were shouting on the air, some yelling for backup, others barking warnings into an already cluttered loop.

They were punching for the lift, and after a moment's delay while their ID was scanned, it opened. The interior was mirror-lined, scented with lilac, cushioned by ridiculously serene muzak. "It's chaos," Stone said bleakly. "If Friedman doesn't get a grip on this, we'll be deploying Blue Raven."

"On Mars? Shock, horror." Jarrat glared at his reflection in the opposite wall as the lift went up fast. "It's Friedman's call, Stoney. If anyone gets roasted by the media tomorrow, it'll be him, and you know he's thinking about his pension. He's older than that old mate of yours, Vic Duggan. They get cautious when retirement's right around the corner."

"Friedman's putting his ass on the line to get us in," Stone argued.

"True," Jarrat allowed, "and he's a hell of a lot easier to deal with than Pete Stacy." The lift was ten levels from the top, and he drew the Colt. With the ease of long familiarity he primed it, checked charge and load, and thumbed off the safety. "Christ, here we go again."

The twist of fear which he had long ago recognized as stage fright coiled like a serpent through his belly, and Stone muttered a curse. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Jarrat tuned out the instinctual fear. "I had enough good sense to be scared long before Death's Head got hold of me, which is probably the reason I'm still alive."

Central's shrinks would have called it post trauma syndrome, and in fleeting episodes they might have been right. Jarrat lived with it, looked the demon in the eye when it raised its head, and refused to be intimidated. The demon usually backed off, until next time.

The lifts opened into a deceptively quiet passage. On the inside were the closed doors of dark offices, on the outside, the arched entrances of the private boxes. Overhead monitors had been set up to display the game, but as Jarrat and Stone jogged toward A27, the CRTs were showing scenes of carnage, from the grandstands to the parking garages.

"Chaos," Jarrat said grimly. "You ever seen anything like this?"

"On Mars? No. It could get pretty dire, but the riots were about poverty and privation, poor folks living on the wrong side of Marsport while the

Chryse fat cats strut by and flaunt their wealth. They can drive people wild. You didn't see it on Sheckley?"

"No." Jarrat slowed as they approached A27. "You didn't have a rich class cruising by in their sports flyers. Everybody's dirt poor and working hard to get out. Nothing's changed, you saw it for yourself a few weeks ago."

At the arch opening into the corporate box, they came to a halt. Jarrat's eyes widened in the half-darkness as he looked in, but all he saw was the backwash of the stadium lights which streamed through the wide panes of armorglass. Three screens showed various angles of the field, where the aeroball court had been rolled into place. Smoke grenades had detonated in the grandstands, casting palls of green and red which fogged the image. The box's own lights were dark, and the shadows had coagulated.

"Jimmy Lo?" Stone called quietly. "Jimmy Lo, if you're still here, we're right on time. Look at your chrono. Right time, right place. Nobody but you and Jay Friedman and us knows to be here."

A shape moved in the most dense of the shadows. Jarrat made out a face, but before he could speak it was gone again. A voice whispered out of the back corner of the box, between the AutoChef and the bathroom, "I made a mistake, should never have brought you here."

"No," Jarrat said quickly. "You know who we are? We need what you know. You give us the details, and we can protect you."

"Bullshit," Lo said acidly. "You couldn't even protect Ino. You had him on a fuckin' carrier, and they got him under your noses!"

"That's not true either," Stone said in level tones. He took a breath and looked at Jarrat; Jarrat nodded in agreement. "Inoshiro Carvoni's not dead," Stone said into the shadows.

The man did not respond for some moments, and then the anger was naked in his voice. "Don't lie to me! I didn't come here to be sold a crock!"

"It's no lie." Jarrat stepped into the box and looked into the shadows, letting his eyes adjust. "You know what he calls himself these days?"

"I heard. Michiko. Nice name," Lo said nastily. "Nice life he's been living out there for twenty-five fucking years, while the rest of us went to hell."

Stone moved to Jarrat's shoulder. "It just took Michiko a while to catch you up. He's officially dead, his assets are frozen, he doesn't have a credit or a colonial dollar to his name. His diplomas, his visas, even his license to drive a vehicle, have all been canceled, and if he shows his face outside the sanctuary of the carrier, he won't live long. I'd say he's followed you to hell."

The anger was appeased, and the moving shadow stepped forward into the half-light. "The second I talk to you, I'm dogmeat."

"I told you," Jarrat repeated, "we can keep you safe, same as Michiko's safe. We know you have a kid who doesn't have long to live. We can also get you a cryogen tank."

"We might," Stone said slowly, "be able to do better than that. Kevin?"

"Have Harry take a look at the kid," Jarrat agreed.

"Harry?" Lo echoed.

"A healer," Stone told him. "A mutoid. You have a problem with that?"

The man's face was a tortured mask. "Time was, I'd have said mutoids should be kept somewhere, till they figure out how to cure them, and then I heard about the *healers*. You know about my kid? All right. The truth is, I'd go to the village fucking *witchdoctor* if I thought it'd give my kid a chance."

Jarrat was moving. "Then, come with us. There isn't much time."

The words might have been a trigger. Before Jarrat had finished speaking, a siren sliced through the stadium from the pitch to the top deck of the grandstand, right under the Goldstream pressure dome. For a moment Jarrat thought it was Tac signaling the lockdown, but every CRT in the box had flicked over to internal messaging.

Under the wail of the siren, the androgynous voice of the stadium AI murmured, mellifluous and mellow, as if nothing could go wrong, "Warning. Fire alert in sections A through E. All persons, evacuate through emergency fire escapes. Warning. Firefoam will be released in thirty seconds in sections A through E. Warning. Emergency fire escapes 7 through 16 are impassable. Warning. All persons evacuate through fire escapes 17 through 40. Warning —" Jarrat stopped listening.

"We're in the A section," Stone was saying as he consulted the chart which had come up on the CRTs. His fingertips traced their level and the surrounds. "And we're right in the middle of the zone where the emergency escapes have failed. Where are 17 through 40?"

"Down," Lo rasped. "There." He was at the observation panes, pointing into the cauldron of the arena.

The pitch was a fracas. Goldstream Arena officials, safety personnel, ticket holders, Vista's protest group and the professional riot which had infiltrated them, were thrashing in the lower grandstands and right across the football field. Eight Tactical squads were in the air over the pitch, trying to herd them away from the center of the fire danger, and Jarrat saw at once, the major hazard was in the body of the stadium, perilously close to the corporate deck.

"Warning," the AI murmured, "firefoam will be released in ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven —"

"We're not going to get out that way," Jarrat said quietly. "We can't go down, and with the passages flooded with foam, the top levels will be impassable, or at least unbreathable."

The roar of the foam release thundered through the upper levels. In seconds it would fill the service crawl spaces, the lift shafts, and most compartments where the fire had encroached. Oxygen would be eliminated, and for an hour those areas would be deadly.

"Suits, breather masks?" Stone suggested.

"Maybe." Jarrat was listening. "But ... you hear that?"

Jimmy Lo was showing the whites of his eyes like spooked animal. "Hear what? *What*, damnit?"

The sound was twisting metal and shearing plascrete. "I hear it," Stone

said bleakly. "We need to be out, and fast, not paddling around in firefoam, looking for a lift that still works."

"How about up?" Jarrat was at the windows, looking up past the lighting towers, at the pressure skin. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably." Stone clicked the comm over to the NARC band, and at once Tanya Reynolds was insistent in his ear.

"Blue Raven to Raven Leaders, for godsakes! 7.1, 9.4, where are you? Raven Leaders, respond immediately."

"We're safe," Stone told her, "for the moment. They just foamed the fire in the upper levels, and we're looking for a way out. What worries us is, it sounds like there's structural damage down below. Any way you can tap into the Goldstream AI?"

"Me? Not a chance," Reynolds scoffed. "Let me raise Mac. What do you want from the AI?"

The sounds of twisting metal had stopped, but Jarrat was far from complacent, and Jimmy Lo was close to panic. He caught the man by both shoulders, not surprised to find him shaking. He was reed thin, not quite Jarrat's height, but much lighter. Jarrat's grip tightened on him, commanding attention, and Lo's head snapped around. "Listen to me," Jarrat said loudly. "He's talking to the gunship. We're getting out. You know the stadium well enough to find your way around?"

"May-maybe," Lo stammered. "We can't get out!"

"You think?" Jarrat demanded. "We're not going down, Lo, we're looking for a way up. Think! You know the stadium, or not?"

His brain was kicking back into gear, but he was still blank and Jarrat let him go. "He's no use," he said to Stone. "Stay on the NARC band." He was clicking up to the high Tac frequencies as he spoke, and called, "Friedman? This is Jarrat, looking for Friedman. Come on, man, I know you're there!"

Tactical was at full-stretch, with Hazmat, Fire Control and Medevac coming in from every part of Chryse. Friedman would be wrangling data from Tac 101, on the top of the GlobalNet building. He sounded, Jarrat thought, like a man caught in the middle of his worst nightmare. "I'm here, Jarrat, but I don't have time for your goddamned heroics! Get yourselves out of there."

"We will," Jarrat barked. "I assume you're liaising with Goldstream."

"Duh. Make it fast," Friedman warned.

"We're in box A27, we want a way up, not down. Get us to the airpark. And while you're doing it, make bloody sure your driver, Officer Kirby, is out of the gold pass parking garage."

"Hold," Friedman rasped, and the line whited out.

Stone was watching the chaos down in the arena. "Any joy?"

"Give him a chance. Where's Blue Raven?"

"Five thousand meters downrange, coming in way above the civvy traffic lanes. I'd ask Friedman to route air traffic the hell out of their way, but I don't think Chryse Tac has the manpower left. Blue Raven is going to kick on every spinner and flood they have. If the traffic doesn't see them coming ... well,

the city must be licensing a lot of blind drivers. McKinnen's on her way up to the ops room right now."

"Good enough," Jarrat decided, and paused to listen to the building under their feet. "It's ... quieter."

"That's when they can be at their most dangerous." Stone's tongue flicked out to moisten his lips. "You feel how hot it's getting? I think the fire found a way to run *down*, as well as up. I have a feeling there's a pit right under the grandstand that's molten, and it's getting a lick of oxygen from somewhere."

"The priority access tunnels to the parking garages," Jarrat guessed. It'll be sucking hard enough for Fire Control to find it and plug it ... except, that's got to be where 17 to 40 exit. Plug it to save the rest of the stadium and you lose a lot of lives."

"Oh gods, oh gods," Jimmy Lo was whimpering. He had settled in the corner where they had first seen him as a moving shadow, and was curled into a fetal knot.

The heat was rising steadily, and Jarrat was not surprised when the CRTs darkened and the stadium lights died. Red emergency lights cast bloody, macabre shadows, and the darkness seemed hotter. Jarrat was intent on Stone, who was listening to Blue Raven, until Friedman's voice rasped over the Tac loop. "You still alive, Jarrat?"

"Still," Jarrat told him. "Which way?"

"You're going up the service tunnel for the mains conduit," Friedman said shortly. "Kirby bugged out five minutes ago, and I'm going to pass you to Goldstream. I've got Hazmat and Medevac fighting over too few 'locks, Jarrat, there's nothing I can do for you." He paused and added, "Good luck, kid," before the Tac loop went quiet, replaced by a single voice.

"Captain Jarrat, my name is Rafe Holt. I'm a structural engineer, and if you and your party are capable of walking, I'll get you out of there."

"We are," Jarrat told him. "Where do we go?"

The voice was deep, level, with one of the Earth accents, Jarrat did not know which. "How many of you are there, and what are your injuries?"

"Three, no injuries ... one bad case of panic." Jarrat hauled Jimmy Lo to his feet. "We're moving. We're looking for a way to the airpark ... we have a gunship coming in, if you can get us to the pressure skin. Be aware," he added bleakly, "mains power is out on this level, we're listening to major damage down below, and we *think* there's one hell of a fire down there."

"There is," Holt said calmly, "but you're going in the opposite direction and ... well, I'm looking at your gunship, Captain. I can see it from Tac 101. Your people are holding, thirty meters above the pressure skin. All we have to do is connect the dots."

"Can you get into the Goldstream mainframe?" Jarrat asked shrewdly.

"From Tac 101, no. I don't have the gear." Holt hesitated.

"Are you in contact with Goldstream security personnel, who could make the access codes available?"

"No, but I'm trying to track them down." Holt sounded shrewd. "What did you want to do?"

"Forget it, leave it to our people. Just guide us out," Jarrat rasped.

"Step out of A47 and turn left. Follow the emergency lights in the floor for twenty meters, and find a door on your right. Tell me when you have it."

"We will. Don't go anywhere." Jarrat had Lo by the left upper arm, and propelled him toward the door. "Stoney? We're in business."

"Right behind you," Stone promised. "Jesus, it's getting hot. Cronin, Ramos and Semler are suited and in the jump bay."

"Connect the dots," Jarrat said breathlessly as he made his way through dense darkness in which the red glow of emergency lights was lurid. He saw the door a moment later and said, "Okay, Holt, where to now?"

Holt was back at once. "Through the door is an office. It opens onto a passage with elevator access. Ignore the lifts. Go *right* ten meters and get back to me when you see a door marked 'Authorized Personnel Only.'"

The door was locked, and with the power out Friedman's ID tags were useless. Stone had his own Colt in his hand, and while Jarrat kept a grip on Lo, he carved the door out of its mountings. The office within was a snowstorm of debris, still airborne and whirling in the red emergency lighting. Jarrat thrust Lo into the blizzard as Stone went ahead.

Yvette McKinnen chose that moment to respond, but Stone was not about to stop. Jarrat knew intuitively what he was doing, and let him talk. "Hold it, Mac," Stone said loudly, "we don't have the time! Can you hack the Goldstream AI, and can you do it bloody damned fast?" He stopped to listen, and Jarrat let him concentrate.

The office's inside door was not locked, but inoperative in the blackout. Again, Stone used the Colt to cut it out of the wall, and he led the way into a uterine darkness beyond. The emergency lights were dead here, and Jarrat swore softly as they began to feel their way with fingertips, judging the ten meters and hunting for the shape of a door.

"Either nobody's serviced the emergency systems in way too long," he growled, "or there's more structural damage than we guessed."

"Both." Stone was a pace ahead of him, breaking trail. "Have you felt the wall? Okay, Mac, I'm listening."

The wall against which Jarrat was sliding seemed to be thrumming, an offbeat cadence rather than a rhythm. This part of the building was moving like the branch of a tree shifting in the wind. Major formers must have sheared, many more had warped, leaving little supporting the upper decks, where the stadium was top-heavy with its executive airpark.

"Okay, Mac, see what you can do," Stone said bleakly.

She was attempting to get far enough into the Goldstream AI's core systems to have it shut down the gravity generators. Mars's natural gravity was only one third of Earth's normal 'G,' and the gamble they were playing was a good one. Shut off the full gravity, and maybe enough of the stadium's structure remained for it to hold itself up. The difficulties were immense. This

AI was far from rudimentary. It was smart, and guarded by a jungle of defense mechanisms. Jarrat had no doubt McKinnen could get through. The question was, could she get through fast enough?

"Door," Stone said tersely. "I can't *see* it, but I'm feeling a sign mounted head-high. I'm assuming it's the 'Authorized Personnel Only' door."

"We've got your door," Jarrat told Holt. "You want it open?"

"Carefully," Holt insisted. "The mains are two meters inside. On your *left* as you enter, you'll find a complete maintenance kit. Find the handlights and get them on. *Carefully*, Captain, please."

"Take it easy with this one, Stoney," Jarrat said with surreal calm. "The mains are right inside. Get us in, then grab Lo while I find us some lights. He's shaky on his feet."

"The mains are right inside," Stone muttered. "Perfect. Where else would they be? Damnit!"

He was feeling his way around the whole door. Jarrat was aware of the shift of his leg muscles, the tingle in his hands as he charted a tactile landscape he could not see. Stone also was calm, though sweat trickled down his spine, tickling there, and salt stung his eyes.

"Got it," he said a moment later.

Jarrat turned his head away from the raucous din as the Colt chewed through the door in short, staccato bursts of a few rounds each. Stone's aim was acute, cutting the plastex out while the rounds traveled almost along the plane of the wall. At last he stepped back, and Jarrat felt the solid impact through his own right foot, leg, hip, as Stone kicked it in. It gave with a high-pitched *crack* of ripping plastex.

Their informant shrieked as panic got the better of him, and only the complete darkness prevented him from bolting. Jarrat tightened his grip, and handed him to Stone. "Get a good hold on him, he's slithery. I know where the worklights should be. Where's Mac?"

"Doing what she does, fast as she knows how," Stone told him as he seized Lo bodily. "Give her a chance. It won't be easy. The day it is, she's out of business."

The worklights were arranged on one of several steel shelves, a meter inside the shattered door. Jarrat's palm recognized the shape, and squeezed it on. A triple beam of blue-white light picked out the inside of a three-meter compartment through which a cluster of five pipes, each as thick as his leg, arrowed straight up and down, through a transparent two-meter conduit. A rung ladder was fixed into the wall to his left, and he leaned out to angle the light up along it.

"I'm guessing we climb, Holt," he observed. "How far?"

The engineer was still with him, close enough for Jarrat to hear his breath over the audio pickup. "It's only three levels from your position to the airpark. From there, I have to get you to the pressure skin. I've spent the last five minutes trying everything I know to get you a Tactical pickup, but no joy, Captain. There's still many thousands of people in the stadium, and the only

good news is, the fire's been contained on one side of it. Tac is evacing several hundred wounded, and there's folks who won't make it if they don't get help fast. You're on your own."

"We always are." Jarrat was already on the ladder. "Shove Lo up after me," he said to Stone, though Stone was concentrating on the NARC loop. "If he's between us, he can't bolt."

Stone answered only with a nod, and said to the comm, "Copy that, Mac, and thanks. It'll make the way a lot easier from here on."

"The gravity generators —?" Jarrat hazarded.

"Goldstream call them *compensators*," Stone said dryly, "because they bump Mars gravity up to Earth normal. And they're about to shut down in about ten seconds."

"Hang onto Lo," Jarrat warned, "he'll freak."

"I expect him to." Stone had lifted Jimmy Lo onto the ladder and held him there, pinned tight.

As they had expected, Lo gave a tortured shriek, and only then realized what was happening. "Hey, guys, the gravity just —"

"So now you can fly up this ladder, can't you?" Stone barked. "Go!"

They went up fast. The natural Martian gravity rendered Stone under forty kilos, Jarrat much less, and Lo was a feather. More importantly, 62% of the vertical stress on the stadium's failing structure had been relieved, which bought them time. How *much* time was another question. The heat in the service tunnel was considerable. Jarrat did not think it was any worse than it had been ten minutes before, but the effects were cumulative.

The triple beam of the worklight cast wide disks over the top of the shaft, and as Jarrat stopped at the top rung and swung over onto the deck, he said to Holt, "Nowhere else to climb, but I'm seeing an access door."

And Holt: "It'll be jammed, there's no power. Cut it out the way you did the others. I heard what sounded like a machine pistol."

"Will do. Hold on." Jarrat had the Colt in both hands and was scything through the hatch even before Lo was on the deck behind him.

The plascrete blew out cleanly and he felt a draft of hot, smoky air on his face. He took Lo from Stone and stepped through. The pressure skin was thirty meters over his head — he could see the floods and spinners from the gunship — and all around, the stadium was wreathed in palls of gray smoke. Sirens blared constantly, and heavy engines growled on the other side of the arena. The rank smell of retardant foam was heavy on the air, and the fire had raised the temperature in the dome. It was cooler on the airpark than inside, but to Jarrat the heat was still oppressive.

His first priority was to find a ride, but the whole roof was deserted. Everything that could fly had gone, leaving only an assortment of dormant work drones and maintenance gear in a mesh enclosure. Stone was beside him, talking to Reynolds and Cronin, and Jarrat said hoarsely to Holt,

"We're on the airpark, but there's nothing left."

"There's always something," Holt said stubbornly. "Look up!"

"I can see the gunship." Jarrat coughed on the smoke.

"Not the gunship," Holt said shortly. "Closer. Look up on the pressure skin, right over the west end of the airpark. See it? The maintenance hatch. You can get through the dome there, without depressurizing the whole stadium. You *cannot* breach the pressure skin, Captain. I just heard there's still five thousand people waiting to evac."

"Damn." Jarrat rubbed his eyes. The smoke was getting into them, making them sore, and his vision had blurred. "Okay, Holt — and thanks. We appreciate it, big time. We'll make our own way from here."

"I'll stay with you," Holt told him. "Good luck."

"Thanks again." Jarrat coughed on the chemical-laden air and beckoned Stone. "Maintenance hatch on the pressure skin, Stoney. Two problems."

Stone's eyes narrowed on it, and his lips compressed. "One, it's thirty meters up, and even in light gravity we can't jump that high. Two, it's not a whole lot better than vacuum outside. There's *half* the air pressure you'd find on the top of Everest. And I'm wide open to suggestions."

The stadium chose that moment to groan like a tormented animal. The brushed plascrete shimmied underfoot, and Jarrat felt the race of Stone's pulse as his own heart jumped into his throat.

"We're running out of time," he whispered. He caught Jimmy Lo by a handful of his jacket before the man could begin a blind run to nowhere in particular. "Holt, you there?"

"Still here."

"I'm switching up to the NARC band, and you're going to lose me, but we're all right. If you want to stay with us, have Friedman's people patch you to the gunship. Call sign is Blue Raven. And ... thanks, man."

"Hey, just get the hell out of there," Holt said bluffly.

"We will." The comm clicked over, and at once Jarrat heard Gil Cronin and Tanya Reynolds. "Just hold her right where she is," Cronin was saying in strains of exasperation.

"Goldstream's having kittens," Reynolds warned, "our down-hammer's scorching the UV coating clean off their pretty pressure skin."

"Fuck the bastards," Blue Raven 6 snarled. "Cap Stone!"

"Still here," Stone shouted into the loop. "Leave Goldstream to us, Gil. Just get down here, close as you can!"

"Copy *that*," Cronin breathed. "You heard, Tan? Okay, kids, standby to jump on my signal. And ... *go*!"

Through the haze of smoke, the gunship's lights split into a hundred rainbows and scattered across the pressure skin. Sprites of phantom light danced like fireflies or salamanders, and in the midst of them, three armored figures dove out of the jump bay. Their weight was set high and they fell fast. Jarrat heard the solid *thud* as they hit the maintenance hatch, and Jimmy Lo looked up, gasping for every breath. He had exhausted himself by now, and sagged against Jarrat.

"You see that?" Stone yelled across the roar of engines and sirens.

"I'm seeing riot troops," Lo whimpered.

Stone chuckled humorlessly. "You're damned lucky to be seeing them. They're your ride out." And then, "Blue Raven 6?"

"We're on the hatch, we have the access codes," Cronin rasped. "Stay right where you are, Stoney."

As if they had a choice. Jarrat was feeling the building through the soles of his feet, and its tremors transferred to his spine. Friedman would be wading in paperwork for weeks, and Goldstream had their own explanations to make. How had a peaceful Vista meeting become a firestorm? Why had the stadium failed at a structural level? Was Vista the target — or was it Bram Sorenson? Scenes like this would spread like a plague across the colonies.

"Come on, Gil," Stone whispered to the comm. "She's not going to hold together much longer."

"She won't have to. We're through." Cronin paused, and then, "Give us one minute to blow the 'lock up to pressure."

One minute, Jarrat thought. The last minute was always the longest, and this one seemed to stretch to the proportions of an hour. At last the inner hatch opened and his smarting eyes focused on the three armored figures. The plascrete under his feet seemed to ripple, as if he were trying to balance on the pitching deck of a boat, and before he could shout over the comm Stone was waving off the Ravens.

"Don't land! Do *not* land!" Stone's voice bellowed into the loop. "It's breaking away under us!"

Jarrat looked down at his boots, and then across the airpark's plascrete slabs. They were flexing, bowing, and lateral fissures had begun to open. Dust, smoke and whirlwinds of furnace-temperature air gushed out. Miniature tornados capered across the roof, and the pit of his belly registered a falling sensation, though his feet never left the plascrete. The whole structure was going down, fast enough to leave his belly hollow.

And then the gauntleted hands caught him, bruising his shoulders, and he was hovering, riding Joe Ramos's repulsion while he watched the airpark collapse into the cauldron below. The heat soared, but Ramos was already rising back to the hatch in the pressure skin. Jarrat could not see Stone, but did not need to. He felt the bruising pressure of Gil Cronin's gloves on him, the spasms of his lungs as he coughed. Off to their right, Jon Semler had caught Jimmy Lo tight against his breastplate, and the informant had stopped struggling. Jarrat craned his neck back, looking up past Ramos's helmet, into the neon-lit interior of the maintenance hatch's 'lock. The gunship's lights haloed the whole section of the pressure skin, and Goldstream would have a legitimate complaint. Minutes ago, the superhot bluster of Blue Raven's repulsion would have stripped the UV coating right off. Jarrat did not care.

He heard Stone coughing, heard his own hacking as they came up into the 'lock, and Cronin sealed it with the tap of one armored finger. Semler was going over them with the scanners built into his left forearm plate, but Jarrat could have told him, their lungs were only irritated by chemicals released by

the fire. What concerned him more was the lack of pressure on the other side of the hatch.

Clipped to Semler's armor was a cargo net holding three rebreather helmets, fully visored and with shoulder seals, and three pairs of full-arm gauntlets. Stone was unloading them while Jarrat held onto their informant. Lo was looking down with glassy eyes, into the heart of the cauldron. Jarrat cast one glance into its molten center, compared it with Mostov and the gantry on Bartusiak Number 2 field, and dismissed it.

"Get these on him," Stone said, rasping on the fumes which were gathering up against the pressure skin. Light gasses were forcing out the oxygen, and it was difficult to breathe. He settled the helmet on Lo's head as he spoke, and as the neck ring smart-sealed itself, forming around the contours of Lo's shoulders, he dropped the visor. In a moment Lo would be breathing clean air.

Wrestling the gauntlets onto him was more difficult, because he was not about to cooperate — or if he was, he had no idea what to do. The right gauntlet went on at the third try, and the thin kevlex sheathed his forearms and elbows before smart-sealing about his biceps. Semler seized him again, holding him while Jarrat and Stone settled their own gear, and Cronin and Ramos prepped the 'lock to depressurize.

Red warning lights were scattered across the instrument panel, and Cronin swore fluently. "The heat's knocked the electronics right offline. We'll have to hand-crank this. Blow her down, Joe. We'll go when she's reading 50%." His right glove closed about the manual crank.

The seals cracked as Ramos's armored hands lifted them open. Bare hands required tools to do the job, but Ramos made light work of it. Like Cronin, he was watching the pressure gauges in his own helmet display, and he had Jarrat in both hands as he read off, "Seventy. Sixty. Fifty. Go."

The gale of decompression tore at Jarrat's clothes, and he felt the smarting discomfort begin in his own skin and Stone's. They would certainly suffer a mild case of vacuum bloom, but he counted the cost cheap. Cronin had the hatch half open in four massive cranks, and both Ramos and Semler were going up fast. Cronin was a scant second behind them, with Stone held fast against his armor. Jarrat's eyes watered at the fiery burn of the decompression rash, as blood vessels everywhere ballooned and ruptured. Stone's teeth were gritted against the burn as they rose into the jump bay. The hatch was open only a crack, enough for three to pass inside, and it rumbled shut as Ramos set Jarrat on the deck.

The bay repressurized at emergency speed, and most of the pain subsided. Jimmy Lo was still whimpering when Jarrat lifted off his helmet, but Semler was attending to him. A shot fired into his neck, above the line of the angry red decompression rash, and he lapsed into quiet. They had been exposed to partial vacuum for less than ten seconds, but they were sore over every unprotected inch. Jarrat set aside the helmet and gauntlets, and gave his hand to Joe Ramos. "Thanks. We owe you."

"I'll remind you, next time I put in for furlough," Ramos said with wry amusement. "You want to get out of the hangar while Gil and me go back and secure the hatch?"

For the moment, the whole Goldstream pressure skin was riding on a single seal, and Jarrat waved off the Blue Ravens. "Get busy. We'll haul Lo into the Infirmary, and then ... you hearing me, Reynolds?"

"Glad to have you back, Cap, both of you," she said from the cockpit. "Where to now?"

It was Stone who said, "Lassiter. We'll retrieve Kip and Harry, and then ... return to the carrier."

"Earth," Jarrat added before his lungs ambushed him with spasms. "Take our crew back aboard," he said hoarsely, "before this whole thing hits the fan."

"I think," Stone said thoughtfully, looking down at Jimmy Lo's inert body, "it already has."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A faint vibration in the deck told Stone the drive engines had come online. The carrier was underway, and with Mars behind her she would drop swiftly into the lower Earth orbit. The Infirmary was busy, with both Reardon and Harry Del treating three cases of vacuum bloom. Jarrat had gone through first, and though his skin was still rose-red, the thousand broken capillaries were cauterized. Jimmy Lo was passing through the microlasers now, lying on his belly while the bench crept slowly through the machine.

On his back, eyes masked against the beam, Stone was listening to the Infirmary and feeling through Jarrat's raw nerve endings as he slathered on a coat of pale green aloe gel. Lo was quiet. Reardon had administered a sedative, and he was almost drowsing as the hair-fine energy pulses passed over him. Stone might have been concerned that he must be bribed to offer what he knew, but the sedative hit him in every nerve, and coming on the heels of an episode of terror, it was more effective than a truth drug.

His voice was slurred. "It was different in those days ... or maybe *we* were different. I sure was. Me? I was in for the fast buck, like Ino. Did I tell you we were at the same college? Not in the same courses. He was doing physics and gravity shit and architecture. I'd let my old man talk me into doing marketing. Sheesh, what a waste of time. After Ino lit out with his tail feathers sizzling, I even finished the degree. Not because I wanted the work, and *not* to make

my stupid old bastard of a father happy ... campuses are great places to sell stuff and make contacts, you know? S'where I know 'Marcel Oliver' from — an' I know they'll tell you Oliver only showed up in the homeworlds a while ago, when he had big AI design ideas, but that's a crock.

"Him, I knew, soon as I saw him. Marcel Oliver? Shit, it's like Ino and his fuckin' Leo Michiko. I knew Marcel Oliver when he was plain old Matt Orlick. He was a lot older than me, 'course, but he had a bimbo girlfriend on the campus. One of these big, bouncing blonde jobs. You know his type? He's back with Ann Marie again. Farinelli must be as old as God, but she never changes ... she's got the bucks to throw at the job. Costs a fortune to stay young. You guys wouldn't know about it, not yet. Your time'll come.

"So there's Mattie Orlick and Ann Marie Farinelli, bold as you like, struttin' their stuff in the society pages, all over the city nets. Christ, them and Ino Carvoni, and bloody Lorrie Quade. They always had their own share of luck and some bugger else's as well, while the likes of me, what do I get?"

He lapsed into silence, and Jarrat said tiredly, "Why don't you tell us. What did you get?"

"Me?" Lo slurred. "I got shafted. NARC was all over this system like the zits on a hustler's ass, and Tac swept up the dregs, the little guys. A lot of the big bruisers, like Ino, and Lorrie, and Ann Marie and Mattie, got the hell out and stayed out till it was safe to come back. Some never came back at all, till they were made to. Leo Michiko. Most of the little guys are still doing time. They're banged up in Tharsis Maximum Security, with five or ten years to go. They were kids when they went in, they'll be old men when they walk out, and they're flat broke, can't afford the gene tweaks to get young. Now, that's a raw deal."

"Not for dealing Angel," Stone said quietly.

Jimmy Lo heaved a long sigh. "These days, I'd say you were right. Back then? Nah. Angel was *cool*, Angel was 'where it is', as they used to say on the Marsport rink." He paused for some moments and continued in a softer tone, introspective and pained. "I guess it's always great when it's somebody else who's paying the price. Then one day it's yourself, or your kid, and ..."

"And it sucks," Jarrat finished.

"Big time," Lo agreed. "So what do you guys want from me? You want me to tell you who was pulling the strings behind Aphelion when NARC blew through here like a hurricane? I already did. You want their addresses and phone codes? Jesus Christ, the bastards are in the book. Look 'em up. They're legit, like Leo Michiko was."

The prickling of the microlasers was on Stone's lower legs now, and he hooked a finger into the eye mask to pull it off. Jarrat was in a terrycloth robe, perched on the side of the bed opposite the other machine. His legs and feet, and the vee of his chest exposed by the robe, were pink as fresh sunburn, but in a day or two the color would subside.

"What we need," Stone said slowly, "is evidence. Proof."

"Proof?" Lo echoed. "You have *got* to be shitting me. I can only tell you

what *is*, man, what I know from the fact I was there with the bastards when I was a kid myself. They were Aphelion. Ask Ino. He knows."

"*Ino*," Leo Michiko's voice said from the doorway, "already did tell them ... and the information was what landed you here." He came to the side of the bench which had rolled two thirds of the way through the machine, and looked down into Jimmy Lo's masked face. "Hello, Jimmy. It's been a long time. You look ... older."

"I am fucking older!" Lo snatched off the mask and blinked up at Michiko. "Damn it, you haven't changed. Why in seven hells are you still alive?"

"Good luck, and good management," Michiko told him. "They told me about your kid. Like father, like son."

"What?" Lo demanded, and his fists were balling despite the sedative.

"You were an idiot," Michiko informed him. "Your child can hardly be blamed for inheriting the gene for stupidity." He turned his back on Lo, folded his arms on his chest and looked from Stone to Jarrat and back. "There's your cross-reference, gentlemen, but if you want hard evidence that'll take you into court, you'll have to get it yourself."

"According to Friedman," Jarrat mused, "Jimmy Lo was an insider at QuantumCyber, but very junior, nowhere near the levels within the company where he could start to filch information."

"And Friedman," Stone added, "isn't investigating Marcel Oliver or his intended, Mary Ann Rousos, at all. They, and Lorenzo Quade, are legit."

"They are now," Lo said bitterly. "Legitimization is the name of the game. Don't you get it? Christ, it's so simple. You trade Angel as long as you have to, to build a business empire, and then you use it in the background to plug the gaps and prop you up when you stumble. Legitimate companies close their doors every day, but people like Quade and Orlick don't fall. It takes decades for a company to be bulletproof, so armor-clad, it creates its own trade patterns. Then, you dump your syndicate connections, *itemize* anybody that gets in your way, cover your tracks so thoroughly, nobody, nowhere, no *how*, can prove anything against you. And you're free. Multi-billionaire free, with the rest of your very long, gene-tweaked life to enjoy."

There, he wound down into silence, and Stone frowned at Michiko. The man looked serene, waiting, and at last Jarrat said, "Evidence, Michiko?"

"I never had any," he said levelly, "and never claimed I did. But like Jimmy Lo, I know what I know. However, if you asked me to prove it, I'd tell you that's *your* job. It's time you went to work, I believe."

"Time," Stone said darkly, "to go to work."

The machine was finished with him, and as he swung his legs off the bench Jarrat lobbed the tube of aloe gel into his hands. He was pink from shoulders to feet, with the exception of his hands and arms, but the spiderweb patterns of broken capillaries were gone. He laved himself with the pale green gel and felt the coolness he had felt previously, from Jarrat.

"I'll tell you something, though," Lo said thoughtfully, hands folded on his chest as the machine worked on his legs. "Soon as the carrier came insystem.

there was a fracas in citybottom like I've never seen since the *last* time we had a carrier here. People turned up dead, people went missing. By that time, I'd been on their shitlist for long enough, they'd already missed me twice. I was hidden so deep, it didn't touch me, but a lot of others turned belly-up ... on syndicate orders. Had to be."

"The question is," Jarrat mused, "is it new syndicate moguls, or is it the old guard? Did the orders come down from Quade and Orlick and Farinelli, or from some new command hierarchy?"

"Both," Jimmy Lo said with a trace of reluctance. "I was supposed to be meeting with Friedman next week. He slips me a bundle of credits, he moves me from place to place, keeps me safe, and I trade him info."

"So trade us," Stone prompted. "You know the new syndicate bosses?"

"Some of them," Lo said carefully. "There's others, higher up and back in the shadows, in the mist. Faces you never see, voices you don't hear, but you know they're back there, because things *happen*, guys do things, say things, that had to have a reason." He licked his lips. "Hugo Yeliseyev and Gina Rizo. Get them, and the rest'll slither back under their rocks."

Jarrat and Stone shared a mute conference. "You're sure?" Jarrat prompted.

The informant glared at him. "I know you don't respect me. That's no reason to insult me. Do like Ino says. Do your fuckin' job. You're NARC, aren't you? Go do what we pay you for."

A white terrycloth robe eased onto Stone's shoulders. It felt like sandpaper, and he belted it with care. Even the soles of his feet were sore. "You want to talk to Friedman?" he asked Jarrat.

But Jarrat was looking at the Infirmary's chrono. "Later. I'd be surprised to even reach the man at this time. The chaos in Chryse is probably bigger than anything the city ever saw ... and I could use some sleep."

The carrier was a half hour out of Earth orbit, and Petrov had already issued the recall for all personnel. Friedman's situation would still be dire, and Stone was not about to share data with anyone else from Tactical, with one exception. He lifted a curious brow at the Kip Reardon. "Give your brother a call."

Reardon and Del might not have contributed a word to the debate, but they had followed every syllable. Reardon wore a shrewd look as he stepped into his office and called up the phone code. "You can certainly trust Paul," he said slowly, "but I'm going to say the same thing I said before. Don't get him into trouble. Don't get him dead."

"Relax, Kip." Jarrat was shifting uncomfortably in the robe. "All we want him to do is carry a message and force-feed it to his colonel the instant Jay Friedman has a spare moment. Right now, every service from Hazmat to Goldstream's insurance underwriter will be suffocating him, but he'll have it broken down and reassigned in a few hours, and there's not much time to waste. Everything Friedman's wanted is coming to the boil. He can't afford to let it slip through his fingers — he won't get another chance."

The message was simple enough, and Paul Reardon took it without question. Like every soul affiliated with Olympia Tac, he had been called to work long beyond his normal hours. While the brothers spoke, Jarrat and Stone took the time to catch up with the vid feeds, on one of Reardon's CRTs.

Manpower was coming in from Marsport and Tharsis, and GlobalNet was running constant coverage, calling it the worst disaster in the history of Chryse. It would be days or weeks before investigators were able to determine the cause of the blaze, but early predictions were that opponents of Bram Sorenson had ignited the original fire, probably with the intention of creating a diversion. The senator's security crew had confirmed that an attempt on his life had been made, and unidentified individuals within the Vista group were under suspicion. To Stone the accusation looked like a knee-jerk. Sorenson's people would be quick to seize an opportunity to impeach any person or group who disagreed with their policies. Vista was diametrically opposed, making for an obvious, convenient target.

With a soft curse, Reardon logged off. "He'll be nagging the boss as soon as Friedman's available. You want these people under surveillance? They should be tagged within a day or so. Let Tactical catch up with itself ... this thing in Chryse is bad."

"I know how Tac operates, Kip." Stone dropped a hand on his shoulder. "This one is down to Bram Sorenson, and Friedman is going to have his hands full, keeping Vista out of the muck."

Reardon had been watching him and Jarrat while he spoke with Paul, and he asked shrewdly, "You want something for the discomfort? It's going to feel like a lousy case of sunburn. I've got Jimmy Lo mildly sedated, or he'd be whining. What you really need is a cool shower, a lot of lignodex spray and some rest."

"Thanks." Stone was winding down fast. Sleep had never sounded more alluring. "We'll take all three."

They were waiting for Reardon to return with the lignodex pump when Gene Cantrell appeared. He had been in the ops room, but had monitored every word since they arrived aboard, and his face was grim indeed. "I ran the names Lo gave you. Hugo Yeliseyev has quite a record in white collar crime. He had a promising career in middle management twelve years ago, and he blew it when he got caught with both hands in the cookie jar. He did four years out of a seven-year term in the Marsport correctional facility, came out of there dead broke ... and yet eight months later he was driving a Volvo sportplane. Go figure. Gina Rizo started out as a dancer ... the exotic variety. She seems to have danced her way into the affections of some uptown businessmen and at least one woman, but she doesn't dance anymore, and unless she's hustling the top drawer and making a rich living at it, I have no idea where her money's coming from. She hasn't been audited in years, there are no tax records, but she's paying top-dollar for an apartment in Chryse, and she never shows her face to the citynet society pages without so much

jewelry, it's pure bad taste. Again — go figure. I know what it *looks* like."

As he finished, Kip Reardon returned from the pharmacy with the lignodex. Jarrat plucked it out of the air as it was lobbed to him, and Stone eased the robe on his back. "Let Tactical run surveillance," he said tersely, "while we get our crew aboard. And then..."

"And then," Cantrell said darkly, "this is almost certainly adding up to a deep cover assignment. This time around, I don't intend to delay. Last time I busted Aphelion, I waited just a few hours too long, and a number of them slipped through the net. Orlick, Quade, Farinelli. The younger ones, Yelisseyev and Rizo and others, are your next generation middle men, taking orders from their elders and betters in the shadows. The little people, the hoplites, are the ones who've been showing up in dumpsters." He looked from Jarrat to Stone and back. "We need to be on standby to move so fast, I don't think an assignment was ever executed at this speed in the history of NARC ... or it's for nothing."

Jarrat was frowning at the CRTs, where the Martian city nets were ablaze with accusation and recrimination. "Monitor the situation, Gene. Use Friedman's resources, and hassle the man. We're ready to move, but we have to know where."

"Where?" Cantrell echoed. "It'll be the Jupiter system again. It has to be. Nothing's changed, Kevin, nothing can, here in the homeworlds. It's a matter of topography." Then he waved the younger men away. "Go get some rest. I'll buzz you when I get some sense out of Friedman."

"He's a decent guy," Stone said tiredly, "and he wants Aphelion out. He knows his population better than we do — yet. Trust him."

"Famous last words," Cantrell warned, on his way back to the ops room.

They had been asleep long enough for Stone to be so sound, the buzz from the comm jerked him awake in a cold sweat. His skin was tacky with the old lignodex, a little swollen, still hot, and stiff as sunburn, but the condition had already subsided a good deal. He could tell the difference as he snaked out one arm, hit voice only, and groaned in the direction of the pickup.

It was Petrov. "Friedman called an hour ago. He's shorthanded, but he's put people on these characters Rizo and Yelisseyev. Turns out he knew the names, but he never had enough dirt on them to be useful ... although a couple of Tactical officers assigned to them went missing. One showed up two weeks later as a dead body. The other showed up six *months* later, in a bordello way out in the belt, out of his mind, raving on a speedball of Angel, chimera and stuff no one ever even heard of."

"So Friedman must have set his sights on Rizo and Yelisseyev," Jarrat's voice said from beneath the sheet. No part of him was touching Stone; it was too uncomfortable to share body heat yet.

"Nope." Petrov sounded disgusted. "The two dead officers had a rep for being genuine bastards. They'd rubbed half of citybottom the wrong way. It

was only a matter of time before they were screwed. Friedman might have suspected Rizo and Yeliseyev, but the fact is, the shooting had all the hallmarks of a local hitman, nothing to do with the syndicate or the buggers Friedman was after. And the guy who wound up screaming his lungs out in a sexshop on the far side of Ceres had used a machine pistol to cut the legs off a citybottom Companion two months before ... and the den on Ceres is owned and operated by the Companion's former sugar daddy. Friedman let sleeping dogs lie. If the fuckers want to wipe each other out, let 'em do our job for us."

"Great," Stone muttered. "We're at square one."

Petrov hesitated. "Not quite. Friedman's got a buddy in Callisto Tac."

"Meaning?" Jarrat teased down the sheet and blinked up at Stone.

"Meaning," Petrov said barbedly, "Gene's shitting bricks because he's seeing it all getting ready to happen again. He and Friedman chewed over old times together on encrypted highband — they both know, when the Chryse sewer rats get hyper and start deserting the sinking ship, they run *out*, not it."

"A matter of topography," Stone said dryly. He frowned at Jarrat. "In principle, we can slam up a security cordon."

"Seal the Jupiter system," Jarrat mused. "We have the authority, but you know how popular it'd be. We could expect major arguments out of Earth."

"Speaking of Central," Petrov said with dark glee, "we're getting a 'return to base and report' order, and we're getting it regularly. We've pushed about as far as we can before somebody, somewhere, pushes back."

The sheet rustled as Jarrat sat up. His skin was only pink now, and just a little too warm to Stone's fingertips. "RTB and report," he said thoughtfully, and lifted one brow at Stone. "You want to play their game?"

"Sure." Stone sat up beside him and stretched experimentally. "Where are we, Mischa?"

"Back at the NARC dock, taking on crew. The upshuttle in an hour will bring another forty aboard, the last thirty are making their own way home."

"Then, why don't you go ahead, do what Central's been demanding," Jarrat suggested.

"Me?" Petrov echoed.

"You," Stone affirmed. "Tell them you're on the downshuttle with several terrabytes of data. Make it the late shuttle, tomorrow. Give them Michiko's complete post mortem results, and the tech report from Arago, and everything we got from our own overview of the Goldstream disaster."

The Russian snorted. "They're going to want to know why the hell you two were there, in the middle of it, so Blue Raven had to lift you out."

Jarrat actually chuckled as he swung his legs off the bed and stood. He was pale pink from head to foot, not the fiery tone of hours before. The last time Stone had seen this color on him, they were on Tarataga and Jarrat had underestimated the ferocity of the island's sun. "Tell Central the truth," he was saying. "We were meeting an informant of Colonel Friedman's, who has pivotal intel regarding the Angel trade."

"And when they want to see his intel?"

"Fudge it," Stone said acidly.

"You mean, lie?" Petrov demanded.

"Delay them. Stall. Tell them the man's name, tell them about his kid with the Angel problem. They know Lo was lifted out with us, and he has a case of vacuum bloom. Say it's bad, have Reardon exaggerate, hand over the CMO's treatment sheet ... when Jimmy Lo's sedation has worn off, he'll talk. Before that, you won't get any sense out of him, and Central has to be patient."

"All...right," Petrov said slowly. "I guess I'm running interference for you guys, while you wait for Friedman's goons to hit paydirt. How long?"

Stone had been wondering the same thing. "Two days?" he asked of Jarrat, who was slathering aloe gel onto his legs.

"Three, if we can get them," Jarrat judged.

"Okay," Petrov said exasperatedly. "Shit, this could get ugly."

"It could. It probably will," Stone agreed. "Is Friedman in contact with his bud in Callisto Tac?"

"I don't know," Petrov admitted. "You want I should find out?"

"Discreetly," Jarrat said quickly. "If Friedman asks if we want a lockdown in the Jupiter system ... Stoney?"

It was the proverbial unanswerable question. "I'd say it's too soon," Stone said quietly. "We have nothing to warrant it. Yet."

"Exactly." Jarrat turned back to the comm. "Tell Friedman to standby ... and to have his Callisto contacts standby. Gene's right, when this starts, there won't be time to set something up. We second-guess this one, or we eat their dust." He was heading for his own cabin for clothes, soft and loose.

"Keep us appraised," Stone told Petrov.

The comm was silent, and Stone had picked up the tub of aloe gel when Jarrat returned. He had put on soft charcoal sweats and a baggy white teeshirt, far from his usual style, but comfortable. He took a glass of water from the cooler on his way by.

"We ought to be designing a deep cover op," Stone said bleakly.

"I've been thinking the same thing." Jarrat drank the water and upturned the glass on the workspace by Stone's CRT. "But there's not enough to base it on yet."

"There will be." Stone took a deep breath. "I have a feeling, the same one Gene's been nursing since Chryse." He leaned over and dropped a wet kiss on the side of Jarrat's neck. "We're well enough to work, and I want to research the Jupiter system."

"You're not familiar with it?" Jarrat was watching him dress.

"No. I've been there," Stone said, pulling on sweats, "but it was only a vacation, a lot of years ago. We need to know citybottom from uptown, the rink, the size and shape of the underworld, which way the money flows."

Jarrat palmed open the door. "Archives."

"Archives," Stone agreed.

From the NARC dock, they were at liberty to tap the main homeworlds

datastream, and they knew at once, they had lucked out. The Jupiter system was online, VR-modeled forty ways, from the navigation lanes to the architectural blueprints. The techs who wrangled the repairs drones, the shuttle pilots who skipped around the vast Jovian radiation fields, freight coordinators for the shipyards, air traffic controllers, tour bus operators, Tactical, Fire Control and Hazmat — even the plumbers who unblocked the mains on the incredible skycities, all used the master database.

In VR, the Jovian system came alive in three physical dimensions and six data layers. Stone had dropped the visor over his face and swung his feet up onto the console, and immersed himself in the database while Jarrat hunted down food and coffee. In the threedee sim, he flew a light commercial craft in from the civil traffic lanes, and took a slingshot through the whole system, from the frozen rockballs of Sinope and Ananke and Lysithea, to the massive Galilean worlds where humans had established their first deep space colonies. Europa, bright with ice, locked in captured rotation; Ganymede, big, rocky, magnetically active, crisscrossed with the lights of industry, and shimmering with a halo of skycities; and Callisto, big, dark, with much lower gravity than Ganymede, which had made it attractive as a launch facility in the early years of colonization. Even now several major shipyards were clustered on and around Callisto, and the world's skycities were little less opulent than Ganymede's.

From the navigation sims, Stone moved on to those generated by Tactical, Medevac and Fire Control. A blizzard of data flooded the system, every detail from the in- and outbound air traffic routes, to the population loading, rounded to the nearest ten humans present and updated every four hours. The most populous cities in the Jupiter system were Geneva, the greatest of the skycities, in orbit above Ganymede, plus the integrated complex of four minor cities and many labs serving the scientific community, in orbit over Europa, and the jewels of the system, Sequoia and Amaterasu, orbiting Callisto. Scores of others were scattered through the system, afloat like bubbles in the Jovian tides, and several were parked in clear pockets of the upper atmosphere of the giant world itself. A mining operation was still working there, extracting the gases to top-off the cities' recycling plants. Over a hundred million humans, more than a million drones and an AI population in six figures made the system busy, and noisy.

"It's an ant heap," Jarrat observed as he began to wade ankle-deep in the threedee schematics provided for Fire Control access. "It reminds me of Avalon, the whole system's a mess, and Jupiter itself doesn't make things any easier. You see these? No-fly markers. The radiation belts and plasma fields inside the beacons'll fry you alive."

The Jovian exclusion zones were well posted. Not even drones entered those fields, and Stone frowned deeply at them. "You know how easy it would be to use the radiation belts to hide? You remember how rough it was, finding the Hera platform in the atmosphere of Zeus."

"If I wanted to hide," Jarrat mused, there's more than seventy moons

listed here.” He had pulled up the navigation plot. “There’s a big population in the cities, where you could vanish into the crowd, and the upper atmosphere is full of platforms ... science, gas mines, factories.”

The atmosphere was mostly hydrogen, with a lot of helium, methane, ethane, ammonia, and hail storms of water ice. The planet was an inexhaustible source of hydrogen-based fuels, and where the atmospheric pressure increased with depth, drone factories worked to convert raw materials into exotic compounds. The planet had become a massive engine, powering the whole system, and much of Earth’s industry had migrated outward.

“It’s no wonder Gene lost the bastards in here,” Jarrat said quietly as they dove through the scores of layers simulated by the navtank. “I’m surprised he busted as many as he got. This place is ... difficult.”

A large part of Stone wanted to rate the Jupiter system too complex to be viewed as a potential theater of operation for NARC or any other service. Too many people, too many pressure zones, traffic lanes, skycities, surface domes, troglodyte cities burrowed into the hollow shells of the lesser moons, mining drones twice the size of the *Athena*, factories which sank into the atmosphere of the gas giant, disappeared from sensors and reappeared hours or days later, and hundreds, even thousands of kilometers away. Four major passenger spaceports plus the clipper docks; eight freight marshaling yards and twenty minor yards; the Starfleet drydocks, the Cygnus maintenance yards, and the terrible confusion of a civilian population which had spread like a virus through the system, staking claims on any hunk of rock big enough to look appetizing.

Over four thousand ‘homesteaders’ owned their own little piece of this or that moon, and some of the ‘ranches’ were astonishing. Medevac, Tactical and Fire Control knew them all, and the ranches where a population had risen above fifty were flagged. The largest was Gundawindi Station, where a body of five hundred people made gourmet foods for export to Ganymede and Callisto. The smallest was Lachlan’s Drift, where ‘old man Lachlan’ and four battered drones were still working a forty-year-old titanium claim that had gradually hollowed out an entire worldlet.

At last Stone sat back, snatched off the VR helmet and rubbed his eyes. “Christ, this is going to be impossible. You’d have to be bred and born in that system to stand half a chance. This is how the likes of Orlick and Quade got out the first time. They go to ground, sit tight, and eventually slither away. We’ll have to be psychic not to lose them again.”

“Damn.” Jarrat pushed back his chair and stood. “I’m going to break for a meal before I get into the Tac files. We might not be able to get much of a handle on the lie of their land, but we can learn it from citybottom’s perspective.”

“The worm’s eye view,” Stone said darkly.

“If it happens, that’s *where* it’ll happen.” Jarrat’s arms slid around Stone from behind, and a kiss fell on his nape, devoured his ear. “Take a break. Look at your chrono.”

Stone did, and was astonished to see they had been immersed in the threedee tactical plots of the Jupiter system for over four hours. He was pleased to put the files on hold, stretch every joint and muscle, and follow Jarrat to the crew lounge.

From the NARC docks, the view of Earth was arresting. The coastline of East Africa was picked out in ochre, blue-green ocean and the white froth of shoals. Heavy weather was about to shroud the Cape, while the Indian Ocean darkened into the indigo deep of the night side.

The status board just inside the lounge showed all but a few crew members back aboard. One reactor was online, a second was idling; the engines were still on standby, and the highband arrays were busy, trading telemetry with Central. The ops room was technically powered down, but Cantrell was on-shift, monitoring their own frequencies and Jay Friedman's.

And it was Cantrell's voice they heard an hour later, when they had returned to the archives and were running the Callisto Tactical dossier. A curious sensation raced the length of Stone's spine, and Jarrat looked sharply at him, recognizing premonition when he felt it.

"I've got Friedman holding for you," Cantrell said bleakly, "and it's top-level encryption. You'd better get up here to take it."

"Two minutes," Jarrat told him.

"Anything transmitted at level five is never good news," Stone warned.

"Depends on your perspective," Jarrat argued. "Disaster for Friedman might be exactly what we've been waiting for."

The ops room was dim, but the navtank had loaded a great deal of data, some of which Stone recognized. Petrov had just come on-shift, but Cantrell showed no signs of retiring. On the security screen in the most discreet corner of the room was Friedman's face; its expression was resigned, careworn.

"Central's AI is trying to access the signal," Petrov said reported.

"Block it." Cantrell gestured at the comm panel. "Route it through processing, as if it's come in distorted, and then shunt it straight to terminal storage. Central can still get access from the short-term archive, but they'll need to place a retrieval request, and our own AI will allocate them time when it's available. I'm about to make sure our mainframes are busy for at least six hours."

"You're dancing on thin ice," Petrov observed.

"You'll notice I'm also dancing very carefully, on tiptoes," Cantrell added. He nodded in greeting to Jarrat and Stone. "Friedman's not a happy camper. Something, somewhere's gone pear shaped."

"It always does." Stone swiveled a chair in before the monitor. "Hello, Colonel. Paul Reardon spoke to you?"

Friedman took a deep breath. "Hours ago. I did what you asked, Stone. I put people on Yeliseyev and Rizo. You have to understand, Chryse's a mess. There's not much manpower to spare. I've been borrowing people from Marsport and Tharsis. I didn't have my best people available for the job, and we did the best we could, under bloody damned difficult circumstances."

He was defensive, and Stone smothered a groan. "That sounded ominous. You lost them?"

"No. We know exactly where the bastards are," Friedman said quickly. "We, uh, spooked them."

"They saw you." Jarrat tipped back his head and worked his neck to and fro. "You have them tailed?"

"They can't scratch an itch without me knowing about it." Friedman licked his lips. "And this is going to wind you up. It's not just Rizo and Yeliseyev who're spooked. I've had monitors on Marcel Oliver and Mary Ann Rousos. They're moving. Now, skeptics would argue that they're just getting out of Chryse for the duration of the emergency. It's rough, right across the city. Power blackouts, emergency services rerouted, the sectors right by the access tubes to the stadium have been evacuated because there's a real risk of cave-ins after the fires got into the underground conduits. I can see people like Oliver and Lorenzo Quade bugging out for the duration, so I can't promise you there's capital for NARC in it."

"But you'll soon know," Stone growled. "Don't lose them, Friedman."

"Don't sweat that one," Friedman promised. "Your XO was wanting to know if I'm in close contact with Colonel Danni Voigt, out at Callisto Tac." His brows arched. "I am. And I assume you want something."

Jarrat and Stone shared a look, and Jarrat said very softly, "Would Voigt take your recommendation and lockdown the Jupiter system?"

"Lockdown?" Friedman echoed.

"Seal it," Stone elaborated. "Spaceports shut, traffic lanes blocked, freight bumped into holding areas pending searching, clippers sent back to Itzhak Loyola or Mars. Nothing in or out. At least, not legally."

"You can't seal the Jupiter system," Friedman began.

"You can try," Cantrell said sharply.

The colonel's eyes flickered toward him. "The best you can do is slow the buggers down. You have no idea what that shithole of a system's like."

"Oh, yes I do," Cantrell breathed, "which is why we were trying to stop them on Mars. Pick them up at Marsport if they try to leave, Friedman. Make it a clean arrest, NARC's responsibility."

But Friedman's head was shaking. "That'll only work if they're dumb enough to try to shoot through on a commercial flight. Twenty percent of traffic between here and the Jovian spaceports is private. If it was merchant *astra* or military, we could seal the whole thing, but it's like trying to stamp on every termite in the nest. You can try ... and we will. But you have to know, the odds are with them."

"Well, shit," Cantrell said philosophically.

Stone angled a glance at him, over his right shoulder. "You have Oliver and Rizo and the rest of them under constant surveillance?" Friedman nodded. "Then, if you can't get your hands on them at Marsport, the instant you know they've slipped through your net, have Voigt standby to seal the Jupiter system." He lifted a brow at Jarrat. "Kevin?"

They were on the same page. "Let them in," Jarrat agreed, "and then lock the whole system down so tight, getting out again's another question."

"I can do that." Friedman regarded them bleakly. "There's going to be hell to pay. You know what this is going to cost, in man-hours and credits?"

"I don't think anyone here actually cares," Gene Cantrell said with spurious blandness. "Keep us informed, Jay. And get us a pipeline to Colonel Voigt. We need intel that's so fresh, it's still wriggling."

The colonel was moving. "That much, I can do right now. You'll be wanting syndicate and cartel data, citybottom in Sequoia."

"And intel on the syndicate traffic between Mars and Jupiter," Jarrat added. "How well connected are our Martian suspects? Who's at the other end of the pipeline? You share data with Voigt?"

"Of course," Friedman said carefully. "But you have to understand, Jarrat, this is the homeworlds. I can't investigate people who haven't come under formal suspicion. If I do, I can be busted myself, for harassment. I haven't been able to get my hooks into Oliver and Quade."

Stone smiled grimly. "Then, here's your chance. Tag them, let them run."

"Your responsibility?" Friedman demanded.

"It always is." Jarrat laid one hand on Stone's shoulder and the other on Cantrell's. "Link us up with Colonel Voigt. We need the best intel, the fastest way we can get it."

"Done," Friedman assured him. "Standby."

The connection whited out and Stone swiveled out the seat. "Cat among the pigeons?" He took a beaker of water from Cantrell, and drank it without tasting it. "It was like this the last time, Gene? They bugged out of Mars fast, you chased them to Jupiter, caught a flock of them there, missed others."

The older man looked tired, but anger would not let him rest. "We're moving faster this time, with better equipment, better intel, and prior experience. This time around I can make a few good guesses as to where they'll be, who they'll connect with, which way they'll run, and how. Let me see Voigt's data, double-check my assumptions with Leo and this idiot, Jimmy Lo, and ... if this were a horse race, I'd pick the winner for you."

"You're very sure," Jarrat observed.

And Cantrell nodded. "I spent several days here, a long time ago, tying up loose ends, sweeping up the minor players, finding out where they'd been. Sure, citybottom changes, and it's not going to be *quite* the same now as Michiko and I recall. But Jimmy Lo never left the place, and it's Colonel Voigt's territory, it's her job to know her own underground."

For some moments they were silent, and at last Stone stirred deliberately. "Let's assume Friedman misses them, they never show up Marsport, they take a private ride out of someplace like Lassiter, and the last Friedman sees of them is their sternflares."

"Let's assume," Jarrat continued, "the colonel in charge of Callisto Tac is up to the job, and she'll take Friedman's lead. Quade and Orlick and company get in ... they can't get out — not on the ship they arrived on, nor

on any commercial carrier, nor anything legit. What's left?"

Stone felt an odd twist in the pit of his belly. "Let's assume Tactical comes down on the system like a load of bricks. Everything's blockades, scans, searches. Clubs and dens are getting turned over, nobody's safe, and there's a NARC carrier insystem. If you were Orlick or Rousos, you'd want to get out, any way you could."

"I would," Cantrell agreed, "and remember, they have the experience. They went through this twenty-five years ago, and running, vanishing into the woodwork, is what they do. Equinox and Scorpio would give you a standup fight, but Aphelion was all about chasing shadows, catching a handful of smoke here, a puff of wind there. I'm dead certain they'll go to ground like rabbits, then try to run again."

"And," Jarrat went on, "the only ride out they're likely to get is a private charter on the shady side of the law." He arched one brow at Stone. "I'm seeing a deep cover assignment."

So was Stone. "I want to go ahead and plan it. The details can be plugged in later, from Voigt's intel and whatever Friedman and Lo can offer. We can't afford to wait." He looked up at Mischa Petrov. "I'd advise you to pack a bag and be ready to shove off, fast. Stall Central. If you can't keep them happy, keep them guessing. Leave this circus to us."

The Russian's face tugged into disapproving lines. "You're welcome to it. This looks like the express track to early retirement, without benefit of a pension."

He made a good point, and the same thought had been nagging Stone. If the attempt on Leo Michiko's life had not been launched out of a conference room at NARC Central itself, and if Charles Steinberg was not connected to Bram Sorenson, they might have questioned the wisdom of driving ahead. But Michiko was alive by a fluke, and Steinberg was a bone that had stuck in Stone's throat.

The Callisto Tac records were still open, on hold, when they returned to the archives vault. Jarrat fetched coffee from the 'Chef and his fingertips pattered rapidly, calling up several columns of streaming data. For a moment Stone remained preoccupied with his misgivings, and then he forced his mind back into gear and concentrated on the screen.

A summary of the illegal air traffic activity in the last twelve months was scrolling alongside a 'wanted' list of the pilots suspected of flying unlicensed, or carrying illicit cargo, or avoiding tariffs and visa requirements. Stone frowned at the list, and then at Jarrat. "You're looking for smugglers."

Jarrat gave him a wry, crooked grin. "If I were trying to slither out of the Jupiter system, I sure as hell wouldn't do the ticketing with Cygnus! Still, making a swift, covert exit from the Jovian worlds probably means leaving the homeworlds entirely. Mars and Earth are out of bounds, and people like Quade and Rousos are hardly likely to bum around in mining towns in the belt, or in the dark and ice out by Itzhak Loyola. They'll want out, all the way out, worlds where the sun shines and the living's good."

"Since the clipper's off limits," Stone agreed, "your shady private charter almost certainly means a smuggler." He hooked a chair with one foot, drew it closer and straddled it. "What do we have here?"

The records of Callisto and Europa Tactical boiled down to a half dozen notorious individuals and as many ships. Ganymede was too uptown, the 'homesteads' were too far out, and Io was one vast open-pit mine. Callisto and Europa boasted three functional ports each — freight, major interplanetary, and domestic. The jumping-off points for other star systems were the docks at Ganymede and Itzhak Loyola, in the Oort, each of which docked the clippers as well as the massive freight haulers.

One by one, Jarrat's routine was running the records for each of the shady operators who had emerged from the cross-referenced search. Three had been logged out of the homeworlds, with loose flightplans which included Darwin's, Kelso and Avalon. The fourth had just been arrested by Callisto Tac and was in custody, waiting to see a judge. Two were at liberty somewhere in the skycities of Callisto and Europa; they might have taken a shuttle to Zurich or the incredible domed cities which floated above Ganymede — but their ships were registered, docked, berthing fees paid, and their names had not shown up on any inbound commercial flight.

"You're down to these three," Jarrat mused. "Colleroy. Pretorius. Yip."

"Any connection between the three?" Stone wondered.

The Tactical database was thorough. The semi-aware librarian AI took more than twenty seconds to plumb the depths and cross-reference the results, and on a whim, Jarrat threw in the names of Yeliseyev, Rizo, Orlick, Rousos, and Quade.

Data began to scroll, and Stone froze the display for human consumption. Lorenzo Quade owned real estate in the city of Sequoia; Orlick and Rousos leased an apartment in the city, for vacations; Maxine Colleroy was born in Sequoia, still had family there, and her ship was currently docked there; Brendan Yip once attended the merchant *astra* college in Sequoia and his ship was registered there; Quade had hired Yip several times to carry small, delicate cargo from the freight yards in to Chryse; Yip and Colleroy were busted eight months before, for 'creating a public affray' in a den called Cinnabar, in Sequoia's exotic citybottom. They were bailed by Masahiro Pretorius, paid their fines and shipped out; Mas Pretorius's most recent tax audit listed him as a part-owner of the den; SequoiaNet's society pages popped up a raft of images of celebrity couple Mary Ann Rousos and Marcel Oliver, partying without regard for good taste or sense, and the location quoted was Cinnabar. Customs and Quarantine records scrolled next, from Darwin's World and Brennan, the cities of Venice and Calleran, where Colleroy and Yip frequently delivered one cargo and picked up another. Mas Pretorius seldom flew in recent years, but the AI was not finished digging. Pretorius did not *have* to fly at all. He was the pilot who had spirited Lorenzo Quade beyond the frontier, where Quade spent fourteen years fighting his case through the homeworld courts, and when a judge on Earth found him

innocent, and when Quade returned to Mars, former bush pilot Masahiro Pretorius was well paid. He invested heavily not only in Cinnabar but in real estate in Sequoia, and in recent years either flew for his own amusement or made his ship available to Colleroy and Yip, or to their associates. They had yet never been busted for smuggling, but they had been under surveillance for a long time, after they deliberately avoided the authorities on Kelso and Sheal. Warrants had been issued there, and on their return Colleroy and Yip would be arrested and heavily fined for breaking port without clearance, landing without due documentation, avoiding routine Customs and Quarantine inspection. The extradition treaties between the homeworlds and the colonies had always been muddy; Callisto Tactical was still negotiating the point with its opposite numbers, but Colonel Danni Voigt had promptly tagged Yip, Colleroy and Pretorius for close, unrelenting observation.

"Because," Stone mused, "if they were bouncing in and out of Sheal and Kelso and God knows where else, without passes, permits, clearances, whatever, it's a safe bet they're slithering in and out of this system the same way. They just haven't been caught. Yet. With what cargo?"

"I'll give you three guesses," Jarrat said acidly. "And your pivot point is this place, Cinnabar. Let's take a look."

A search on the den's name produced a flood of data. The results of several tax audits were scrolling along side the 'form sheet' — a dynamic record of arrests that had been made there, and subsequent convictions. Callisto Tactical bounced the den routinely; they made a lot of arrests, but convictions were rare, and the same attorney's name appeared over and over on the dismissals. A London lawyer called Griffith Shand-Pike.

While the Cinnabar data continued to run, Jarrat set the librarian to track the man down. On the CRTs, Stone was looking at the floorplan of the den, supplied by the insurance company to Fire Control, in compliance with civil regulation. The club was spread over four levels of Sequoia's rink, and Stone swore softly. It looked all too familiar. The top level was a restaurant and bar, with a dance floor and cabaret stage. The next level down was luxury accommodation; use the house Companions or bring your own. The third level could only be a sexshop, albeit maintaining a good deal of class. And the bottom level?

"Dungeon," Jarrat said as the brochure came up.

The den's commercial was public domain, free for the download from any city net. The accommodation and third-level sexshop were themed, with the flavor of Ancient Greece. Mock-marble, urns and drapes, and Companions who had a vaguely Mediterranean look about them. The bottom-deck was predictable. Both Jarrat and Stone had seen too many places like it, from the smoky shadows to the equipment slung from the ceiling. One could almost feel the prickle in the back of the nose of the acid tang of chimera and Buran on the air, and the subtle reek of the Angel, half-masked by the rest.

"So that's Cinnabar." Stone sat back. "Why doesn't Colonel Voigt just bust them, shut them down?"

"She might want to," Jarrat said slowly, "but when you go into court without watertight evidence, the Angel lawyers will make a fool of you. Like this Shand-Pike character." He nodded at the screen, where the face of a young man was framed. "Educated in London, Paris, Shanghai, owns his own legal company working out of Chryse and Sequoia, and check out his tax audit. The money's flowing like water."

"Now, where would the deadbeats who get nailed in Cinnabar get the bucks to pay a lawyer like him?" Stone hazarded. "Can we get any deeper into Shand-Pike's financials?"

Keys pattered; the librarian whispered a 'hold' request, and Jarrat got up to stretch his back, work his shoulders, and fetch juice from the 'Chef. He had drunk it and lobbed the cup into to chute when the library AI said quietly, "Unable to comply."

"His financials are locked," Stone observed. "Try NARC clearance codes. We should be able to get at least two layers deeper than a Tactical probe."

"We can try," Jarrat muttered as he keyed in the code. "Depends how high up the files were sealed, and ... here we go."

"Unable to comply," the librarian said unapologetically.

"State the reason," Jarrat demanded.

"Attorney Shand-Pike's files are available only to level-eight clearance."

"Level what?" Stone echoed.

"That's government." Jarrat swung the chair around, put his back to the CRT. "That's on the homeworld security level, so high above Tac — and NARC, for that matter — it's not about crime or even military intelligence. It's the level where battles are planned and wars are orchestrated. How the hell did an Angel lawyer get his financials sealed at level eight? It shouldn't be possible!"

"It isn't," Stone said slowly. "You'd have to be political to work this conjuring trick ... and you know what this means."

Jarrat's gray eyes darkened. "The files were sealed to protect someone, not Shand-Pike himself. Somebody, perhaps, who dumps money into his accounts, for services rendered? It wouldn't be someone Shand-Pike defended at law, because the case would have been in the vids, the whole system would have seen it. But money's changing hands at top level, far behind the scenes, and the likes of us, and Tac, aren't allowed to know the details."

They were silent for a moment, and Stone felt an odd, cold thrill run the length of his spine. "You know, if we dig, we could plow ourselves into hellaciously deep shit. Some rocks are best left undisturbed ... I'm not sure I want to see what slimes are living under them."

Restless, unable to be still, Jarrat was on his feet and pacing between the work station and the AutoChef. "On one end of this you've got Cinnabar, where Callisto Tac keeps arresting the bastards. In the middle, you've got this Griffith Shand-Pike character, a big-gun London defense attorney who makes bloody sure the aforementioned bastards walk away smiling — and if that isn't a syndicate lawyer at work, what is it? On the other end, you've got some

political connection that arranges to have Shand-Pike's files sealed so tight, even NARC can't get into them."

"You want to have Yvette McKinnen take a shot at them?" Stone wondered dubiously.

They shared the misgivings. "Not this time," Jarrat agreed. "This isn't like putting an AI into DAC Tokyo, looking at property deeds, tax audits, passport stamps, license applications. Those are delicate and confidential, but they're still part of the civil record. This? Jesus! I've never run up against a level eight clearance. You?"

"Nope." Stone joined him at the 'Chef and punched for hot green tea. He handed Jarrat a cup and met his eyes levelly. "This could be dangerous."

"You mean for us, personally? At a career level?" Jarrat sipped the tea. "We're tickling something that's way out of bounds. Part of me wants to push, see how far we can go. And another part of me is whispering, it's professional suicide," he admitted ruefully.

"The intelligent thing," Stone said darkly, "would be to forget we ever saw this. We could to that."

"We could," Jarrat allowed. "We can also tickle it just a little more." Stone waited, brows arched at him, wishing he could share Jarrat's actual thoughts rather than the tumult of his feelings. "All I want to know," Jarrat said levelly, "is where the authorization came from to seal Shand-Pike's files. Not *why*, not the circumstances of *how*. Just who signed the authorization."

It was a legitimate question, and since the system would already have logged their two denied access requests, there was no harm in asking it. Stone pulled the chair in at the work station and petitioned the AI librarian, but he might have predicted its response.

"Unable to divulge the information," it told him pleasantly.

"Well, now." He sat back, looking up at Jarrat. "Interesting."

Jarrat perched on the edge of the work space. "You want to place a formal data requisition with Central? The red flags have to be going up everywhere. We just took three cracks at those files and got a slap in the face each time. Whoever the system reports to knows, right now, we're sneaking around, trying doors and windows, looking for a way in."

The chill was back in Stone's spine. "Yeah, I'd like to try requisitioning the data, but ... not yet." He licked lips that were suddenly dry. "This could blow up in our faces, and the fact is, we don't need to dig in that direction to dismember Aphelion. Okay, we're seeing political affiliations, but how many times have we seen the same thing, out in the colonies? Like Gene discovered right here, a long time ago, you can't always cut the roots out, but you can tear the rest of the structure down so hard, it'll be decades before it drags itself back together."

"Good enough," Jarrat said quietly. "Which brings us back to Cinnabar."

The den was the common denominator — it, and the shady operators who could only be smugglers, though Callisto Tac had proved nothing, yet. If Quade, Oliver, Rousos and their people ran anywhere, if and when Friedman

spooked them right out of Mars, Cinnabar was surely where they would land, looking for a pilot to get them out of the Jupiter system. Lorenzo Quade would hook up with Mas Pretorius, or Maxine Colleeroy, or Brandan Yip, any of whom would be able to smuggle out a human cargo.

Unless their ships were impounded. Stone swiveled a CRT toward him and glared at the docking register displayed there. They were all on the rink, the tocomac in the keel of Sequoia city, above Callisto. The *Tambisha*, the *Draque*, the *Fernando*. Three hyper-enabled heavy transports, truck-sized, rated for cargo or passengers. Their civil registry was current, their maintenance documentation was in order, their berthing fees were paid.

"Seal the system," Stone mused, "nail those ships, those pilots, shorten the options for Quade and company. Suddenly they're hunting for a ride out, someone wild enough to run the Tac blockade. Assume the whole company flocks around Quade and Orlick, assume they all come together in Sequoia, where they have a foothold in property, owned or leased."

"Tac only has to seal Callisto," Jarrat said shrewdly. "It could be done."

Stone sat back and considered the scenario critically. "There's still too many variables. *Nothing* about this plan can be controlled. It's a gamble."

"It's four-fifths guesswork, because when the time comes, there won't be any opportunity to set up a proper deep cover run." Jarrat pulled up the other chair, straddled it and gave Stone a hard look. "You want to let this one go?"

"Do you?" Stone let the empathic shield fall, and took a breath as he felt his partner's profound ambivalence.

"Part of me does ... and the rest wants to nail Aphelion," Jarrat admitted. "I know which way Gene'll vote, if we put it to him. He'll take Aphelion down supposing it kills him. It's unfinished business." He looked away for a moment, and then met Stone's eyes soberly. "I don't want to send you into jeopardy, in a deep cover op that's barely planned and impossible to control."

"But you want to take Aphelion," Stone said quietly, "as badly as I do, as badly as Gene does."

"*Almost* as badly as Gene does," Jarrat corrected. "He wants Aphelion so bad, he'd take 'em on with his bare hands." He paused, and Stone felt the knife-sharp twist of an inspiration. "So let him."

"Meaning?" Stone thought he could guess.

"He wants it," Jarrat said slowly, "for vengeance, or satisfaction, or just to finish the job he's always believed he left half-done. I'd offer him the deep cover op, or at least part of it. He knows Callisto better than we do, which gives him a head start, and he has the motivation."

Stone was aware of a fundamental symmetry in the proposition. "I could believe Gene as a wily old smuggler. Maybe a military vet, with a history of dodging Tactical in the belt, running contraband between Ceres and Mars."

"Contraband," Jarrat echoed. "Buran, and maybe high-octane tequila from the low side of Darwin's. It's been prohibited in the homeworlds for thirty years but the belters prefer it over their own rotgut."

"So he does the run from here to Darwin's," Stone went on, "offloads

his stuff in Memphis, on Ceres. That'd be safe. The likes of Quade and Orlick wouldn't be caught dead in the belt, so they wouldn't know this old smuggler from a hole in the ground."

"Have him bred and born in the belt, then," Jarrat reasoned. "Say, he never went through merchant *astra* college. Learned to fly heavy transports in the army, same as I did, took the hyper license later, after bumming around on enough freighters to have learned by the seat of his pants. Have him licensed, and his ship registered, in Memphis."

"And he's in Sequoia for the first time on vacation," Stone added. "Cashed up from a load he just smuggled in from Venice and looking for a few thrills, which takes him to Cinnabar."

There, they fell silent, and Stone felt the quiver in Jarrat's belly as clearly as if it had been his own. "Too many variables," Jarrat whispered.

"It's gamble," Stone agreed. "This one's always going to be a gamble, loaded with variables, way beyond anyone's control. We either agree to wing it, or we forget the whole deal, right now." His brows arched. "You call it."

But Jarrat shook his head. "No. Let Gene call it." He gestured at the comm. "Get him down here, while we still have the luxury of time to put into the design work."

The character had to be perfect; he had to be inserted into the Tactical and civil register databases, so that his ID would run. Cantrell had to be 'in character' as surely as a stage actor who could not afford to fluff his lines. For an instant, Stone was John D. Strother again, and before him, an AI-hacker who called himself Jack Dorman, an engineer named Sonny Goldsmith. He had been so far under the skins of those characters, he would speak with their voices in his sleep. Gene Cantrell was a veteran. He had been at command rank when Jarrat and Stone were just entering grade school. Colonel Bill Dupre trusted him implicitly, and Stone mocked himself for the misgivings.

"Let Gene call it," Jarrat said again. "It's only fair."

Stone reached over to the comm.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

His name was McKenzie Crane. He was born in the mining colony at Tempel, which had once flourished and was now little more than a ghost town on the asteroid Cybele. He signed an Army enlistment form almost forty years before, served on the carriers *Tobruk* and *Mandalay*, and the tender *City of Tharsis*, and retired as a master sergeant on a full pension. With the death of his father, Crane inherited the hyper-enabled heavy transport *Isabeau*, named

for his long-dead mother, and for fifteen years he had tramped around the colonies, occasionally returning to the homeworlds when a cargo brought him back. He had just slithered in with a load of contraband for the belters, and since his wallet was thick, McKenzie Crane was in Sequoia to live the good life while his largesse lasted.

The personality fit Cantrell like a glove. The ID was already shuffled into the homeworlds civil registry, and Petrov was thorough. He went back into the moldering files of Tempel and wrote Crane into the education records. He was a poor student, constantly being busted for smoking fizz and cutting class to go slumming with his friends. At fourteen he was arrested by a Tac patrol, in a VR den that should have been off limits to minor; at sixteen he was arrested in a sexshop, topping a house hustler hours after the curfew for minors. When the Army enlistment vessel *Windrush* performed its annual sweep through the belt colonies, Crane was eager to sign on, and the colony was pleased to see him leave.

With a deep satisfaction, Cantrell spent several hours designing the look of his man. He dressed in a quasi-military style, still wearing the last pair of boots, now well-worn, that had been issued on the *Tharsis*; but his wrists, fingers and ears were heavy with platinum jewelry, and he smoked Gold Ring, the most expensive scented bel grass exported from the prefecture of Shangai-Hangzhou. The *Isabeau* was a hardworking vessel with a crew of four, and while Crane was living the high life in Sequoia, rather than running up port fees, she was hauling cargo around the Jovian homesteads. Crane would know where she was at any instant, but a long-range flightplan was impossible to file because the crew never knew where they were headed next.

Crane's right-hand man was an ex-Starfleet courier pilot named Vic Allen, not long out of the service and already in trouble. Allen had quit early due to his own shortage of attention span, and he enjoyed Crane's footloose lifestyle — and the sudden big-ticket jobs which were tailor-made for a man who had no qualms about dealing on the muddy side of the law. He was wanted by Tactical from Callisto to Chryse, though smuggling most items was only a five-year stretch in medium security. Only Angel smuggling carried the much longer terms, and neither McKenzie Crane nor Vic Allen had ever — yet — touched Angel. Of the two, Allen was more likely to dabble, being younger, wilder, and much less troubled by scruples. He had killed a citybot-tom informant about to betray him, and Olympia Tac wanted badly to have him in custody.

Not long out of Starfleet, Allen was a sharp dresser with a taste for gorgeous Companions of the colonial persuasion. He was born on Darwin's World, went to college in Venice, shipped out on the academy ship *Galileo*, and transferred directly to the carrier *Kyoto*. The signal lag between Earth and Darwin's made most of the identity secure, and Petrov enlisted Yvette McKinnen to slip Victor Keith Allen seamlessly into the inactive Starfleet register. He had served five years of the seven for which he had enlisted, was a brilliant pilot, but had difficulties with authority and never quite accepted the

doctrine of the service. His discharge was honorable and legitimate, but Starfleet did not hesitate to accept Lieutenant V.K. Allen's resignation.

Minutes after the homeworlds civil registry was updated with the identity of Crane, Allen joined him in its strange, ephemeral reality. Jarrat watched the records slither into the Starfleet database as if they had been oiled, and gave McKinnen a rueful look. She was done in minutes, after Stone had spent over an hour designing the character. His photocards — licenses, credit, ID — and Cantrell's, were being produced as they drank coffee in a corner of the ops room, and watched Petrov and Mac work.

The Russian was ready to leave on a moment's notice, and he was noticeable edgy. On the very threshold of the promotion for which he had worked and waited years, he was taking the downshuttle to Central, where he would not *quite* lie, not *quite* feed a tissue of untruths to the NARC brass. If the situation turned ugly his only defense was, he was under orders. Jarrat fully expected him to use the argument.

Stone looked very good in black-marble denim, black leather jacket, pale blue silk tank, and a lot of white gold. The style was chic on Darwin's, Avalon, Sheal. He had the look of a well-heeled colonial, without needing the body morphology. He looked, Jarrat thought self-mockingly, good enough to eat alive. Which made the impending hazard exquisitely painful.

The twist of resentment was razor-edged, and Stone felt it clearly. While McKinnen and Petrov tied off the loose ends, he stepped out of the ops room and beckoned Jarrat into the lounge opposite. Siberia was pristine and glaring, while massive storms darkened the skies of Kazak. Jarrat spared the view a single glance, and watched Stone sprawl on one end of the couch opposite the long observation panes. Stone's whole face was a question, but neither of them needed to speak it aloud. In any event, there was no answer.

With a soft curse, Jarrat sat beside him. The lounge was deserted since the carrier was still docked, the ops room only idling. Officially, business in the homeworlds was almost concluded. Leo Michiko was deceased, as far as Central was concerned; Harry Del was only waiting for the formal documents to be delivered before he signed off on Marcus Brand, and Petrov was about to satisfy Central's 'RTB and report' order. Jimmy Lo was ostensibly still sedated with severe vacuum bloom, and Michiko's remains had officially been committed to cryogen, pending repatriation and cremation at his home on Aurora. The *Athena* was technically prepping to ship out; Budweisser's department was concentrating on the drive engines while the crew complement made their way back.

The chatter from the ops room carried quietly. Cantrell had dropped into an odd, clipped accent and a guttural voice. He was in character, deliberately settling into the skin of another man, and Jarrat shivered, remembering the Companion who had been the fascination of uptown Calleran. And beside him was Stone, striking in black, as well as subtly different already. Jarrat felt the difference keenly, and in the same moment was attracted and troubled. Vic Allen was powerful, magnetic, with the allure of the dangerous; but he

was far enough from Stone for Jarrat to almost wonder how his kisses would taste, and he mocked himself for the absurdity.

"You want to talk?" Stone asked at last.

"No." Jarrat's fingers laced into Stone's. "Got nothing to say."

It had all been said — and not said. Stone and Cantrell were only waiting for the 'go,' taking the opportunity to settle into character, get a feel for the clothes, the swagger, the accent. Stone's own speech would drift, leaving behind the overtones of London, taking on the longer vowels and softer consonants of Venice. He was lucky; the Venice accent had much in common with Barcelona, where he had spent so much of his youth. It was easy to drop into it.

They were silent until a chime from the ops room intruded, and Petrov swore lividly. It was the second call for the downshuttle, and he was booked on it. "I'm out of here, God help me," he said to no one in particular. "Wish me luck."

"Break a leg," Cantrell said with dark good cheer.

"I should be so lucky." Petrov was out of the ops room, heading for the lifts.

The shuttle would leave the NARC dock in twenty minutes, and Petrov was scheduled to present himself on the carpet at General Gaunt's office in the morning. He was as edgy as Jarrat had ever seen him. "He probably hopes we fall flat on our faces," he said with arid humor. "It'll make his promotion a dead cert."

"Petrov's been wanting to see us do a face-plant for a long time," Stone said dismissively. "Neither of us cut him much slack, and he has to know what we think of his potential at command rank."

"Command rank," Jarrat echoed. "If there's anything much left to command, when Bram Sorenson gets done with this."

They had watched an edit of the GlobalNet coverage from Goldstream Stadium, and according to the Mars Press Association, the disaster was being laid at the door of the Angel lobby. Any individual who opposed Sorenson and his legislation was characterized as the enemy. Jarrat was uncomfortably reminded of the scene at Venice's Lambert Stadium, where the scene could have been the same.

"Let it go," Stone said quietly. His fingertips traced the line of Jarrat's cheek, his jaw. "One thing at a time. That one's not our fight — let Cass Brand take on Sorenson. My money's on the old man."

He was right, and Jarrat had taken a breath to agree when Cantrell's voice said sharply from the ops room,

"Heads up, kids ... it might be showtime. I've got Jay Friedman on the line, level five encryption, and he looks mad enough to spit."

"Here we go," Jarrat said with grim resolve. He lifted Stone's hand, touched his lips to the knuckles, and let it go.

Friedman was pale with fury. "They bolted," he said baldly. "You knew they would. They didn't even touch Marsport, but we tagged them to the

Hellas Number 3 field, the mines down in the southeast. My people had the good sense to back off and let them run when they saw where they were going. There's a lot of corporate security on the Hellas fields, and since Lorenzo Quade owns over twenty percent of HMC, they'll shoot when and where he tells 'em to." He was defensive, as if he thought he must rationalize his agents' self-preservation instincts.

"Your kids got out safely?" Cantrell wanted to know.

"Yeah." Friedman relaxed visibly. "They stood off and got us a good ID on the ship that bugged out of Mars maybe ten, fifteen minutes ago, on a nice, pat vector for the Jupiter system. She's big, heavy, powerful. She's registered on Ceres as an asteroid miner, which means she'll be trouble."

"Hyper enabled?" Stone asked tersely.

"No, thank God, or she'd be jumping right out of the homeworlds about now. But she has the kind of power, and firepower, that out-muscles anything Tactical can throw at her. I'll be recommending Danni Voigt have her squads stand off and observe, not engage."

"Very wise," Cantrell agreed. "We just unpacked your data, Jay. We have what we need, with the exception of a pipeline to Colonel Voigt."

"She's waiting for you," Friedman said bleakly. "I already briefed her, and I messaged her AI when the miner quit the Hellas fields. Jovian ATC will be looking for it, soon as it enters their network. With luck, they won't lose it ... but that system is a chaos, a labyrinth. If they *do* lose it, blame Jupiter and its shitty radiation belts and plasma fields, not ATC."

"We know," Jarrat assured him, "we took the VR tour. It's no surprise Aphelion went to ground there last time, and a safe bet they'll do the same now. Thanks for your assist, Colonel. We appreciate it."

Friedman glared at him. "Don't be grateful, just get that fucking syndicate out of my territory."

"If we don't," Cantrell growled, "it won't be for want of trying. Inform Colonel Voigt that we're coming in, and standby."

"Will do." Friedman reached out of the frame. "Callisto Tac will contact you direct, on heavy encryption. Good hunting, Captains."

For a long, pregnant moment, Jarrat, Stone and Cantrell regarded each other darkly, and then Stone touched the comm. "Ops room, looking for Gable. You're on, Curt."

With Petrov off the carrier and both Stone and Cantrell in the field, Gable would be gaffing the ops room. The eagerness was sharp in his voice as the younger man responded, and Jarrat's lips compressed. Had he and Stone been so keen? He knew they had. The climb up to command rank was years long and never easy. Gable had a long way to go, but he had the talent and the determination.

Showtime. Jarrat lifted a brow at Stone and Cantrell, and tapped the comm. "Carrier pilot, prep to maneuver. Inform NARC Control, we are uncoupling. Secure to cast off umbilici."

The voice answering from the flight deck belonged to Helen Archer

herself. "Roger that. Flight systems are online, waiting for engines and dock clearance. Vector and velocity?"

"Jupiter," Stone said levelly. "Half speed ... and standby to slow it way down. We're not looking to outrun our quarry."

"Well out from the system," Jarrat added, "come to a dead stop. We'll be playing a hiding game this time. Stoney?"

"Now you see 'em, now you don't," Stone agreed with a faint smile. They shared a thrill through every nerve ending, knowing they were on a wave-length so close, they were almost sharing thoughts. "Fortunately, the chaos of the Jovian system makes this an easy game to win."

"Jupiter," Archer echoed, amused, "at waddling speed, pull her over well out, and park her somewhere nasty ... the NARC dock control AI has cleared us to maneuver. All sections report secure, umbilici are away. Waiting for engineer's confirmation and drive ignition."

The routine was both timeworn and the province of the carrier's Starfleet crew. Jarrat's attention had passed on to more appropriate matters. Stone had called up the deep space tracking network, and was waiting for a lock on Friedman's bolter. Even boosted through the tachyon comm conduit, the signal lag between the nodes serving Earth and the belt was almost five seconds, and the delay dragged absurdly.

"Patience," Cantrell said dryly as Jarrat's fingers drummed a tattoo on the work space by the CRT.

"You're kidding, right?" Jarrat muttered. And then, "Here we go. Got 'em. Jesus, they're fast."

"And big," Stone said softly. "Gene, can you get stats on this bugger?"

The data had come in with Friedman's transmission, and by now Colonel Danni Voigt would be looking at the same intel. The ship was registered as a Class 8 miner, a 'commercial heavy' with two Prometheus generators aboard, powering three monstrous sublight engines. The database knew her simply as Commercial 55187, and Cantrell whistled as he read off the data.

"She's almost two centuries old, goes back to the days when they'd send a ship out to the belt, spend a few weeks prospecting, pick out a planetoid to mine and smelt, and couple up to it. The smelters and mass drivers would dock on, the drones would go to work, and then something like 55187 would sink itself, bows-on, in the ass-end of the planetoid, and shove the whole assembly into a thousand-day orbit. By the time they reached Earth orbit, the ball of rock was reduced to a half billion tonnes of ore." He looked over the CRT at Jarrat and Stone. "She been working the Hellas Strike on Mars, being used to power the whole site and push bulk cargo to orbit. And Friedman's right. She could be trouble."

"She's built like a warship," Stone mused. "If she's armed —"

"You know it will be." Jarrat folded both arms across his chest.

"— I wouldn't want to tangle with it," Stone finished.

"We don't plan to." Jarrat frowned at Cantrell. "We'll put you into Sequoia quietly. Tactical should be coming down hard on everything and

everyone. Hotels, dens, bars, arcades, the rink, the malls, uptown and citybottom alike. Quade's group should be running scared, and these guys, McKenzie Crane and Vic Allen, will come up like a gift from the gods."

Cantrell's brow creased. "Or just too convenient. They could suspect, and if they do, we better be ready to get the hell out, fast."

They would need a swift extraction, and Jarrat's nagging misgivings returned. "I'll know where Stoney is," he told Cantrell, "down to the last half meter. But you're another question. If you get separated —"

"We won't," Stone began.

"You don't know that," Jarrat argued.

It was Cantrell who said tartly, "So bug me, for chrissakes. You think I've never been wired before? I was doing this job when you were in school!"

"You've been doing it long enough to know how bloody dangerous it is, being wired." Jarrat gave him a glare. "I'd rather give you an R/T."

But Cantrell was less optimistic. "Get frisked, and the R/T's gone. I you'd been bugged, Kevin, when we lost you in Chell, well, you wouldn't have stayed lost for very long and that whole episode would have turned out very differently."

"If he'd been bugged," Stone said quietly, "and the bug was detected, he'd have been head-down in a dumpster weeks earlier."

"It's a gamble we take," Cantrell agreed, "and right now I do *not* want to be on the street in Sequoia with some bastard Aphelion shooter on my ass, and trying to call home." He looked over at Yvette McKinnen, who was paging through Friedman's data, and listening without comment. "Mac?"

She pushed away from the CRT and tilted her head at him as she stood. "You want me to bug you? I have the best, latest, technology ... but there are no guarantees, Gene. Bugs *are* detected. It's why R&D is making such a circus out of the empathic bond."

"Just do it," Cantrell insisted. "It's a risk I'm prepared to take." He gestured at Jarrat. "He ran the other side of the risk, wouldn't have the wire. It was *his* decision to make, and see where it landed him!"

McKinnen nodded soberly. "Come with me."

Her lab was bright, noisy with the cooling fans of many machines, all of which were processing data, and to Jarrat's surprise Harry Del was perched on a stool at one of the benches. He set down his lunch and gestured at the screens beside him, where gibberish code was scrolling without pause. Jarrat took one glance and looked away, making Harry chuckle.

"That's *one* percent of my serum going through analysis. Yvette was good enough to make her systems available." He lifted a glass of light red wine. "The only thing I really deplore is a waste of time, because it translates directly into lives lost."

"You're welcome, Harry," McKinnen told him. "Gene, take a seat."

She was opening several lockers, and Jarrat watched her take out a shielded case, a normal first aid kit, and a percussion hypo. With an expression of resignation, Cantrell hung his jacket over a chair and pulled the shirt

over his head. He was in excellent physical shape, Jarrat noticed, wearing an even spacer's tan over well-worked muscles. Only a few strands of gray on his chest betrayed his years, and Cantrell was one of those 'naturals' who had no vanity, no desire to cling to youth. Maturity suited him, and he was comfortable with it.

"This will hurt a little," McKinnen warned as she loaded the hypo.

"It'll hurt a lot," Cantrell corrected. "Get on with it."

"Where do you want it?" She checked the hypo's stylus-fine tip.

"In my left shoulder, right behind the arm." He leaned over the bench, glanced back at the hypo once, and then looked away as she swabbed the area with alcohol.

With what sounded like a silenced gunshot, the bug fired in, and Cantrell grunted. Blood blossomed, and McKinnen swabbed the tiny wound until it was dry. "Done. Let's take a look."

The technology had improved, Jarrat admitted. On the CRT was not only a plot of Cantrell's exact position, but also his pulse and body temperature, which were enough to indicate conditions of stress, pain, exertion. The telemetry band was very high, very discreet and heavily encrypted. To most civilian receivers, it would look like the data return from a classified science project. Few people would be able to receive the signal, and of those who did, even fewer would connect it with a human source.

"You're online," McKinnen told him. "The computer recognizes you."

"I feel safer already," Stone said dubiously.

Cantrell seemed about to argue or banter, but Gable's voice intruded, from the comm. "I've got Colonel Voigt holding, heavy encryption. We're receiving a datastream from Callisto Tac. You might want to be up here."

"On our way," Jarrat said tersely. "Thanks, Mac ... I'll catch you later, Harry, when this show's on the road."

The ops room was on standby. Gable had called only two officers to duty. He was monitoring the comm himself, and the navtank was busy with the plot of the Jupiter system. The Callisto Tactical commander was on a screen off one side of the main comm panel, and as Jarrat, Stone and Cantrell appeared, Gable said to the pickup,

"Thank you for holding, Colonel. I have Captain Jarrat for you." As he spoke, he beckoned Stone and Cantrell to the CRT on which a massive datastream had begun to unpack. "You need to see this."

She looked young to be the Tactical colonel, but Jarrat was not quick to judge. Dealing with Leo Michiko had made him more cautious. If Voigt was from one of the system's old, landed families, she could easily be twice her apparent age. Her hair was blue-black, her skin pale olive, her eyes as gray as his own; she was not conventionally attractive, but the strong features, large nose and wide mouth had their own appeal. She spoke with an odd accent, unfamiliar to Jarrat, and her expression was shrewd as she studied her own CRT. The signal lag was still almost four seconds, and the conversation would be stilted.

"Captain Jarrat. I've received a great deal of data from Jay Friedman, and of course I'll comply, though these worlds have not requested NARC presence."

The statement was loaded, and Jarrat felt his hackles rise. "NARC's presence in your system is a matter of necessity, Colonel Voigt. You are about to track a big ship, ID code Commercial 55187, into your space. Several pivotal members of the Aphelion syndicate are aboard. Do you give me to understand that Callisto Tactical is agreeable to their presence?"

The signal lag was infuriating. Eight seconds passed before the image on the screen assumed an appalled look, and Voigt said, "Good gods, no. Quite apart from the illegality of it, this system doesn't want syndicate trash within a million kilometers of our most outlying homestead." Her eyes were flint hard. "You're certain of your data, Captain? No mistakes? You understand, to comply with Jay's requests for a system-wide lockdown, I'll have to strip manpower from Ganymede and Europa ... don't let it be an expensive wild goose chase we'll all regret."

Again, the signal lag, while Jarrat said grimly, "We're certain of the data, Colonel, but I'll be candid with you. The operation is a gamble. We're going to get one shot at these Aphelion escapees. Three of them are original members of the syndicate which was busted a long time ago. Two of them are key players in the new Aphelion. Yes, they're reforming. Yes, there's an Angel problem even in the homeworlds. It's not in the NARC charter to let the situation escalate — or to let syndicate moguls get out to the colonies and start again. Your assistance is critical to any chance of success we have."

"Gamble though it may be," Voigt said in bleak tones, as the signal lag expired. Her smile was devoid of humor. "I've been known to indulge in the occasional flutter, Captain ... let's do it. We're letting 55187 into the system, and then we're on an immediate lockdown, correct?"

"Correct," Jarrat affirmed, eight seconds later. "Do not, repeat *not* allow your squads to engage 55187. She's too big, and way too nasty. Friedman should have sent you the stats, if not, pull its civil registration and tell your people to stay well clear. Try not to lose it, Colonel. The carrier is coming in well behind 55187, they won't know we're here ... and you *will* lose us from your ATC network before you're even sure we're insystem. Let it be, have ATC stand down, do not come looking, understood?"

"Understood," she said slowly. "You're playing cat and mouse. Jay briefed me. You're putting people into Callisto. I need to know a hell of a lot more than this, Captain, or while they're just doing their jobs, my best people can fuck up your operation. We don't want a NARC arrested and moldering in my holding cells. I assume you have data for me."

He gave the image on the screen a edgy grin. "You assume correctly. Standby to receive telemetry." He looked up from the comm. "We ready to go, Curt?" At Gable's nod, he tapped the 'send' key. "It's on its way, Colonel. Two identities to have your street patrols ignore like they're invisible. Five ships you *must* impound, on any charge you want to dream up. Three pilots

we'll ask you to arrest, if you can lay your hands on them — again, any charge you like, even if it won't hold them longer than a few days. That's all the time we need. Names of Yip, Colleroy, Pretorius. You might know them."

Eight seconds later Voigt said wryly, "Oh, I know them. I also know their bloody lawyer, and he'll have the bastards back on the street in forty-eight hours. I can't hold 'em any longer, Captain, not without compromising my own department. Is it enough?"

It would have to be, and Jarrat's intuition said, more than enough. "It'll do," he told her. "Do you have the manpower to seal the system *and* harass suspects on the street? Just go through the motions, pull everything over, run every ID, make a great, stinking nuisance on the street. If you can do it, we need you to stake out a number of properties, uptown real estate ... and let your people be *seen* on the job. Can do?"

"We can do it," Voigt allowed, "so long as all you want is surveillance. I can assign cadets to observation, but don't ask them to tackle syndicate goons. I won't bury academy kids for this."

"Surveillance is just fine," Jarrat said levelly. "We're only trying to unnerve Quade's group, herd them in one direction. This is why your cadets need to be seen on stakeout. You must be aware of a club called Cinnabar. Stake it out too ... but keep your people *out*. Even if Yip and Colleroy and in there, don't touch the place. We need it open and functional. Problems?"

She was back after the infuriating signal lag. "Nothing I'm aware of at this time. If we hit trouble, you'll be the first to know. Anything else?"

"Not now. We appreciate the assist, Colonel. You have our data?"

"It's unpacking, let me run it." Voigt paused, looked out of the frame and added, "ATC just picked up Commercial 55187, headed in fast. We're on, Captain Jarrat. You'll be online during the operation?"

"I will," Jarrat assured her. "Run the data now, and ... good luck."

"Good luck to us all," Voigt said darkly, and killed the link.

"We're on," he said to Stone, Cantrell and Gable. "Callisto ATC's got a track on 55187, but you *know* they'll lose it." He looked from Stone to Cantrell and back. "You'd better prep to insert. The system is going to be sealed tighter than a drumhead in two hours, and Crane and Allen had better be on the inside when it happens."

Cantrell was already moving. "Give me ten minutes," he said, working his shoulder to ease to stiff soreness of the implant as he headed for his quarters.

"Stoney?" Jarrat's hand fell on his arm.

"I already packed," Stone said quietly. "I'll grab my bag, and I'm good to go."

The black-and-silver designer backpack was just inside his door. The CRT was dormant, the lights low. The cabin had an abandoned feel, almost a chill, and Jarrat swore lividly as he stepped inside. Stone's big arms slid about him from behind, pulling him into an embrace he could not have escaped, and did not want to. He leaned back into the bigger, stronger body and his eyes closed, the better to share the flashfire of emotion which almost overloaded the bond.

"A couple of days," Stone said moistly against his ear. His tongue flicked there, teasing, making Jarrat shiver.

"You be bloody careful," Jarrat growled, hearing the edge in his own voice as he turned into Stone's arms and took his lips with a kiss that drew blood. "This *feels* bad, wrong ... something."

"It's not too late to scrub the op," Stone said pointedly.

"Yes it is." Jarrat first fended him off and then seized him, bruised his ribs, and then gentled and held Stone's dark head between his hands. In the low light he was very beautiful with a sultry allure. "Even if we could scrub it, we wouldn't. But it still feels bad. Like I said, be bloody careful."

"I will." Stone's fingertips traced Jarrat's brows, his nose and lips. "Everything I want is standing right here, and I'm coming back for it."

Jarrat took a painful breath, held it, let it out. "This part of the job doesn't get any easier with time, does it?"

In fact, it was growing infinitely harder, but Stone did not say it. He leaned over, laid a kiss on Jarrat's open mouth, and then hoisted his bag over one shoulder. "A couple of days, Kevin, that's all. Sequoia's lousy with Tac squads, those ships are impounded, the pilots are either in the cells or lying low, and every square meter of real estate Quade's people either own or lease is visibly under surveillance. It's still a gamble, but I've won on longer odds."

"So have I." Jarrat stepped back to clear the doorway. "Your ride's waiting. And I'll be with you," he added with grim determination.

"I'm counting on it," Stone told him darkly, and headed away toward the hangars without looking back.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jupiter was very different from Zeus, and Callisto had nothing in common with Avalon. They were gas giant and major moon, but the comparison ended there. Even in the age of the terraformer fleets, not one of the Jovian worlds was inhabitable, and Jupiter itself was far more violent than Zeus. The radiation belts and plasma fields formed permanent, natural sensor blinds which would swallow and conceal the carrier, and the news from Callisto Tactical came as no surprise. They lost Commercial 55187 soon after it dove into the Jupiter system. A good pilot who was determined not to be seen would vanish, and not reappear until he wanted to.

Or *she*, Stone added, as he and Cantrell spilled out of an aircab on the roof park of the Hibernian Hotel. Helen Archer had parked the carrier in a drift of radiotoxic rubble, between a flock of tiny worldlets that did not deserve

the name of ‘moons’ and Jupiter itself. Callisto ATC would not be able to see the *Athena* even if they were looking for it, which they were not. Of 55187 there was no sign, but Stone was confident the miner’s aftscan platforms had never picked up the carrier. He was also confident that Vic Allen and McKenzie Crane had made it into Sequoia city well ahead of any member of Lorenzo Quade’s party.

Sequoia floated in Callisto’s sky, with an incomparable view of the gas giant off the ‘high side’ and the corresponding view of the planet’s smashed, pockmarked surface off the ‘low side’ of the platform. Jupiter was red, orange, gold, even dusky blue-green, charcoal and ash in the shadows of its many worlds. Callisto’s orbit fell outside the radiation belts, which made it an attractive proposition for the early colonists, whose comm equipment was often fried. The other three Galilean worlds — Ganymede, Europa, Io — were all colonized now, since the Jovian radiation was no match for armor and flare shields, but Callisto had been the first. Sequoia was the oldest city in the system, and only Geneva, in orbit over Ganymede, was wealthier.

Even Stone, who had made the dive into the atmosphere of Zeus, was transfixed by the face of Jupiter. He had spent twenty minutes gazing mutely at it as Eve Lang brought them over in the Apogee, and Lang was hushed, overwhelmed by the planet. The Apogee docked in the public hangar at the Sequoia East 9 gate, and the engines did not shut down. Lang was on a countdown, both to the sealing of the Jupiter system, which would make it difficult for her to get back to the carrier — and to the carrier’s functional disappearance, which would make it doubly hard to get home.

Their bay was still cycling, freezing, with ear-popping low pressure, when Stone and Cantrell hurried into the inner ‘lock, and Lang was already calling for clearance to leave. She was masquerading as a cab, doing ferry service between Callisto and Europa, which was near enough to appear as a bright disk in the sky, and Callisto Flight did not keep her waiting long. By Stone’s chrono, she would have been home with minutes to spare before Archer slipped the kilometer-long *Athena* into the lee of a fractured worldlet known only by its beacon code.

The Hibernian Hotel towered thirty levels above the junction where Windago Mall crossed Crowhaven Boulevard, and opposite, thirty meters closer to the transit terminal which fed bodies and freight downtown, was the maw-like entrance to Domenico Martinez Arcade. Twenty meters inside that mall, on the right, was the dancing threedee signage of Cinnabar. Stone stood at the parapet, looking down into the street, and then up at the triple-layer pressure skin high overhead. Drones worked there, every moment of every day, testing and repairing. Native Sequoians liked to boast that there had never been a decompression ‘incident’ since the city was man-rated and opened up for habitation.

Then again, there had never been a slugging-match between massively heavy ships anywhere in this system, and to Stone’s eyes, Sequoia appeared uncomfortably similar to Argentia, Arkadia, Barsoom. The ‘soap bubbles,’ the

pressurized fantasy cities floating in the frozen skies of Aurora, Leo Michiko's brain children.

Beside him at the parapet, Cantrell thrust his left hand into one long cargo pocket and withdrew a red glass bottle. The bourbon was decent quality, manufactured somewhere on Earth. It certainly deserved better than to be splashed on Cantrell's clothes, before he took a single swig and passed it to Stone. With a grimace, Stone repeated the performance. The spirit smarted his throat, burned his gullet on the way down, but what made him catch his breath was the twist of reaction from Jarrat. Cantrell looked curiously at him, but Stone shook his head and said quietly,

"Nothing to fret about. In fact, be glad he can give me a shiver at this distance. He just felt the booze go down ... he's actually coughing."

"Damn, you're good," Cantrell observed.

"Not that you'd want to share," Stone added, "not unless you were in love, or it'd have you right out of your mind." He pushed away from the parapet. "Time to go in, while we've got the chance. I want to be off the street before Tac starts the heavy-duty harassment. Looking like we do, and stinking of booze, we'd be picked up."

"They're supposed to know to leave us be," Cantrell said sharply.

"And mistakes get made," Stone added, "way too often." He was on his way to the elevators, which were housed in graffiti-strewn sheds in the corner of the roof park. Two of the three lifts were out of order, and the graffiti was four layers deep. "It's easy to see we're on the low side of town," he said ruefully as he thumbed for the car. "Citybottom never changes, no matter which world you're on."

Windago and Crowhaven were among the first sectors completed and populated, and many of the buildings were original. The architecture was old, and only the exoskeletal design kept them in use. Utilities — power, water and comm conduits — were external, sometimes disguised behind Gothic 'furniture' that might be gargoyles or tangled ivy or the faces of a forgotten pantheon, sometimes just raw tag-on pipes. This part of Sequoia was ugly, and at ground level it was crowded, but on the way over from the East 9 gate Stone had glimpsed the face the city preferred to show to its visitors.

Spires reached right up to the pressure skin, gleaming with armorglass and chromed plascrete, dancing with dynamic, threedee artwork which shimmered, constantly changing, sometimes abstract, sometimes depicting the incredible landscapes of other worlds or of old Earth. The traffic lanes soared up around the spires, and Leo Michiko would have been inspired by the architecture — or had Callisto's designers been inspired by Michiko's work on Aurora? Here on the Sequoia platform, the low-grav architecture was less risky. Floating in the parched vacuum of the moon's sky, it had no dependence on an Arago field.

The elevator car opened directly onto Crowhaven Boulevard. Stone smelt frying onions and sizzling oil from the curbside vendors, and the jangle of three different music tracks from stores to left and right punched through the

roar of traffic. He was dodging a gaggle of gyrobikes before he was fully out of the elevator lobby. Kids who should probably have been in class giggled and mocked, and he showed them his middle finger.

Four lanes of ground traffic jostled for space between the sidewalk and the gaping entrance to Domenico Martinez Arcade, and the cumulative heat of so many repulsion fields was oppressive. In moments, Stone was sweating in the leather jacket and unsurprised to see the uniform near-nudity of the passersby. Body paint, tattoos, pierced-in jewelry and scraps of silk seemed to be the dress code in this part of Sequoia, though in the coolness of uptown, closer to the wind machines and in thoroughfares where the traffic did not back up, undress was scorned as a hallmark of citybottom's poor.

The Companions were working, even in the afternoon. The huge arclights, parked up by the pressure skin, fluoresced on their body paints, and Stone's eye was drawn to a young man who seemed to morph between tiger stripes and dragon scales, head to foot, as he moved. His eyes were bright gold with contacts, his hair was a mane of black and scarlet streaks. He caught Stone's attention at once, and sidled closer. The smooth, well-muscled limbs, round buttocks, the wisp of silk at his groin and the sapphires bleeding from lobes and nipples, warned of a high pricetag, and before he let Stone snake an arm about him he whispered into his ear, "Five thousand."

"Credits or dollars?" Stone slurred, cheerfully half-drunk, in the accent of Darwin's World. "Hell, what's it matter? You wanna drink? I wanna drink. I wanna get drunk as three skunks, and fucked through the floor. You wanna come along for the laughs?"

The Companion batted long, inky eyelashes at him. The lids were green, contrasting the scarlet in his hair. "I wanna. Where are we going?"

"Who knows?" Stone said affably. "Where's the closest place to get plastered an' laid, in no particular order?"

"Cinnabar," the siren purred. "What do I call you?"

"Vic." Stone thrust out his hand. "Vic Allen. This is Crane, my partner, an' he also wants to get screwed and smashed ... or is it the other way around? Where's this Cinnabar place? Is it a den, a real pit? We wanna den. Nothing dress-up fancy," he warned. "What's your name?"

"Call me John," he invited.

"Now, that can't be your name," Stone protested.

The young man only shrugged. "A rose by any other name, and all that shit." He linked his arm through Stone's. "Cinnabar's this way, and it's as much of a den as you want it to be. The old man's coming along?"

"Old man?" Cantrell echoed, deliberately rumbling and rasping. He had hunched his shoulders as if his spine had seen better days, and the drab, mock-military fatigues bulked him out. His jaw was stubbled and, Cantrell not being bothered about years or age, the stubble was coming in iron gray. "I'll give you 'old man,'" he growled at the Companion. "We'll see how old you think I am after that field of yours is plowed and seeded."

John smirked. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Hey, find your own," Stone protested, loud and slurred, "this one's mine, and I'm not bloody sharing, not again, not after last time."

They were making their way into the close, noisy dimness of the arcade. Burning incense, sizzling oil, seafood and spices, ancient dust and fresh paint assaulted the nostrils, and the cacophony of overlapping music was so dense, it merged into one sound, thick as syrup. Cinnabar was on their right, and John steered Stone toward the big threedee signs.

"What happened last time?" he demanded as Vic Allen and McKenzie Crane stopped to watch the animated logos.

The word 'Cinnabar' was tattooed on the flanks of two sinuous, sweat-slick and very naked dancers, one male, one female. As they writhed together, the words came alive, became a pair of emerald green serpents, and while the eye was distracted by the snakes, the dancers morphed, male into female, female into male and switched position. The serpents slithered around them, dusky, sensual, returned to their original patterns on the dancers' flanks, and faded back into tattoos. The tableau froze, shimmered into sparklets which were whipped into chaos by an unfelt wind, only to coalesce and begin again.

"That's neat," Crane rasped, "gives a guy a few ideas ... they got Companions inside?"

"The best," John promised. "So long as you got the cash."

Crane snorted. "We're cashed up and ready to boogie," he informed John. "You work outta this place, do you?"

"Yeah. It's a good place to work. They look after you, and they get the good customers, jocks with real money, not beer money." John looked him up and down, and then subjected Stone — Vic Allen — to the same rude scrutiny. "You cashed up? From what?"

"We just got back in from Calleran, loaded," Stone growled.

"Hey, you drunk already?" Cantrell punched his arm. "You want to get us arrested before we've even gotten ourselves laid? Jeez, it's no wonder Tac's breathing down your stupid bloody neck, Vic. Grow up, will you? Or find yourself another berth, cuz I sure as shit won't be doing time with you!"

Every word had impressed itself on the Companion. "Cool down," Stone was saying as they passed in under Cinnabar's exotic signs. "Nobody here's gonna turn us in, for chrissakes." He nailed John with a glare. "Are they?"

"In this place?" The Companion snorted a ribald laugh. "Fuck, man, if we started ratting on each other, there wouldn't be nobody left to pull the beer, much less drink it!"

Just inside the illumination of the signs, the club became comfortably dim. The music was subtle, deep and rolling, with a powerful subetheric track that got into a man's bones as well as his gonads. John might have been trying to convince Vic Allen that the sudden arousal was his doing, but Stone was not fooled. He caught the tang of Buran and chimera on the heavy air, though someone was trying to disguise it with incense.

"So what is it first?" John licked his lips. "You wanna get drunk, eat, hump, dance, lose a few bucks at the tables?"

"Drink," McKenzie Crane decided.

"All of the above," Stone said expansively. "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry," Crane accused. "Hey, kid, can you get a decent meal in this place, and get pissed at the same time?"

John hooked his arm through Stone's. "Follow me."

On this level, the decor was burgundy, the light was gold, and either the waiters were half-dressed as Companions, or the Companions were dressed as waiters. Stone could not tell which, but it was amusing trying, as he let John lead them into a crescent-shaped restaurant where the tables were ranged around a moon pool. Tropical plants grew in profusion around the edges, and the Companions frolicking in the water had the same long-limbed beauty as Jesse Lawrence. Most were boys, though at least two were female, and several seemed to thrive in the wide zone between, where gender was as flexible as it was unimportant. They dove for coins, and for a ten credit pop they would hump each other — or do a decent job of pretending to — in the water below their patron's table.

"This is more like it," Crane observed as he tossed a coin to the water sprites and fondled the buttocks of the waiter who had just offered him a menu. "Beats hell out of that dive in Calleran. What was it called?"

"What, the Quarterdeck?" Vic Allen looked up over a menu. The club was notorious everywhere, for its high prices and the frequent Tactical raids on its clientele. Spacers did business there; mercenaries were contracted, cargoes were traded, fortunes changed hands. Stone glanced at John. "You know the place? We were lucky to get out of there, and we weren't even doing business! You go in for a honest jar of ale, a legal snort, and the next thing you know, Tac's busting half the customers."

The Companion shrugged. "I've heard of it, but I've never even done the trip to Earth. You think I can afford a clipper to the colonies?"

"They don't pay you here?" Stone protested.

"Oh, they pay me," John admitted, "but it's easy to spend real quick. I'd like to get the fuck out of here, work on Earth or Mars, but ..." His shoulders twitched in a resigned expression. You gotta have a patron to get out, and I'm still waiting." He looked sidelong at Stone.

Vic Allen wore a pensive, interested look. "We're not headed in, kid. We came back to the belt to lighten the load on the ship and cash up, and then we're gone." He nodded at the ceiling. "Darwin's, Avalon, Kelso." His eyes strayed over John's lean, muscular and painted body. "There's good work for decent Companions."

"Yeah?" John's brows rose. "I'd be ... interested."

"See how it works out," Allen growled. "I haven't even sampled the merchandise yet. But I like what I'm looking at," he added.

Under the table, John's hand curved about his thigh. "You're smugglers, aren't you?"

"The kid's quick, by gods," Cantrell said dryly. "You want it printed on a business card, junior? Bugger off and get in a round of drinks. Get one for

yourself. I'm drinkin' Warhold Gold Tankard. What's your fancy, Vic?"

"Tequila," Stone decided. "Santa Rosa. And just bring the bottle."

The Companion glared daggers at Cantrell, and whistled. "Good thing you guys are cashed up, but it ain't gonna last long if you spend it like this."

"Doesn't have to, does it?" Cantrell growled, brash and deliberately obnoxious. "I said, get one for yourself. *Git*, will you!"

Still glaring at the elder spacer, John sauntered away toward the bar. Stone stifled a chuckle and sat back to watch. It was very different working with Cantrell, rather than with Jarrat. Cantrell's act was in every way diametrically opposed. Jarrat deliberately exploited his good looks, his youth and sensuality, with the diamond-edge of hard experience. Put to the test, like Stone himself, and like Cantrell, he could pilot a commercial heavy, fly a hyper transport, drive an Army tractor the size of a small town, handle any sidearm and most man-portable weapons, including armor. But Cantrell's performance was the curmudgeon, not the siren, and it worked. Right now, John was trying to figure out the best way to part Crane from most of his money, because Crane annoyed him. John was more intent on Crane than on Allen, because he believed he already had Vic Allen on a string. Crane's was the wise old head, he was the senior partner, with double the experience in every part of life; and he had let it be known beyond any doubt that he controlled the cash flow, owned the ship, and was far too savvy to be lured and duped. Stone had already heard the sound of a gauntlet being thrown down; and in John's eyes, he saw it picked up. Cantrell was expertly rubbing him the wrong way, and John could smell the money.

With a chuckle, Stone sat back to study the menu, and watch.

The subetherics were getting to him, and Jarrat also felt the coil of rueful humor. He was eating, a trace of some kind of booze warmed his belly, and he was listening to something, watching something, that was deliberately stimulating. Jarrat felt all of it, and mocked himself as he sat down, crossed one knee over the other, and tried to divorce himself from Stone's work.

On the other side of the plot table, which was bright with the charts of the whole Jovian system, glittering with pinpricks marking the positions of every ship on the ATC network, Curt Gable gave him a curious look. "Don't ask," Jarrat told him.

"It's that clear?" Gable gave him a cheeky grin. "It has to make life interesting at times."

"You have no idea," Jarrat muttered, and looked over the system plot for the third time in ten minutes.

They were watching for any sign of 55187, but wherever it had gone to ground, it was well hidden. Small ships continued to scamper in every direction, but the spaceports and docks were officially closed, the clippers were bypassing the Jovian terminals, heading directly from Mars to Itzhak Loyola, and as Jarrat watched a blizzard of drones was deploying in a vast

halo, covering the traffic lanes, the orbits of the inhabited moons, the departure vectors of ships heading out of the gas giant's gravity well, everything. Colonel Danni Voigt's department had risen to the challenge. Jarrat doubted there was a drone on the ground on any world in the system, and personnel was still streaming into Callisto from Europa and Ganymede.

Tactical was communicating in nanoburst transmissions, spaced ten minutes apart, and as Jarrat scanned the plot, Gable read off the latest. "They're sixty percent up to strength in Sequoia, all drones are deployed ... nobody's seen hide or hair of 187, but they're looking, and letting themselves be *seen* to be looking. Eleven midsize ships have scooted into Sequoia in the right time frame to be carrying Lorenzo Quade's party, but Voigt has an AI monitoring security vids, and we're not recognizing faces. Yet."

"We might not," Jarrat mused. "If I were Quade and Orlick, and the rest of the bastards, I wouldn't be seen. There have to be ways to duck under, behind, around, the vidrones. Technicians' spaces, catwalks, crawlways. And I'd know them all."

"Point." Gable joined him. He was intent on the loop for some moments, and said quietly, "Petrov called in. They've put him in an apartment in the NARC building, they'll talk to him in the morning."

"What time is it in Chicago?" Jarrat had lost track of Earth time.

"Something like 17:00, maybe a while later." Gable was unconcerned. "The situation'll keep for at least twenty hours."

Jarrat angled an amused glance up at him. "You're enjoying this."

The pilot blinked at him with wide blue eyes. "This is what I transferred for, not to sit on my ass and fly the standby shuttle for the rest of my hitch! I could have done that with Starfleet. I'm here because of a kid called Jodie." He smiled, wistful, sad. "Same old, same old, Cap. Like yourself."

Everyone aboard had a similar story to tell. Jarrat had heard snippets of the story of Gable's kid sister, and it was painfully familiar. Anger and grief fused into the vocation, the blazing hunger for vengeance. Gable was still riding the first wave, still on a personal crusade. For some this phase lasted decades, for others it was spent more quickly, but NARC had never suffered a dearth of applicants.

"Get me a coffee, Curt," Jarrat said with a gesture at the AutoChef.

He was looking at carrier data, focusing on the CRT at his elbow as much to distract himself from Stone's work as to catch up with the ship's routine operations. Helen Archer had brought her in on an acute angle, where the body of the small moon Himalia effectively masked her presence, and where she could slither like a python into the radiation belts.

A mug landed on the workspace beside him, and Gable pulled up a chair. "So, where are they?"

"Cinnabar." Jarrat closed his eyes, the better to concentrate. "Eating. A glass of something with a kick. Could be vodka ... knowing Stoney, tequila. The food's not bad. The entertainment is —"

"Raunchy," Gable guessed.

"Very. There's no anxiety factor, but he's waiting. Talking. Way too much to be talking to Gene. Some kind of a contact, maybe, but nobody pivotal." He gave Gable a wry, crooked smile. "Give it a chance."

A blip from the comm terminal told them the next nanoburst was in, and Gable ambled away to look at it. He was well suited to the job, Jarrat thought. Petrov had never been comfortable wrangling data, yet this job was crucial to an officer's progress from raw new transfer to command rank. Jarrat seldom recalled his own days, gaffing the ops room aboard the *Avenger* under Alec Moore and Lisa Hirano. Stone had been lucky, though at the time no one would have even imagined the word. He inherited the *Athena* when her former command rankers were both killed. Max Standish was incinerated in a high-speed chase. He missed a curve, rolled his ground car, and did not live long enough to make it to the hospital. Guy Robson was still shell-shocked at the loss of his partner when he put himself into the field to finish the job. His aircraft was blown out of the sky, and suddenly Stone was ranking, nine tenths of the way through a long, rough assignment which had a lot in common with the dangerous chaos of the Death's Head job — and six weeks by Starfleet courier from the nearest NARC Quadrant Command. He assumed Robson's place, promoted an ex-Army standby pilot by the name of Y.M. Petrov to wrangle data, and finished the job. Bill Dupre could have censured Stone, but he had done too well, and he was due for consideration in the promotion stakes. Stone's command rank was made official, and ten days later Jarrat walked aboard to replace Standish.

Those days seemed so long in the past, they had a sense of unreality. In Jarrat's mind the last half year, the seven months since closure on the Death's Head assignment, was more real than any other part of his life. The rest might have been a dream.

"They've got deliberately clumsy surveillance on Quade's mansion in Sequoia," Gable reported. "A squad's on its way to cover the apartment Oliver and Rousos lease on the west side. Give Callisto Tac a couple of hours, they'll have squads on the street. Every man and his uncle will be flashing his ID or getting a closeup look at the pavement."

"Fine." Jarrat tried the coffee and made a face. Gable liked the warehouse variety, and assumed everyone else did. He pushed back the chair and headed to the cooler to dilute it. "They have obbo on Cinnabar yet?"

"Yep." Gable watched him water down the black tar without comment. "Like you said, give 'em a chance. It'll work."

"Intuition?" Jarrat lifted a brow at him, not for the first time noticing that Gable was good looking, and in top physical shape.

"Could be." Gable was intent on the plot board, where Tactical squads were harassing anything that moved and was not a drone-piloted cargo hauler. "Have a little faith, boss."

In fact, Jarrat's faith was invested in Stone, and he settled again to concentrate on his partner.

With evening the crowd at Cinnabar changed. The foyer might have been the platform at a transit station. Stone watched, amused, as vastly diverse clients made their way in and headed up or down in the gold-gated, heavily-guarded elevators. Upstairs was the restaurant; downstairs, the elegant sexshop, the VR parlors, and at last, the pit itself. Stone was shooting craps at a table with a view back through the massive archway to the foyer. Cantrell was at the bar behind him, working his way down another Warhold Gold, and talking much too loudly to the bartender. From his perch on a high stool, he could also see across the craps table to the foyer. The trick was to make the bartender believe he was actually fixated on her pneumatic bare breasts, so that she would flirt, providing him with enough cover to run surveillance on the foyer when Stone's view was blocked. John was merely bored. He had sprawled in a lounge chair with a schnapps, and Stone caught him cruising the other patrons, as if he could be persuaded to wander.

"Hey, remember me?" Stone leaned down over him, nipped the lobe of his ear with sharp teeth, and kissed him comprehensively. "What's your problem, kid? You that desperate to get plowed? In your line of work, I'd have thought the novelty would wear off."

The Companion's arms had gone around his neck. "It does. But you're not just a trick ... fact is, chief, I actually fancy you."

"You say that to all the guys," Stone accused in Vic Allen's voice.

"I don't." John cast a dark look at Cantrell. "Do I gotta do him as well?"

"Yes, you do," Allen said firmly. "It's your job. In fact, for that you can do him first!" John made a face, and Stone laughed easily. "It's getting late, we need a room."

"Could be tough getting a room," John warned. "You should've checked in hours ago, when you got here."

"So *you* go tell somebody," Stone suggested, "and *you* check us in."

"All right." John slithered out of the chair and groped Stone deftly on his way to his feet. "Jeez, I wish the old git would shut his face! If he keeps this up, somebody's gonna show him a bunch of knuckles."

Cantrell was in fine voice, loud, obnoxious, bragging about his ship. Stone cocked his head, pretended to listen, and said to John, "He's only telling the truth. She's a hell of a good ship. I've been aboard since I quit Starfleet."

"You were in Starfleet?" John's eyes widened. "You don't look the type."

"And what's the type?" Stone demanded.

"They come in here," John sneered, "a bunch of stuck up snobs in the fancy uniforms, better than the rest of us, drinkin' wine and eatin' fillet mignon, and playin' blackjack. But I'll tell you this much. Get a few beers in 'em and you find out they wanna get *done*, like you and me, only they wanna get fucked real bad, cuz they don't get enough."

"Is that a fact?" Stone was fascinated. It was a side of 'the senior service' he had not glimpsed before.

"S'a fact," John said darkly. And then, "Hey, Mas is in. I'll see if he can get me a room." He paused and snickered. "He'll more likely throw you out. He's looking at that dumb old git partner of yours, like he wants to toss him."

Slowly, so as not to draw attention, Stone turned in the direction of the staff door, at the north end of the bar. Masutatsu Pretorius was very tall, not just thickset but actually stout, with a full-moon face and sensual mouth. His hair was long, sleek, black, tied back at his nape; his hands were pudgy, heavy with rings, and the fingernails were long, filed oval and black enameled. A black silk suit and scarlet silk shirt disguised his girth, but Mas Pretorius traded on his size. He had the look, Stone thought, of a warlord, accustomed to giving the orders that sent men to their deaths.

He was studying Cantrell as if he were not quite sure what species of animal he might be looking at. John caught his attention with a call, a wave, and slipped into the warlord's big arms uninvited. Pretorius caught him, hands everywhere at once, and whispered against his ear. John laughed, and gestured at the table where Stone waited.

The dark, predatory eyes looked over Vic Allen now. Stone nodded raised his shot glass in salute. John was talking rapidly, pointing at Stone and Cantrell, and while Pretorius's expression did not change much, Stone would have sworn he saw a glimmer in the hawkish eyes. He was intrigued. Score the first point to Cantrell. A moment later Pretorius nodded, said something to John and fondled his ass in parting. The Companion took his hand for a moment, smiled up at him, and sauntered back to the craps table.

"We're in," he said to Stone, "and bloody lucky to be. Mas likes me, or you'd be out looking for a hotel. I'll go'n get the key, shall I?" He looked up at Stone from beneath half-lowered lids, and licked his lips.

"You do that," Stone agreed. "I'll go see if the boss can still walk."

He watched the Companion head off to the reception counter, and leaned against the bar beside Cantrell. "We're in. You saw Pretorius checking us out?"

"I saw," Cantrell growled. "I've annoyed the bartender enough to be unforgettable. Between her and your little hustler, by morning there won't be many in this house who won't know who we are, where we come from, what we do." He lifted a brow in John's wake. "You can handle him?"

"I find that remark highly insulting," Stone said dryly.

Cantrell smothered a chuckle. "Not what I meant, Stoney." His voice dropped. "You and I both know it's Kevin you're wanting ... and Kevin can feel every last thing you do."

"You leave the hustler to me," Stone said quietly. "Unless you want him?"

"Not my type," Cantrell scoffed. "Too brash by half, this one. Double his age, put some meat on his scrawny bones, and I might get interested." He was watching John with the receptionist, at the counter in the foyer. "Good Christ, the kid can talk. You didn't tell him anything you don't want the whole of citybottom to know —?"

"I told him exactly what we want Lorenzo Quade to hear." Stone finished the beer he had been nursing for the past hour. "Grab a bottle to take along, and let's get some rest. Give the stew a chance to simmer."

He might have hoped for a night's sleep, but John was agitated as he returned to the bar, too preoccupied to make snide remarks about Crane, who was sliding a fifth of bourbon into one long inside pocket and a bottle of vodka into the other. He gestured over his shoulder toward reception, and was talking before he passed the craps table.

"It's fuckin' lucky we're off the street. I just found out it's hell out there! Tac's crapping on the whole city." He was wide eyed, breathless. "They've sealed the spaceports! Jeez, this never happened before."

"Not in your short little lifetime," Cantrell told him.

The kid was too agitated to glare. "I'm not kidding about, you stupid old fart! And I'm turned twenty, so knock it off. Tac's shut down the spaceports, the clipper dock, the lot. Where's your ship?"

Cantrell jerked a thumb in the vague direction of 'yonder.' "She's working, like she always is. You think I'm going to park her in port and let her sit there, moldering and running up docking fees? She's hauling between the homesteads. Why, what's the big deal?"

"Tactical's the big deal!" John slapped a keyring into Stone's hand. "I hope you bastards weren't hoping to leave anytime soon."

"Leave? We just got in." Stone was watching Mas Pretorius make his way behind the bar, toward the startlingly pneumatic bartender who had endured Crane's bragging. He was easily within earshot as Cantrell said too loudly,

"If we wanted to leave, you daft young sod, we'd be out of here and gone, by routes you people don't now *squat* about, because you're not bloody old enough, aboard a ship that's worth any ten of your local scup-buckets. But since we have no interest in leaving, haul your skinny ass on up to that room, and try doing what we're bloody paying you for!"

"But —" John began.

"Shush, now." Stone slid one arm across his shoulders. "The big he-bull has spoken. When he's got a few in him, it's easiest to just do like he says. Besides which, he's dead right anyway. Oh, come on, kid, who wants to leave? We're cashed up, cozied in and sitting pretty. There's plenty to drink, the food's good, let Tactical run amok if they want. They're turning the city over, looking for somebody? Who gives a rat's ass? They're not looking for us. All I want is to get snockerred, laid, fed, and some decent sleep."

The young man was still agitated, but he could hardly argue. He looked back at Pretorius, who had the bartender's balloon-like appendages in both hands though he was watching Stone and Cantrell. From the tail of his eye, Stone saw Pretorius nod, and John settled down with an effort.

The elevator dropped one level, and the car opened into a Grecian courtyard. Overheads created the illusion of a sunset sky, the sounds of the ocean and gulls blended with lute music, and expensive house Companions barely half-clad as slaves, waited with pitchers of wine. With the rustle of a silk

chiton, a boy of John's age was at Stone's elbow, head bowed, palm upturned, waiting for the key. John gave it to him and muttered,

"Save it, Larry, they're not the kind. They're from out of town, *way* out. Good ol' boys, these. We're in 245 ... listen, get me a pack of smokes, will you? And listen up for what's happening on the street."

Larry straightened, looked Stone in the eye with a grin, and leaned on the nearest upright surface — the rear flank of a life-sized statue of the god Apollo. He was taller than John, bleached blond, with permed curls and a lot of fake tan. The effect was as attractive as it was artificial, and Stone was amused as Larry said in a broad Marsport accent,

"Hey, house rules, you know? The act goes on with the frock." He gave the flimsy chiton a tug of aggravation. It covered what it touched, which was not much. "Uh, Tac's not looking for you guys, are they?"

"Not us," Stone told him, "not this time. Don't know what it's about. Larry, is it? You want to join the party?"

"Sure." Larry nodded discreetly at the party of guests just leaving the lift. "Get me the hell away from these bozos, or I'll be curtsying and picking a fucking lute, when I'm not bent over a table." He looked Stone up and down, and Cantrell. "You guys just want a clean bed, a good roll, and breakfast in the morning, right?"

"We might stay for lunch," Stone amended. He swatted Larry's backside, which was bare under the too-short chiton. "We might even stay for dinner."

"Might have to," John said moodily. "Tac's got the whole place zipped up tighter than corsets."

The key blipped and a door opposite opened. Stone found himself in a two-room suite with emerald green fixtures, a big screen, a wet bar, a king-sized bed, and a spa in the corner of the bathroom. Cantrell was stocking the bar while John flipped channels, searching GlobalNet for coverage of the Tactical operation. Stone drew a tall glass of water, shrugged out of the leather jacket, and set the faucet in the shower stall. John groaned and tore himself away from the screen, but Stone fended him off.

"Get yourself a drink and watch the newsvids. You might see something useful. If I want you in here, I'll yell."

"Yeah, man, sorry," John offered, though he was intent on the big screen.

With a faint chuckle, Stone stepped under the water. He had a view of the lounge, where Larry was settling in as some bizarre boozing companion of McKenzie Crane's and John was on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table. On the screen, SequoiaNet journalists were taking it in turns to remark on the peculiar Tactical activity; in the background were wide shots of the city, with its incomparable views of Jupiter, against which Tac squads were stopping anything that moved and running ID.

It was happening. They would drive Lorenzo Quade's party in the direction of Cinnabar, and even if Quade suspected he was being manipulated, there was little he could do about it. Satisfied for the moment, Stone kicked shut the door and turned up the heat.

"I have Colonel Voigt for you, level five encryption," Gable said over the background hum from several CRTs displaying different newsvids.

Jarrat clicked his comset over from the Blue Ravens' intership loop he had been monitoring to the secure band. He was tired, frustrated, restless. Sequoia time, it was just short of 23:00, and Stone was drowsy, resting. His heart, pulse, respiration, were all consistent with downtime, and a large part of Jarrat was resentful. They had the chance to take a few hours at last, and they were separated by three quarters of a million kilometers. "Jarrat," he said to the comm. "What you got, Colonel?"

She sounded as tired as himself, and as edgy. "We're officially at flat-chat, Captain. Everything deployed, nothing left. Gods help us if there's a real emergency, some bullshit like the Goldstream disaster."

"If it happens, pull your people in," Jarrat growled. "We'll chase Aphelion halfway across the colonies, but I'll promise you this. We'll have them in the end." He drew a hand across gritty eyes and cleared his throat. He had drunk too much coffee, smoked at least one too many of Helen Archer's kip grass and lime Silver Swans. He found himself parched for simple water, and longing for sleep. Like Danni Voigt, he thought, and gentled his tone. "What's the situation in Sequoia?"

"We've imaged a number of faces," she told him. "I'm sending you a data squirt, just a couple hundred gigs of security vid time, but we got an ID on your people."

"It'll stand up in court?" Jarrat pressed.

"I think so. Take a look yourself," Voigt prompted.

Gable beckoned him to one of the tactical CRTs, where the data was unpacking. "This screen, boss. And I like what I'm seeing."

So did Jarrat. He knew Mary Ann Rousos and Marcel Oliver on sight, could pick them out of a crowd, after the society pages he had viewed. There was no doubt about Lorenzo Quade, who was well known as a legit business entity in Chryse, and never bothered to shuck publicity. Rizo and Yeliseyev were harder to recognize, and tagging along with them were three others whose faces he did not know. The whole party had been imaged in a basement parking garage, where the viddrones were tiny, mobile, hard to see. The lighting was fluorescent, blue tending toward violet, and every face looked sick, but the illumination was quite adequate.

"Who are the others, the three at the back?" he asked tiredly.

"Smalltime operators, street runners," she told him. "Yasutake, Logie, and the tall one in back is Mitchelmore. We know them, but they're slippery, not so easy to lasso, because they're well connected in Sequoia. Even if we did bust our asses to take them in, they'd be out again tomorrow. Speaking of which, Maxine Colleroy and Brendan Yip are in your neck of the woods. We tried to grab the buggers, but they put down two of my people and shot

through. Everybody's best guess is, they'll all make their way to Cinnabar by one route or another, sooner or later."

"We have people in position in Cinnabar," Jarrat said quietly. "Do *not* try to move in, Colonel. We'll handle it. It could get ugly ... our business."

"And you're welcome to it." She paused to consult other data. "Still no sign of Commercial 55187. Did you want us to ramp up the search for it?"

"No, let it be." Jarrat was frowning at the imaged faces. "The parking garage where these pictures were captured. Is it far from Cinnabar?"

The woman laughed hoarsely. "Captain, no place is far from anywhere in Sequoia. We're a big place stuffed into a small space. Quade's people must have come in via one of the homesteads. We tracked a big old rustbucket of a truck over from the Malamute Strike, but by the time I got a squad over there to look for 187, it was long gone. We interviewed a homesteader, name of O'Leary, and he just flashed a handful of cash, your actual blueback credits. Some big noises paid him a fat fee to bring 'em on over to Sequoia, and for that kind of money he was not about to ask questions. It's not against the law to give someone a ride, Captain."

"Call me Kevin," he invited as tiredness settled like a fog over his brain.

"Call me Danni," she said ruefully. "That's all I have for you right now. I'm going to go grab a couple hours sleep."

"I wish I could do the same." Jarrat worked his neck around to loosen the muscles. "Right now, we're down to patience. Our people in Cinnabar will send up the flags when it starts."

"And till then?"

"Stay in the holding pattern," he told her. "And if you can sleep, lucky you."

"Later, Captain. Kevin," she corrected dryly, and the line went dead.

"Take a couple hours," Gable suggested. Jarrat gave him a hard look, and he shrugged. "So what's Stoney doing?"

He closed his eyes to concentrate, and grunted. "I could swear he's sitting on a couch ... with something hard and cold in his right hand ... and someone or *something* is licking his ear."

"They could have a spaniel in there," Gable quipped.

"You think?" Jarrat permitted himself a chuckle and dropped a hand on Gable's shoulder. "I'm going to go bug Reardon for a couple of peps."

He clicked the comset back over to the intership loop and heard Gil Cronin, Joe Ramos and several other Blue Ravens in the launch bay. They were on standby around the clock, eating and sleeping in the ready room just inboard of the launch bay. Most of them were servicing the armor and weapons, watching the vids from Sequoia, and playing poker.

And as for Stone, Jarrat's throat bobbed as he felt the icy thrill of beer traveling downward, and there was definitely a tongue in Stone's left ear. A twist of annoyance uncoiled in Jarrat's belly and he was quick to identify it as Stone's, not his own. It was a safe bet he had hooked up with a Companion to get into Cinnabar.

Alone in the lift with his hand on the control key, he hesitated before punching for the Infirmary and tuned fully into Stone. The sensations was so clear, so strong, they could have been his own. For the moment, Stone was safe, warm, comfortable, he had eaten, and the icy froth, the hard coldness in his right palm told Jarrat he was nursing a beer. His annoyance was tempered with amusement and a thread of arousal, though the tongue had been removed from his ear.

Fascinated, Jarrat leaned heavily on the brushed steel wall of the lift and let Stone feel it. Stoney would easily key on the sharp edge of Jarrat's fascination, and from Stone he felt an echo of easy affection and wry humor. There were no hands on him, no lips, but whatever he was doing was filled with the ticklish quality of titillation.

Desire had a way of being infectious, getting into a man's every extremity, and Jarrat mocked himself with an honest chuckle. "Goddamn it," he muttered to Stone, "you're doing it to me, hands off, from this distance!" His brow creased as he concentrated harder, but no fingers were caressing Stone, and no matter how closely he tuned in to his partner, he could make no more sense of it.

With a soft curse of resignation, he punched for the Infirmary.

Time was elusive on any skycity, and when one was underground in the sky, doubly so. Stone had lost his time sense completely. He heard the rustle of sheets as the Companions began to stir, and opened one eye. He had been awake for half an hour, but it could have been midnight or dawn. John was stumbling off in the direction of the bathroom and Larry, just as unconcernedly naked, was moving determinedly to the AutoChef, beside the room's wet bar. A pair of bare feet visible at the near end of the couch told him where Cantrell was; the screen was still on, displaying some inane drama punctuated by even more inane commercials. Stone pushed up against the pillows, rubbed his eyes and peered at his chrono.

Sequoia time, it was not much after 05:00, but the hour meant nothing to him. There was no 'dawn' in a system where the sun was distant, cold, eight hundred million kilometers away, and where the moons passed into the shadow of a gas giant for days at a stretch. Massive arclights shunted up to automatically compensate for the lower light levels, and in cities like Sequoia and Geneva few people bothered to notice the night.

The aroma of coffee wafted from the machine, and Larry stuck his head back into the bedroom. "You want a mug, chief?"

"Thanks. Bring it here," Stone told him. "Black, no sugar."

"One mug of molten tar on its way," Larry intoned. His own mug — poured well before he inquired if the client could use one, Stone noted — was loaded with cream and sugar. A coffee in either hand, he made his way back to the bed and deposited himself carefully in Stone's lap. "You're an odd one, you are, chief," he observed.

Stone tried the coffee and made a face. There was a lot of bourbon in it. "Why do you say that?"

"Well ..." Larry gestured vaguely in John's direction. "Last night. We expected the works, you know. John and me, we get the rough end, most of the time, being young and not exactly uptown class."

"Why am I not surprised," Stone said darkly. "You mean, you wanted to sweat through a workout last night?"

The Companion snickered. "*He* game me a workout."

"Then you got your own back, so who's complaining?" Stone demanded.

He indulged himself in a chuckle at the recollections of their antics. Very mellow with several drinks inside him — and certainly not about to drink any more, when it was far from impossible for the job to erupt too soon — he had fended off John, and sprawled in the chair opposite the couch. Too much to drink, he had said, though it was far from true. On a whim, he sent Larry to the bedroom to fetch the big, thick duvet and toss it down on the floor between the couch and chairs, and then he dumped both Companions onto it and told them to get busy with each other. The performance was alternately outrageous and amusing, and in the course of an hour they exhausted themselves, as Stone had intended.

He gave Larry a firm shove. "Go and get me and Crane some breakfast."

"Call room service," Larry grumbled.

"I said, *you* go," Stone said, with another shove. "Breakfast for four. Take John with you and don't rush back. We have business to attend to."

Still yawning, heavy-eyed, they ducked out of the suite. John had showered off the body paint and wore a flimsy scrap of silk about the hips, and Larry had not even bothered to put on the ridiculous chiton. Stone shrugged into the black kimono he had found strewn on the end of the bed, and took his coffee out to the lounge. Cantrell was wide awake.

"You got rid of the sprogs," he said redundantly.

"For a while. And I'm surprised either one of them can walk, after last night." Stone dumped the bourbon-heavy coffee, poured a fresh cup, and one for Cantrell. "If Quade's group is going to land here, Gene ... they're probably already here."

"I know." Cantrell was off the couch, sorting the clothes he had dropped six hours before. "It'll happen when it happens, Stoney. You got some sleep. Be grateful." He lifted a brow at Stone. "How's Kevin?"

In fact, Stone was intimately aware of Jarrat. "Tired. Edgy. Eating ... makes me hungry. He took peps a while ago. He couldn't sleep now, even if he got the chance. Feels like the situation's in order, backup's right where we want it. Relax."

"I could say the same to you." Cantrell took the coffee and drank half of it without coming up for air. "We baited the hook and threw it in. If they don't take it — they don't, and it's over."

"You can accept that result?" Stone asked doubtfully.

The older man answered with an eloquent shrug. "Like I've got an

option! If we don't get them here, we'll take them later. This time around, we know exactly who they are. They identified themselves when they bugged out of Mars right on cue." He bundled McKenzie Crane's drab clothes under one arm. "I'm going to take a shower. Give me a yell when the sprogs get back in with breakfast."

The water was running when Stone sank into the couch with a second mug and turned up the sound on SequoiaNet 3. The citizens of Sequoia were furious, and Colonel Danni Voigt was deliberately unavailable for comment. Journalists tried to corner her lieutenants, but the only relevant comment SequoiaNet got out of them was a chance remark that the action had been codenamed Operation Crackerjack.

A map of the city appeared, with the major centers of Tactical activity plotted. They were thick as flies around dead meat within a kilometer of Cinnabar, and right around the rink, and again in uptown Harlow, the brightlights sector where Quade, Oliver and Rousos owned and leased expensive property. The net was wide enough and tight enough. No more could be done, and as Cantrell had counseled, Stone cultivated patience.

A clatter from the door announced the Companions, and John was talking as they rattled in with a laden trolley. "Hey, hey," he shouted at Stone, "you're in some badass company now, man. Take a shot at who I just saw!"

"The president of Mars," Stone said fatuously as he turned off the sound.

"Like he comes here to get his sore ass plowed?" John demanded. "He goes to Exposé, uptown."

"He does?" Stone gave the kid a sharp look. John was serious.

"I just saw *Mister* Lorenzo Quade himself," he was babbling. "Jeezus, what's he doing in this town, while Tac hits on us?"

"That," Stone said soberly, "is a very good question, don't you think?" He lifted the covers off trays of ham and eggs, cereal, hot rolls, fruit salad, and raised his voice. "Crane!" He pointed the Companions at the table. "Dish this up, I'll get him."

The bathroom was a fog bank which the extractors were still struggling to cycle, and Cantrell was still soaking his back under the high-pressure hot water. His palms were against the tiles, and his skin was scalded lobster pink from shoulders to knees. Across his back, Stone saw the flock of old scars, five puncture wounds, where five rounds had been dug out of his muscle, sinew and at least one bone. Cantrell had almost died, and such injuries never completely healed.

"Breakfast," Stone said quietly as he peered through the steam. "And we just hit the jackpot. John recognized Lorenzo Quade on sight, saw him not ten minutes ago. They got here, Gene. We knew they would. The only question left is —"

"Will they take the bait?" Cantrell hit the faucet to stop the water, and snatched up a towel.

"Like you said," Stone told him, "patience. Come and get some food."

He left Cantrell to dress and returned to the table, where John and Larry

were eating as though their lives depended on it. "So I said to this bastard," John was muttering through a mouthful of eggs, "'No freakin' way are you shoving that thing up me,'" and he says, 'But it's one of your own toys,' because he got it here, but from downstairs, and I said, 'I don't work in no stinkin' dungeon, fuck-face,' so he screams for the boss, an' Mas Pretorius comes out. I'm thinkin' to myself, this is where I get whapped and told not to come back to Cinnabar, which stinks, cuz it's not my fault, but here's this freakin' clown with a great red rubber dick the size of your arm, looks like a bloody fire hydrant, and he wants to do *what* with it, and he's whining to Mas that this pathetic little plebe, meaning *me*, won't play nice."

"And Pretorius said —?" Larry prompted.

"He said," John finished with immense satisfaction, "the clown could take his toy back downstairs where it belonged, and shove it up anybody he could find who wanted to play with him, and if somebody shoved it up him, well, that's what you get for being shit-faced in a dungeon, and if you can't take the knocks, don't get in the game." He looked up over the table at Stone. "Hey, man, your food's getting cold."

The ham and eggs were drowned in curried chutney, with hot rolls on the side, slathered with melted butter. Stone took the plate and gave it a dubious look, but the combination did not seem to have killed the Companions yet. He picked up a fork, returned to the couch and thumbed on the sound, if only to curtail the professional hustlers' shoptalk.

SequoiaNet was treating Operation Crackerjack as if it were a full-scale war. Channel 3 was devoted to it, around the clock, but the stories had dwindled away to human interest clips, where people moaned to the camera about their embarrassment at being pulled over and ID'd, or how inconvenienced they were to be stopped on the expressway and made ten minutes late for dinner. And from Voigt's perspective the operation was already a runaway success. Her squads had turned up an illegal Buran racket, recovered four stolen vehicles, busted two pimps for having underage hustlers in the cars, and identified over a dozen illegal aliens, working in Sequoia without permits.

Stone was investigating the ginger marmalade when the comm buzzed. His belly clenched for a moment and he shot a glance across the table at Cantrell before he reached over the tapped the set. "This is Vic Allen. What can I do you for?"

The voice was deep, low, smooth, not quite seductive. "Good morning to you, Mister Allen. My name is Masutatsu Pretorius."

"Yeah?" He pitched his voice to express surprise. "John told us about you. That is, you own this place, don't you?"

"Indeed I do. Mister Allen, would you and Captain McKenzie Crane be available this morning to talk with some associates of mine?"

"Talk?" Stone echoed. "We're not in any kind of trouble, are we? I know my partner was a little loud in the bar last night. He'd had a few, and he can get somewhat ... *robust* when he's got a skin full. I'll try and keep him quiet."

A velvet chuckle answered him. "Captain Crane's *bonhomie* is of no consequence, Mister Allen. Our patrons are at liberty to indulge their fancies without hindrance or judgment. In fact, my associates find themselves in need of such services as might be provided by yourself and the captain."

Stone skipped a beat. "We're just a freighter crew, Mister Pretorius."

"With a hyper-enabled ship currently at liberty somewhere among the homesteads," Pretorius added, "is this not correct?"

"Yeah, it is." Stone paused. "Uh, I've been watching Channel 3. There's one of the biggest system-wide lockdowns I've ever seen."

"Precisely, Mister Allen." Pretorius was silent for some moments, letting the import of what he had said find its target and settle in. "The captain, your partner, gave us to understand he has in his possession certain navigational information critical to departure at this time, in addition to a suitable vessel."

"Well ... yeah," Stone said lightly, "that's quite true. Look, I'll ask him if he's in the market to make a run. He usually is. Christ, you've seen how he goes through money. It never lasts long. What kind of run is it, light cargo or bulk freight? We can load up to a hundred tonnes, depending on what it is."

"Only passengers," Pretorius purred. "Please do inquire as to the captain's availability at this time. My associates would like to depart at once."

"Can I call you back?" Stone wondered. "I might have to talk him into it. He was high as a kite last night, and he's hungover as all hell."

"By all means. I shall be waiting, Mister Allen." Pretorius closed the line.

Across the table, Cantrell's eyes were on Stone, wide and dark. "I think," Stone said quietly, "we just hit the money."

Jarrat took a quick breath and blinked his eyes clear. Harry Del was watching him closely, knowing he was seeing a reaction to empathic feedback through the link, and Curt Gable was learning fast. They were in the crew lounge, across the passage from the ops room, where machines were monitoring the datastream, and Jarrat had been looking over a sheaf of documents which had just been delivered by courier. They were the release papers which would sign Marcus Brand over into the care of NARC specialists, and Harry was about to scrawl his signature on them.

"Kevin?" The healer leaned closer.

"I think ... no, I'm sure. We're on." Jarrat handed back the documents. "We'll get to these later, Harry. For what it's worth, they look good to me, but I'd have Leo Michiko look through them. He's one of the most slippery characters I ever rubbed shoulders with, and he owes you a few favors. Right now —?" He stood, and set aside the green tea he had just poured. "It's about to hit the fan with a vengeance. Curt, with me. Time to crank up the ops room. Blue Raven, Gold Raven, go to launch standby."

The gleam was back in Gable's eyes. He had scented a battle, and he was hungry for it. Not for the glory, or the rush, but for the vengeance. His kid sister would be on his mind, Jarrat knew, as he stepped back into the ops

room and hit the comm. His voice was level and mild. "Blue Raven, Gold Raven, you are on three-minute launch standby. Engineers, prep both gunships for space. Armorers, confirm max loads aboard. Gunship pilots go to launch alert, and report. Carrier pilot, bring your flight systems online, and prep to maneuver."

In seconds the loop was a confusion of callsigns as Lang, Reynolds, Archer and Koroda, the new Gold Raven gunship pilot, reported. Gil Cronin was on the line, calling for Jarrat. His voice was sharp over the comset.

"You want the full squad aboard, Cap?"

"Yep," Jarrat affirmed. "I want Blue Raven at full strength."

"You got it," Cronin said with a certain glee.

The fifteen dedicated descant troops, plus the ten field techs, would all be in armor — the two medics, two engineers, and the unit specialists in hazmat, field comm, armor, weapons systems, repulsion and flight systems. All were jump-trained, capable of creating and withstanding mayhem on the battlefield or off it, and the specialists were also capable of putting right a good deal of the damage the descant troops were likely to cause. Civilian lives were almost always in the balance, and Jarrat was keenly aware of the delicacy of cities like Sequoia. They floated in the sky like motes of light, fragile outposts of humanity, like Argentia, Arkadia, Barsoom — Leo Michiko's dream cities. One mistake, and the consequences could be horrific.

So there would be no mistakes, Jarrat thought grimly. He was at the comm panel, and said quietly to the officer, "Get me Colonel Voigt, level five encryption."

She must have been waiting for him to call and, like himself, she was running on peps and caffeine. The face on the screen was stressed, gaunt. As she stubbed out one smoke, she lit another. "There's no movement around Cinnabar," she said without preamble, "but anything civvy we know about that's insystem and accessible is impounded, and they know why. Quade's group is fully aware we know they're here. There's no legit way out of the system, none whatsoever ... the question is, how many backdoors do Quade and company know about?"

"Even if they know the backdoors," Jarrat reasoned, "they don't have access to a ship. Have your people put a 24/7 guard on those ships, Danni, because it could easily come to a fight."

She smirked. "I did better than that. I towed them. They're in the compound, docked in among a mess of Tactical heavies. It'd take a good dock pilot an hour to untangle 'em. I figured that was long enough for you to send me a gunship."

He indulged himself in a chuckle. "Outstanding. Any sign of 55187?"

"No movement there either. Soon as she shows herself, we'll have her. Until then, forget it, they've hidden her pretty good. Like the carrier. Where are you, by the way?"

"Close enough to Callisto to be breathing down your neck in five minutes," he said evasively. "Now, listen, Danni. Get a heads-up to your

people around Cinnabar. It's starting, inside the club. Quade's people are on the move right now, and I don't want Tac in the firing line if it turns nasty."

She gave him a shrewd look. "Your field agents are wired. You're eavesdropping."

"Something like that," he said, evasive again. "We're on a three-minute launch alert. I'll be in the air myself, and your squads need to be informed and on their toes. It could blow up faster than anything you ever saw before, and neither of us wants to be counting Tactical casualties. Let the guys in the riot armor take it."

Voigt had no argument. "I'll brief my squads immediately. Anything else?"

"Clear the routes from Cinnabar to the rink," Jarrat said levelly. "Sooner or later, Quade's group will realize they've been conned, and it can only turn into a showdown. Let it happen on the rink, for obvious reasons. Allocate me one specific docking bay, close enough to Cinnabar to be convenient but not too transparent, and then ... tap into our datafeeds if you want a ringside seat, but for chrissakes keep your kids out of the firing line."

"Oh, I will," she said grimly. "Standby by for your bay allocation."

She was offair for some time, and Jarrat used the minutes to tune into Stone. He had been eating, but hunger was gone now. His belly was taut, every nerve alive, adrenaline pumping, pulse accelerated. He was walking, talking, and from Stone's easy reactions Jarrat guessed he was talking to Cantrell. They were in the calm before the storm, and they knew it.

"Take Bay 116," Voigt said from the comm, jolting him out of the sensory feedback envelope. "It's empty, and it's well shielded because the machine shops are right on the other side. You could melt down a drive in there, and the bay would contain it."

"116," Jarrat confirmed. "I'll give you a buzz when we launch. Right now, I'll be suiting, and when it starts, if you need me, I'll be flying forward obbo."

"Do I say good luck or break a leg?" Voigt wondered. "Later, Kevin."

Gable had been standing at Jarrat's shoulder, listening in. "I'll pull up the data for 116. Blue Raven, full squad?"

"Yep." Jarrat settled a comset on his head, and clasped Gable's shoulder. "I'm going to suit up. Get Blue Raven into 116, and then have Reynolds get the gunship well out of there. The Sequoia pressure skin worries me." He was looking at a schematic of the skycity, and shook his head. "I don't want a fight within a hundred clicks of that."

"Will do." Gable turned away, already hailing Gil Cronin and Tanya Reynolds.

Jarrat took a last moment to look at the Blue Raven crew complement before he headed for the hangar. Reynolds was back aboard the gunship, but her usual copilot was sick-listed after some heavy-duty partying just before he caught the upshuttle. Evelyn Lang had picked up the slack. She and Reynolds were crosstalking with Cronin, Ramos, the medic, Jon Semler and the hazmat specialist, Bill Parish.

The descant troops were reloading zone-specific ammo into the rotaries.

A armor-piercing and incendiary would not be used inside a structure like Sequoia. Jarrat listened to their loop as he made his way down to the suiting room. Through the open hangar door he could see the VM-104 Corsair, where his name and Stone's were stenciled on the side of the cockpit. Techs were arming, fueling and checking the aircraft, and Jarrat let them work.

He palmed open his own suit locker and lifted out the first segments, the kevlex-titanium boots and grieves. On the mirror-black breastplate was his name, and the unit badge, NARC-*Athena*. The featureless helmet glared down at him from its shelf in the top. He saw his face reflected in the visor, distorted into a grotesque caricature by the curvature of the surface, and some element deep in his memory jogged.

In years, he had not thought back on the first time he put on riot armor, felt its strangeness, the claustrophobic closeness, the mass and bulk of the sections as they smart-sealed around his limbs. For so long, the armor had seemed almost comfortable. Too long, he decided as the sun-bright flare of Stone's adrenaline rush hit him in the pit of the belly, like a blow.

"We're on," he said to Gable, "and I don't know how much time we have. Where's Blue Raven?"

"Ten thousand meters under the keel of Sequoia, coming up right under the rink," Gable told him smoothly, "invisible to civvy scanners. 116 is open and waiting for them. We're in good shape. Where's Cap Stone?"

Jarrat lifted on the breastplate, settled the weight on his shoulders and nudged himself into the embrace of the backpack. It sealed around him like a glove, absolutely familiar, and he bore the weight of it for only a moment before the unit repulsion-adjusted its own mass. "He and Gene are still in Cinnabar, but it's happening, Curt, right now." He thrust both hands into the gauntlets, extended his arms and let them seal around his elbows. "Clear me to launch, and get Gold Raven in the air."

"Gold Raven, launch," Gable said quietly into the loop. "Standby, Cap."

The helmet sealed to his shoulder panels with a hiss of pressurization. The instrument lights came on as he screwed in the umbilici, and a draft of cool fresh air wafted across his face. From its place in the back of the locker, he took the Colt AP60, checked the ammo and power displays, and pressed it snugly into the clips on his right thigh plate. His pulse quickened, a shiver raced through him, a long-familiar thread of stagefright. The reaction was gone just as quickly, replaced by an equally familiar surreal calm as he walked out to the Corsair.

The techs were done with her now. The tailpipes shimmered with heat and the under-wing pods were loaded. The armory crew gave him the thumbs-up as he walked toward them, and Gable said softly over the comm,

"9.4, you are cleared to launch. All units, Raven Leader is in the air."

CHAPTER TWENTY

They were in the Hera Suite. Armed bodyguards stood duty at the wide double doors and four servants were busy inside, waiting tables and arranging flowers. Stone and Cantrell came to a full stop in the passageway and turned over their ID without question. Mas Pretorius took it with a mute nod and passed both wallets to an underling who melted into the shadows. Lorenzo Quade sat at the head of the long, teak table. To his right, Matthias Orlick and Ann Marie Farinelli were talking in furious undertones. Stone recognized them, and the middlemen, Hugo Yeliseyev and Gina Rizo.

The Russian was small in stature, and had more the look of a musician than a syndicate thug. Rizo towered over him, broiling with anger and more than likely in pain. Her right arm was bandaged, the sleeve was ripped out of her shirt, and she held the limb tight against her. She and Yeliseyev had clearly challenged Tactical on their way out of Chryse or Marsport, and she was at odds with the rest of the company. Stone did not recognize them, but three assorted heavies had come in off the street with Quade's people, and he caught names as they grumbled amongst themselves. Logie, Yasutake, Mitchelmore. The last two, he knew from their file pictures. Maxine Colleroy was fifty, silver-streaked, granite-faced, with the hard look of an ex-Army sergeant who had gone into business for herself after she quit the service. Branden Yip was older, softer, with the look of a professional gambler. His hands were slender and flexible, his eyes were quick, and his smile was a mask concealing all else.

All of them were angry; most of them were running scared, but had the good sense not to show it. Lorenzo Quade would have cracked down hard on them, and if the bulge under the left breast of his jacket could be judged from, he was carrying a cannon comparable to Jarrat's favorite Colt. Stone surveyed the whole company and then turned his back on them and said soundlessly to Cantrell, "You wanted 'em, you've got 'em, the old guard and a bunch more besides. All we have to do now is get out cleanly with them."

"Don't jinx it," Cantrell murmured. "We're not out of any woods yet."

Stone took a deep breath, blocked out the greater part of his surroundings and concentrated on his partner. He almost grunted with reaction and mouthed, "He's in the air ... and he's in the hardsuit They've already deployed. We could have descant troops five hundred meters from here."

"*Should* have," Cantrell amended.

All they had to do was connect, and Stone gave Jarrat a kick of feedback

through the link to let him know they were tuned in. Oh, Jarrat was aware of him, every breath he drew, every pulse in his body, the sudden dryness of his mouth and the thud of his heart.

"They read okay, Mister Pretorius." The young man who had taken the ID was back with the wallets. He was only as tall as Pretorius's shoulder, with a dark gold complexion, a shaven skull, and the hard blue eyes of a falcon. "Mister Allen quit Starfleet before they could forcibly eject him, and is currently wanted by Tactical on Mars for the murder of a citizen."

"The *elimination*," Stone corrected, "of an informer who was about to sell me to Marsport Tac, to keep his own sorry ass out of the cage. You have a problem with me protecting my liberty?"

"Not at all," Pretorius assured him. "Go on, Roger."

"Captain Crane was a wildchild in Tempel on Cybele, a long time ago. School, enlistment, twenty years on Army carriers, then tramping around on his own ship. The records are all in order, no horse shit."

"The ship?" Pretorius asked.

"The *Isabeau*, and she's clear. We ran all records, right down to the service schedule." Roger gave Stone and Cantrell a nod. "They are who they claim to be."

"Hazard warning," Cantrell rasped. "One more minute of this bull, and I walk. Vic can stick around if he wants, but you should know, the *Izzy* don't go *nowhere* without me, and I'm already up to my eyeballs with this crapola."

Pretorius spread his hands. "Mister Quade? Your call."

At the head of the table, Lorenzo Quade stood. He was neither tall nor muscular, but he was arresting, in the same way Randolph Dorne had easily commanded the attention without even speaking. "Bear with me, Captain. Mas, I'll ask you to have them scanned, and then we'll talk about travel plans. Where to, and how, and how much."

"Roger." Pretorius stood aside.

A fist seized Stone's insides, and he clearly felt the feedback from Jarrat. "What d'you mean, scanned?" he demanded, as if he were vastly insulted.

"Scanned for weapons and other devices." Pretorius tilted his head at Stone. "You've nothing to hide, therefore nothing to fear. Merely relax and pretend not to notice the formality. Let me offer you a drink while you wait."

"Not now," Stone growled. He turned his back on Pretorius while Roger fetched the scanner, and lifted one brow at Cantrell.

It was even money, and they both knew it. Cantrell had chosen to gamble on this, and he was gambling still as Roger returned with a neat little handset. Stone might have been hoping to see something bigger, older, where the technology was several generations behind current military hardware, but the unit in Roger's palm was small and slim, the latest gadget that should not have been in the hands of a civilian.

An older unit would certainly have missed the implant. Even this one might not key on it, depending on how Roger had configured it, and how savvy Pretorius's man was. Stone held his breath and wished he knew how to

pray. Jarrat's pulse was skipping, too fast in Stone's throat and temple, and the rush sang back and forth through the link, distressing, as Roger said sharply, "One of 'em's wired, Mister Pretorius. I'm seeing a bug. It's a setup."

Conversation stopped as if he had thrown a switch. The room froze into an unlikely tableau and a small voice, dry as old bones, in the back of Stone's head said, *Move!*

As if he had heard the same voice, Cantrell was moving in the same instant. Each of them stepped back and ducked to either side, so fast, the bodyguards flanking the door were disabled before they were aware it was happening. Cantrell's man went down hard with a knuckle-bladed blow to the windpipe. Stone stamped hard on the back of his man's left knee, folding him up like a toy, and a hammer blow to the temple plunged him into unconsciousness before he pitched to the floor.

They snatched up both sidearms, two big guns — a Steyr .44 and a heavy old Chiyoda Mongoose of the odd, unique .48 caliber. The Chiyoda fit Stone's palm oddly, but it was already cocked, and as he took the trigger to second pressure he discovered, there was already a chambered round. The heavy caliber shot plowed clean through Masutatsu Pretorius and flung Roger onto the table behind him. The second round picked Maxine Colleroy up bodily, dumped her into Branden Yip, and they tumbled into the knot of servants. Cantrell triggered twice in the same time, and with the strange, accelerated perceptions of the adrenaline surge, Stone saw a vast dark smear bloom in Quade's chest, before Hugo Yeliseyev spun about and flung himself into the back of Matt Orlick's chair.

The Russian had been scrambling for a gun, and it discharged reflexively as he whirled about. He had set for full auto, and a dozen rounds sprayed the room at random. Plascrete dust hailed out of the ceiling, servants screamed shrilly, the lights went out, and both Stone and Cantrell dove away from the door. With the safety of a dozen meters, Stone turned back and targeted the bearing arch above the doorway. His ears were still ringing from the previous gunfire as masonry, plascrete chunks the size of suitcases, conduit and girders caved in. Magnesium-bright sparks showered from the ruptured power lines, and some pipe was gushing water.

"*Out,*" he rasped at Cantrell, but the older man was already ahead of him, sprinting like a hare for the elevators.

There were doubtlessly many ways out of the lower levels, but the only ones they knew for sure were the double-rank of lifts and the service elevators. While Cantrell went to the executive lifts and punched for the foyer, Stone blew out the controls for the service elevators and the cars used by the rank and file customers. The lights were out right back down the passageway, and doors began to open in the gloom. Voices called out, confused and afraid.

"Get back in the rooms and stay there!" Cantrell bellowed. "Stay put and wait for Fire Control. Do you understand? Get back in, get down, stay down!"

The bark of command would reach them where gentle, cajoling words would not. Stone retreated to the elevator and, as the door closed over, he

gave Cantrell a hard look. "I don't want Tactical in here. Good Christ, it's a shooting party ... and it's our goddamned party, not theirs."

"Well, shit," Cantrell said with a curious mix of resignation and pragmatism. "They're getting smarter."

"They're getting too bloody smart," Stone growled. "No more wires, Gene, you can't afford them. Kevin and I have been saying the same thing for a long time."

The car opened into a quiet, orderly foyer where the customers were unaware of the situation downstairs. But the staff were wide eyed, panicky, and Stone seized the opportunity. "You've got a fire down there," he rasped at the nearest house steward, a girl of indeterminate age with a good figure and a mask of makeup plastered over bad skin. "The elevators are dead," he told her. "You have to get your clients out, any way you know how. Hustle, kid! You don't have time to stand gawping! I'll call Fire Control. Where's your comm?"

"In—in the office." She pointed, then spun and began to scream names.

The office was a cubbyhole behind the reception counter, and it was deserted. Stone hit the comm and keyed fast for Tactical. The AI answered at once and he said, "Stone, R.J., Captain. Give me NARC-*Athena*."

It was routine procedure that Tactical would be monitoring for just such a call, but still it took almost a minute for the machine to verify the voiceprint, raise the carrier and establish a connection. Curt Gable's calm voice was music to Stone's ears.

"We're monitoring Cap Cantrell's bug ... you're still in the club. We have deployed, Raven Leader is airborne. What do you need?"

"A way out," Stone told him, "as fast as you know how. Get us to the rink, get us a pickup."

"You need to be in bay 116," Gable told him. "Blue Raven is there, armed and armored."

"Directions?" Stone rubbed his face hard, forcing himself to concentrate.

The kick of a weapon against Stone's right wrist jarred through Jarrat's arm and shoulder. He counted shots, felt the pounding rhythm in his ankles and knees as he ran, and by then was so attuned to Stone, he was even aware of the slight mass-increase sensation in the legs as an elevator went up. He was alive, he was out and running, and he was talking. which probably meant Cantrell had got out with him. The shock of seeing Cantrell cut down would have transmitted through the empathic link more clearly than data across a comm line, and for the moment Jarrat was satisfied.

"Raven Leader," Gable called in the quiet, even tone which Jarrat had already begun to like as the voice of the ops room. "Cap Stone just made contact. I've vectored him to bay 116. The Blue Ravens are going up to rendezvous. It's gone bad, I don't yet know how, but it's under control. He sounded okay."

"He's fine," Jarrat reported. "He's ... running, and it's hot. The air's hot enough to scorch his lungs. What the hell is that?"

"It's probably the street," Gable guessed. "I'm looking at the ground plan of the area. He's headed for the rink, which means out of the club, back out of the mall, onto the street and hang a left for a hundred meters. I'm thinking the traffic's backed up, and all that repulsion has to make the street simmer."

"Good guess." Jarrat blinked his vision clear and looked out, ahead, at the skycity which glittered against a backdrop of stars. He had put his tail to the gas giant and was standing off, two thousand meters from Sequoia. The triple pressure skin seemed to fluoresce like mother-of-pearl, or the sheen of oil on water; the comm arrays speared up, down and out in every direction save for the tocomac of the rink itself, where every flight into and out of the city had to pass.

He jinked the Corsair down, let her wallow under the skycity, and looked up into the constellations of lights, each one marking a hangar or parking garage, the docking bays for the big ships, fueling points, emergency airlocks, drone chutes, private garages, passenger terminals for the intra-system transit stations, escape pods, workshops, service centers. The city skyline under the pressure skin might be where the people of Sequoia lived and breathed, but the pulse of the city itself was down here, out of sight. The rink.

Bay 116 was open to space. The Blue Raven floodlights glared from within, and their marker beacon cut stridently across the civvy comm traffic. They were cycling the inner airlock as Jarrat listened to their loop. Cronin had marshaled six descant troops beside himself, and a medic, and the squad of eight was headed up toward citybottom. He clicked over the comm and called, "Raven Leader for Colonel Voigt."

"Right here." She must have been intent on the NARC datastream, watching several plots at once and listening in on their comm. "You're putting riot troops on my streets, Captain." But there was no tone of anger. Voigt was more amused and fascinated.

"Give me an alternative," Jarrat challenged. "I'd love to recall them."

"Don't you dare! I have them on several security vidfeeds. They're making their way up the service ramps. It's part of citybottom most people never see. They might find a few Angelheads down there, or drones hauling the trash for recycling, but if we're lucky, we can still avoid a scene. If," she added deliberately, "your riot troops don't actually rupture something."

Like the hull? Jarrat was looking at the panorama of the rink, easily ten thousand meters in diameter, with more human industry crammed into this small space than on the rest of the Callisto combined. "They're under precise orders, Colonel," he told her, "and we don't recruit fools. Just keep your people out of the way."

"That much, I can do," Voigt said acidly. "We're getting screams for help out of Cinnabar. They're yelling about a fire in the lower levels, but Fire Control says they're dead wrong. They have a power blackout, not a fire. I assume it's your people's handiwork?"

"You'd be right." Jarrat smiled behind the visor, without a trace of humor. "Have you picked up our personnel on a security vidfeed yet?"

"I think ... maybe," Voigt said cautiously. "They just turned off the mall into a down-alley by the transit terminal. They're the only people running, and — I'm seeing handguns. Two males, big guys, making good time, but they keep rubbernecking. They're definitely being pursued, but it looks like they have a good start. You want me to send a squad?"

"No. Not if they're being pursued. Keep your squads out of the firing line." Jarrat put the Corsair's nose over, toward bay 116. "I'm coming aboard. I'll get back to you, Colonel." He clicked the comm over. "Raven Leader to Blue Raven 6. Where are you, Gil?"

The Ravens' loop was quiet, surreally calm. Cronin sounded focused, not yet aggravated. "Eight of us are halfway up a ramp between the rink and the utilities basement. Can't see Cap Stone yet."

"You will soon," Jarrat judged, looking at the plot. "He's heading down a ramp not far from you. You need to turn east of your current position."

"It ain't so easy," Cronin warned. "These ramps spiral, they go their own way, and there's forty of 'em. It's a fuckin' maze. Gable's feeding us a vector from Cap Cantrell's bug, but unless you clear us to cut through a shitload of plascrete, we're trying to thread a needle here."

"Thread it," Jarrat said tersely. "Do not, repeat *not* compromise any part of the structure. Remember Michiko's habitation spheres. This thing's similar, but she's a whole lot bigger, with ten times the population."

"I hear you," Cronin said with grim resolve.

"I'm coming into the bay," Jarrat told him. "Raven Leader to carrier."

"I heard," Gable assured him. "All units, Raven Leader is heading into Sequoia." And then he sucked in a breath that rasped over the comm. "Holy shit! Heads up, people! Christ, where did that come from? Raven Leader, we're seeing Commercial 55187!"

"Where?" Jarrat barked, and backed the Corsair off, just as he had committed to entering the docking bay. "Curt, where is it?"

"Close," Gable called across a loop that had gone wild. "Too close. She's on the far side of Sequoia, just came up over the blindspot of Callisto. Jesus, she's a big sonofabitch. Do we want it, Cap?"

"We want it," Jarrat muttered, somehow dividing his attention between a sudden flashfire from Stone's entire nervous system, and the inspired frenzy of the NARC loop. "Get Gold Raven after it, *my pronto*."

The round passed close enough to Stone to scuff the sleeve of his jacket, and his heart leapt as he drove himself toward the corner, ten meters ahead. Cantrell was behind him, holding on with dogged determination, but he was close to spent and Stone was anxious until he rounded the corner and came out onto the apron at the head of a down-spiraling service ramp.

The air smelt rank, the temperature sank sharply, the light levels dropped

to a twilight gloom, and the gravity shut back to less than half. The chill was a relief after the stupefying heat of the mall, the gloom was very much to their purpose, and the low gravity would put survival back into Cantrell's reach.

Shots *whanged* off the plascrete above them, chunks and dust rained on Stone's shoulders, but the moment they were both on the ramp, the situation changed. The ramp went down steeply, almost falling out from under them, and in the near-darkness it was difficult to keep one's feet. Stone stumbled twice, and the third time he let himself go down flat on the cold, stained plascrete. He wormed his way around, facing back the way they had come, and Cantrell dropped beside him with a grunt.

He was holding his left arm in a vice-grip, and Stone guessed he had been grazed. "Kevin's here," he whispered hoarsely. "I mean, he's so close, I could reach out and kiss him ... which means he's put riot troops on the deck."

"Thank gods for tender mercies," Cantrell panted. And then, "Here they come. I make it four."

"Five," Stone corrected, "but the fifth is way back, so far out of shape, he can't even keep up with the rest of the slugs."

"He will in this light gravity," Cantrell warned.

The white heat of Jarrat's feelings dimmed Stone's vision for a moment and he whooped for air as Cantrell squeezed off five rounds, trying to pick off their pursuers. One at least hit the plascrete, grunted and stayed down, and a second was wheezing, whining in pain. Stone barely heard them as feedback from Jarrat's nerves overwhelmed him, and he shook his head to clear it of dangerous phantom sensations.

"Jesus, Stoney," Cantrell muttered, "you hit?"

"No. It's — it's Kevin," Stone gasped. "I don't — can't — cover me, for crissakes, Gene, let me get a handle on this before it kills me."

The Steyr .44 fit Cantrell's palm as if it had been designed for him. Ignoring the left arm that was darkening with blood, he squeezed off rounds every two or three seconds, holding the syndicate shooters pinned down at the top of the ramp. Stone closed his eyes and set his forehead down on his arm to concentrate.

A cold sweat was prickling Jarrat's back, but he was still in the Corsair. Stone felt the deep vibration of engines, but Jarrat was *close*, as if he were hugging the surface of Sequoia, which might be no more than two hundred meters from Stone's position. Situated there, he should have been safe, but his nerves were crawling, a pulse hammered in his temple, and he was shouting into the loop.

"Something's wrong," Stone said hoarsely. "Something's gone bad, Gene, I can't tell what. Kevin's okay, but ... damnit!"

Twenty rounds ripped too close over his head, smacking into the plascrete of the ramp's support and leaving star-shaped scars. Every instinct made Stone try to bury himself in the surface of the ramp. He was blind and deaf, and he knew as well as Cantrell, the syndicate shooters had seen them, had figured their range. The next volley would be on target.

His heart squeezed painfully, and he reached out to Jarrat, trying to physically touch him through the link. It was as impossible as sharing his actual thoughts, but Stone came close. He felt himself enveloped in a warmth he knew with every cell — he felt the clench of Jarrat's throat, the prickle in his eyes, and the raw power of a shout straining his gullet.

But if it was a farewell, it was premature. When the next volley came, the sound was low, whining, an odd wheeze he recognized. Again, he tried to bury himself in the plascrete of the ramp, pulled both arms over his head and protected eyes and ears any way he could. When the rotary cannons opened up, the sound itself could be a weapon. In confines like the ramp, with bare walls on every side, the din could fill his ears with blood.

"Got 'em, Cap," Gil Cronin yelled across the loop. "Both of 'em, they're down, they look stunned, I'm seein' blood, but they're alive. Medic!"

He had taken Jon Semler up with the squad which had just touched on the skirts of the city. Security vidfeeds showed the action and Danni Voigt was watching, but Jarrat had no moment to spare. Semler was the best in the business, and without hesitation he trusted Stone and Cantrell to the man. Stone was a tingle in his nerve endings, even though he had clamped down ruthlessly on the empathic link to buy himself the space to think.

The Gold Ravens were shouting over their loop, yells for backup, screams of warning. The gunship was headed away as fast as Ray Karoda could push it, cutting an orbit that would take it around the curve of Jupiter and into a wilderness of tiny moons, abandoned smelters, and belligerent homesteaders. Karoda was warning constantly, he was redlining his engines to bring the gunship into firing range of Commercial 55187. The trouble was, closing the distance cut both ways. Gold Raven was already taking heavy fire.

"Jesus, what are they armed with?" Karoda was growling. "I've ramped up the Arago field to protect my port bow quarter, but Christ! Sound collision. Grab something and hold on!"

White noise scythed across the loop, and before it cleared Gable called, "Gold Raven, do you copy? Gold Raven? Karoda, where are you?"

It was Sven Hellstrom who answered, from the Gold Raven jump bay. "Comm's down, shipwide, Curt, and I think there's a hull breach up front. I'm looking at instruments here, and seeing major damage."

"Damn it," Gable muttered. "Casualties?"

"Nope," Hellstrom told him. "Everybody's suited — medics, techs, the lot. We can depressurize, it won't hurt us."

"Do it," Jarrat said loudly into the audio chaos. "Blow her down to vacuum, Sven, and get your people on the comm problem. Get me Karoda."

"Already on it, Cap," Hellstrom said in a tone of reproach. "She's blowin' down ... we're fully depressurized and good to go."

"Get me Karoda, fast as you know how," Jarrat said tersely. "R/T will do if your comm arrays are fried."

"They are," Hellstrom affirmed. "I'm reading zilch on every system. I'm going up front, we'll rig something to boost suit transmission."

For himself, Jarrat was dividing his attention between Gold Raven's telemetry and the Blue Raven loop. Tanya Reynolds and Eve Lang were five thousand meters downrange, holding the gunship deep under the rink to monitor the scores of hangars, ports and bays. Gil Cronin's group was making its way back to bay 116, but before they had cleared the down-ramps, Colonel Voigt cut into the NARC band, and the edge in her voice demanded Jarrat's attention.

"Your quarry is on the loose, Captain. I'm watching them on the rink, twelve hundred meters from the riot squad. Medevac just got into Cinnabar's lower levers. You've got five dead, two injured. Pretorius, Quade and Yeliseyev are among the dead, I can ID them on sight myself. But I'm seeing eight on the run, on the utility deck. They have to be heading for a private hangar ... and they're a hell of a lot better armed than any of my kids."

"Keep your people well out," Jarrat told her. "Blue Raven 6."

"Here, Cap, and I heard," Cronin responded. "Colonel Voigt, give me your best guesstimate. How far are the bolters from a probable hangar — can we run the bastards down, on the rink?"

"I ... don't think so," Voigt told him honestly.

"Then tell us," Jarrat said bleakly, "the second you know which hangar they're going for."

"Will do, but you be bloody careful," Voigt barked. "You're gunning for the hangar? Shit, Jarrat, you could take the whole city!"

"Now, would we do that to you?" Jarrat muttered. "Blue Raven gunship."

"Yo," Evelyn Lang said from the flightdeck far below him, where Reynolds was jockeying the ship. "Where d'you want us?"

"Come up here and cover me." Jarrat took the Corsair out and down, for a wider angle on the rink. "Where are you, Gil?"

And Cronin: "Headed for bay 116. Can't go no faster, boss, without taking down some of this goddamn plascrete."

"Don't even think about it." Jarrat had cleared his weapons systems, primed the chain guns and prepped a brace of Shrike missiles. They were the smallest, lightest missiles he had, semi-smart, and extremely short range. "Voigt, talk to me!"

The Tactical commander was hoarse. "They're cutting a line of bay 34."

"What's parked in it?" Jarrat demanded.

"I'm pulling up the files right now, give me a chance. It's ... a transport, medium-range, no hyper capability, but it could be armed. Legally, it's not supposed to be, but that doesn't seem to stop these people."

Jarrat licked his dry lips. "Access rink security. Seal the outer bay doors."

"All right ... but it won't hold the bastards for long," Voigt warned. "All they have to do is override the security system, and they're out. My nine year old kid could hack it in ten minutes,"

"That's all the time we need," Jarrat said evenly. "Blue Raven 6?"

"We're seeing the bay." Cronin was not breathing heavily, though the squad had covered more than three kilometers.

"You got five, maybe seven minutes to get back aboard," Jarrat told him. "Problem?"

"Shouldn't be," Cronin hazarded. "Gunship!"

"Right here, Gil," Reynolds assured him, listening in. "How many pods?"

"Send us two. Cap Stone, Cap Cantrell. Lets get this right." Cronin paused. "We'll have to cycle the whole bay, not just the 'lock. Raven Leader?"

Not five hundred meters off the keel of Sequoia, Jarrat was scanning bay markers. He nosed the Corsair into line and cleared his triggers. "Fast as you can get aboard, 6. How's Stoney and Gene?"

The medic answered. "Cap Cantrell's hurt, got himself winged," Jon Semler said calmly. "Not too bad, but I'd be asking Doc Del to look at this, since he's aboard ... no offense to Doc Reardon, you understand."

Voigt cut in as he finished. "They're in the bay, and I pegged it right. It's 34, you got it covered, Jarrat?"

"Got it," he said baldly. "Gil, you got three minutes."

"Reynolds!" Cronin roared. "Pods!"

"Already in the bay, Gil," Lang said levelly.

The compartment began to pressurize as she spoke, and Jarrat indulged a whim. "Medic, let me talk to Stoney."

While they waited at the inside 'lock hatch, Jon Semler kicked in his external audio, and Jarrat's voice said over his muted public address,

"How're you doing, Stoney?"

"I'm fine," Stone said in a hoarse rasp. "It was the bloody damned bug that screwed us. We had it covered, but these bastards have toys that even Starfleet can't get a requisition filled on! I think there's four dead and a few more down, and I know for sure, Quade and Pretorius are in bodybags. Gene took one, his left arm's one hell of a mess."

He was angry, and the fury raced through Jarrat the moment he let down the empathic shields by even a chink. "You made it out," he said between clenched teeth. "That'll do me just fine."

"Here we go, the bay's up to pressure," Stone said sharply. "How long?"

"Two minutes," Jarrat guessed. "Hustle! Blue Raven gunship."

"On station," Reynolds responded, "covering 34, the jump bay's open. Where do you want me?"

"Right where you are," Jarrat growled. "Ops room, for chrissakes get me Gold Raven — Sven Hellstrom, if you can't raise the pilot!"

The air was a few degrees above freezing, and Stone's ears popped painfully on the comparatively low pressure. Beside him, Cantrell was grunting with effort as he kept pace with the descant troops, and Stone gave him a hard look. He had said nothing about the wound, laboring stubbornly in Stone's wake as they made their way to the down-ramps. A single round had clipped

him, chewing through the flesh of his left arm. Semler had splinted it with a high-compression bandage and jabbed him with painkillers, but still Cantrell was pale, save for patches of bright color in his cheeks.

Two escape pods lay on the deck, five meters inside the bay door, and the descant troops who had remained behind to cover the rink had already prepped them. Cantrell grunted with pain and exertion as he flopped into one, and Stone dove into the other, inelegant and not caring. It fit him like a coffin, with just enough space for him to move his arms. A screen was alive before his face, filled with ranging and tactical data, and a flexible hose to his left offered him cold water. He drank the small tank to the bottom, unable to quench the thirst, and as he finished the pod's screen was peppered with red warning lights.

External pressure was zero, gravity had flatlined, and the pod was moving. He set the screen for video, and saw a dizzying angle as the kevlex-titanium coffin fell out of the bay between two Blue Ravens. He caught a glimpse of the Corsair not far away, and the gunship beyond. Then the keel of Sequoia began to leapfrog the surface of Callisto as the pod spun on its axis, and he quickly switched the display back over to data.

The audio was a clutter, and he deliberately kept out of it. He punched up the ops room loop, which monitored all others, and hunted among the scores of individual channels for Raven Leader. He could *feel* Jarrat, a white-hot itch under his skin, so close. Anger and frustration, anxiety and healthy fear shot like darts through the link, and he knew Jarrat felt their echoes as he bounced them back.

On the plot before him he saw the Blue Raven gunship dead ahead, and the twenty-five blips marking the positions of Cronin's squad, falling back up to the jump bay on repulsion which pushed them off the surface of Sequoia. He saw the blip marking the position of the Corsair, but two other markers were distant, and the audio from Gold Raven was indistinct, broken up.

"Can you clean it up?" Jarrat was saying to Gable.

"They're just not transmitting much," Gable told him. "I think their comm arrays are history, and if we're listening to suit transmission, even if it's boosted, it's too distant by now to punch much of a signal through. They're on the other side of the radiation band, and the magnetosphere's better than deliberate ECM."

Behind their voices, Stone could hear a whisper from Gold Raven. He thought he recognized Hellstrom and Karoda, but it was difficult to tell. His pod gave a buck, like an angry colt, as the gunship picked it up in tractors, and a moment later Colonel Helen Archer cut into the loop, overriding the Blue Ravens.

"Carrier flight systems are online. We can maneuver on your order."

It was a veiled question. Did Jarrat want to send the *Athena* after Gold Raven? But the clench of Jarrat's belly told Stone, he had made the same decision Stone would have. "Hold where you are, Colonel. You're covering Sequoia. Launch Red and Green Raven, but have them standby the city."

The Gold Raven gunship was on its own. Memories of the near death of the city of Argentia haunted Stone, and the lessons learned there were bitter indeed. Sequoia was vastly bigger, and vastly more populous. By now, NARC Central would know an action was being fought here. Official blood would be curdling in that tower in Chicago, and the only absolution for the action was a clean victory, with no loss of civilian life or property. And if Gold Raven was the price they paid for victory?

On the edge of his hearing, Stone heard Hellstrom and Karoda shouting at their people. The ship was damaged, the hull was open to space, but the gunners were crowing. Their battle was by no means one sided.

"Got 'em!" Evelyn Lang yelled into the loop. "All Blue Ravens are aboard, Cap Jarrat. Jump bay is sealed. Go for it!"

Go for it? Stone's heart leapt as the pod nudged down onto the deck, rocked to a stop, and he read the outside pressure. The bay was blowing up fast, and when it was close enough he popped the seals. Semler was beside the other pod, and as it opened he leaned in and jammed a hypo against Cantrell's shoulder. Stone caught a glimpse of a mass of blood, but Cantrell was swearing fluently. Stone was pleased to leave him to the medic.

Full gravity was shocking to the muscles of his legs as he headed out of the jump bay, but by the time he reached the gunship's cab-sized flight deck his body had righted itself. Eve Lang was flying left-seat for Tan Reynolds. She gave him a backward glance as he appeared.

"You want to copilot, Stoney?"

"No, you're fine." Stone was wedged between the pilot seats, intent on the scene ahead, framed in the big armorglass panels.

The rink of Sequoia was bathed in Blue Raven's floodlights, and the Corsair cast a great elongated shadow. They were covering one specific bay, and on Lang's CRT Stone saw data piped from Voigt's department. It was a private hangar containing a Yamazake Mercury, a fast, maneuverable, mid-size transport that was very likely armed like a fighter.

"I'm reading major heat blooms in the hangar," Lang said quietly into the loop. "An ignition signature. They're prepped to leave in a hell of a hurry."

"Look for weapons coming online," Stone prompted, "and give me that comset." She handed it over her shoulder to him, and before he had settled it he was calling, "Blue Raven gunship for Raven Leader. On your toes, Kevin, they've started engines."

"Weapons." Lang glanced up and back at him. "I'd could swear they're testing servomotors ... looks like gun mounts test-tracking and magazines auto-loading. They're armed a whole lot better than any civvy bus should be."

"Syndicate," Stone observed, and heard his own cynicism. "You got that, Kevin? They're clearing weapons."

"I heard. Blue Raven guncrews, stand to," Jarrat said on a steely monotone. "Do *not* fire, not a round, till the Mercury's well clear of Sequoia."

From the gunbay under the serried, antennae-bristled chin of the gunship, Cronin said, "Understood, Cap. Just don't get in my firing line."

"Give me a clear shot and a tad of luck," Jarrat muttered, "and you won't need to fire. We want these buggers alive, if we can get 'em. Stoney?"

"Oh, yeah," Stone breathed into the comm, "they're the tip of the iceberg. They know where Aphelion is, and *who*. We get their intel and Gene can take 'em down like a flock of skeets."

And then Voigt, with a voice like a whipcrack: "You're on, Jarrat — they just overrode the bay doors, and there's sweet FA I can do to hold 'em."

"Copy that." Jarrat took a breath which spasmed in Stone's lungs, and Stone felt the light pressure of his hand on the fire controls. "Blue Raven 6."

"Right behind you," Cronin whispered.

With hands like a musician, Tanya Reynolds coaxed the gunship so close to Jarrat's tailpipes, the hull was scorching. The object was to close the exit lanes and surgically cripple the Mercury before it could get out, or far out, of the bay. It was a good plan, and Stone was gambling on it to work, until a voice that did not belong on any NARC band barked there, and Gable said darkly over it,

"You better listen to this, guys."

"Back off, way off," a man was shouting, almost spitting with rage. "You want a quarter million civvies blown clear into space? I said, *back way off!*"

"Who is this?" Jarrat rasped. "Identify yourself."

"Who I am don't mean shit. Shut the fuck up and listen! Back off, or this city pays your debts. I just installed a device, right here in this bay. It's on a timer. You got five minutes to shut it down, or it'll take half the rink."

"And you with it," Jarrat observed, "if we don't let you out of there."

The man could barely speak for fury. "So here's the game you're playing. We die here, free and clear, instead of looking at the bars forever, we take your precious civvy population with us, and we go out laughing, knowing NARC's being gutted like a fish. NARC'll be deader than we are, they'll roast you alive ... or you back way off, we leave, and you got closer to *four* fuckin' minutes now, to get your goons in here and shut down my device. Time to put your money down, NARC boy."

The ice weighed heavily in Stone's belly. It was Eve Lang who whispered, "Christ, is he on the level? Is there a device?"

"We can't afford the risk." Stone moistened his lips with a tongue just as dry. "Kevin?"

"Blue Raven, pull out," Jarrat agreed. "Gil, you heard? Put a demolition squad in the jump bay. Your priority is Sequoia. Acknowledge."

"Copy," Cronin responded, and then, into the loop: "Demolition, are you in the jump bay, and if not, why not?"

"Already here, Gil," Joe Ramos said acidly. "We're standing by to run containment, and the clock is ticking. Cap Jarrat!"

"Yo," Jarrat called.

"Give me a best guess," Ramos challenged. "What kind of device?"

"Christ." Jarrat cleared his throat. "Can't be too big, has to be a lash-up, and the makings had to come in on the Mercury or be available in the bay."

Say ... a fuel-air device, based on a wad of demolex as the detonator, force-fed with an oxygen line, a second liquid fuel stage, and set up on the inner 'lock hatch. The rink's blast shielded, but blow out a major airlock, and the explosive decompression'd be like ten tornados in downtown Chicago. They've had no time to be smart. Don't think tremblers, just an electronic igniter and a very big bang." He barely had time to breathe again before he was shouting, "Stand by Blue, the bay doors are opening — let 'em go. Reynolds, launch me a bunch of popups, swing 'em around Callisto. Keep a track on the bastards."

The doors were only half open when the Mercury shot out like a dart, and its sterntubes were fully alight, burning off the bay's signage and emergency decals. It arced down at once, cutting a track for the limb of Callisto, and the pilot redlined the engines. In the same moments, Reynolds launched a flight of five popup tracking drones, and for a moment Stone watched the mark on the tracking CRT, before he transferred his attention to the vidfeed from Joe Ramos's helmet camera.

The gunship was still slewing in toward the open bay when Ramos's squad jumped. On maximum repulsion, they kicked off from the ship and dove into the bay like stooping hawks. Ramos landed hard, rolled, and came up against the rear wall, by the inside airlock. His voice was a roar over the comm. "Find it, guys — think dumb, where'd the fuckers put it?"

An unaccustomed feeling of helplessness raced through Stone. Being a spectator was the thing he deplored most. "I'm going to suit up," he said into the loop. "Kevin, come aboard, pick me up. I belong in the air." He was moving as he spoke, headed back to the Ravens' ready room at a flat run.

"Will do," Jarrat said tersely. "I'm tracking the Mercury. They're not as fast as we are, Stoney, and not as smart as they think they are. They're putting Callisto between us, probably hoping to get lost in the blind spot, but I just got a decent signal-bounce off our popups. I can see them ... and they're cutting speed. Damnit, where are they going? Reynolds!"

"Gunship," she responded. "I'm showing 150 seconds on the clock — and remember, the yahoos who set the device weren't specific. Could be closer to two minutes."

"Blue Raven's got it, and I'm coming aboard for Stoney. Raise Gold Raven, if you can."

"No joy," Lang told him. "The radiation belts are scrambling everything like ECM, and Gold's way out of range of high-boost suit telemetry. I've got a track on them and 55187, but as far as we're concerned they're off the air. The gunship's comm arrays went down fast. Gold could be fine, just not sending."

"Great," Jarrat muttered. "I'm coming into hangar two, Stoney."

He had followed every word while he raced into a standby hardsuit. He was locking the helmet in place, screwing in the umbilici, as Jarrat set down and lifted the rear canopy. The hangar remained depressurized, and Stone had only to cycle the cramped inner 'lock before he was jogging out to the

Corsair. He bounced up on repulsion, caught the top handhold and swung himself into the cockpit.

"Go." He dropped the canopy while he was running up the harness. You still got a track on the Mercury?"

"Yep." Jarrat nudged the aircraft out on its powerful Arago fields, spun it inside its own length, and threw open the throttle. "Gunship," he said as acceleration punched them hard, "we're going after the bolters. Blue Raven 6!"

Cronin was there at once. "Found it, Cap. It's the real thing, and you were close to right about it being set up on an inner 'lock. The buggers put it on the mains, not the 'lock. They're not looking for an explosive decompression. They're trying to rupture the power couplers."

"And get a blow-back through the generators that'd maim Sequoia," Stone growled. "You got it covered, Gil?"

"Give us a chance, Stoney," Cronin said in a terse undertone Stone did not like. "It's a lash-up, meaning it's rough as guts. Fuckin' unstable."

"I'm seeing 90 seconds," Reynolds warned.

"Call it a minute," Ramos said with surreal calm. He was working, concentrating, so focused on his job that the rest of the cosmos might not have existed. "Anything else is a bonus, and we're not counting on it."

From the ops room Gable called sharply, "Cap Jarrat, I've got Voigt on the line for you."

"Not now," Jarrat snapped.

"She's got a good question," Gable allowed. "Sequoia's emergency services went on alert three minutes ago. Pressure doors across the rink are sealed. They're locking down the utility level right now. Does she sound a sixty-second warning, get people into hardpoints?"

"There'll be panic," Stone said quietly. "People get trampled in the stampede, every bloody time. We shut down the device, nothing happens here, and fifty people die upstairs. Blue Raven 6, you're on-site, you call it."

"Thanks a bunch," Cronin growled. "Joe?"

"Almost there," Ramos crooned, "get out of my face for twenty seconds."

"Ops room, tell Voigt, don't bother," Cronin called into the loop.

"Will do," Gable said darkly.

The face of Callisto was smashed and shattered by ancient impacts, and glittered with the lights of industry. Most of Sequoia's food was grown there, and its water, originally trucked in from Europa, was endlessly recycled. Callisto was still rich in heavy elements, and though the mines which had provided the raw materials for early colonization were worked out, smaller mines were still profitable. Drones operated them, and few humans lived on the surface, but many people worked there and commuted to Sequoia. The lights of hydroponics farms, factories, launch facilities, mine heads and service garages, formed bright constellations across the moon's darkside. And the Yamazake Mercury was headed into Callisto's velvet-black night.

"Sixty seconds," Lang said quietly. "Joe, you're on bonus time."

"A little longer," Ramos muttered. "Just a little longer."

"Joe, for chrissakes!" Cronin exploded.

And then, "Got it!" Ramos took a vast breath that rasped over the comm pickup. "Tell Colonel Voigt to stop peein' herself and stand down her emergency services. Containment, get in here and pick this up."

Stone had not realized he had been holding his breath until that moment. His lungs gave a spasm, and burned. He blinked sweat out of his eyes and peered at the CRT before him. The Red Raven gunship was standing by Sequoia, riding high above the pressure skin. "Red Raven, come around to the rink and take over for Blue. Gil, get your people back aboard. Red Ravens are going to clean up ... Reynolds, get after Gold Raven, best speed you can squeeze out of her. Acknowledge."

"You got it." Reynolds's voice was hoarse. "Where the hell are you going, Raven Leaders?"

"Not sure," Jarrat admitted. "There's a lot of trash ... pardon me, historic sites ... on this side of Callisto. We're trying to pick the Mercury out of fields of junk. Get after Gold, don't let 187 get out of the system, let us worry about the bolters!"

"Taking the Blue Ravens back aboard right now," Lang reported. "I've got a solid track on Gold, I know exactly where they are."

"You're authorized to overrun your engines," Stone said levelly. "Ops room, get Budweisser online, have him conference with Blue Raven. We want a damage report on Gold, asap. Green Raven, you're standing by Sequoia."

"Anything moves out of line," Jarrat added, "impound it, no questions. Red Raven containment crew, report."

The voice belonged to Red's demolition specialist, a voice Stone did not know, though he knew Red had just taken aboard several transfers from Army units. "No problem, Cap. The device is inert, tanked in liquid nitrogen."

And Gable: "Colonel Voigt reports emergency services are standing down. Most of Sequoia never knew there was an alert, and the folks who do know think it was a routine drill. Do you want —"

Stone would never know what Gable was asking. The Corsair had dropped in low, so close to the surface of Callisto that individual buildings were visible to the naked eye, and he saw industrial drones crawling between them like monstrous bugs. Where the shot came from, he could not guess, but almost in the same second the Corsair's systems flashed warnings of a sensor lock-on, and the aircraft staggered under the impact of something big, heavy.

"What in the hell —" Jarrat began, but the control surfaces were dead.

Power went out across the whole airframe, weapons were offline, engines shut down, and the steady vibration of repulsion was gone. Callisto's gravity was light, just over a tenth of one normal Earth 'G,' but the Corsair was going down in it, and the moon had no molecule of atmosphere to allow the aircraft to glide. She would impact lightly, but Jarrat was powerless to keep her airborne, and already he was hunting for options.

"Green Raven, did you pinpoint where the shot came from?" Nothing. "Green Raven!" He shouted into a loop which had sheeted out with white noise. "Carrier!" Nothing.

"We're being jammed," Stone said darkly, "and we're right on top of the source. They're not going to hear us, Kevin, but they'll come looking."

"If there's anything left to find." With every control surface dormant, Jarrat had abandoned the Corsair to the light gravity and was hand-cranking the release mechanism, to lift the canopy. "Twenty seconds, and we'll impact ... sit still, and we're dead meat."

The same thought was on Stone's mind. "Why the hell haven't they taken another crack at us? Jesus, they could tear us in two, we've got nothing to maneuver with, we're a big, fat target!"

"I'd guess it's us they want," Jarrat guessed, "same as we're trying to take the Mercury in one piece. And we blew it," he added bitterly.

"Not yet, we didn't," Stone argued. "They're out there somewhere. If they pop out of this tangle of junk, Green Raven'll have 'em, or the carrier's going to see them. They're *here*, and so are we."

"It's a big moon," Jarrat warned.

"And if they're hunting, they'll come to us ... hold on!" Stone closed both gauntlets about the harness as the Corsair hit.

The surface of Callisto was bare rock covered in talc-like ice dust. The aircraft touched down with one wing, pivoted, smacked down hard on its belly and slithered a hundred meters in an ocean of silver-gray powder. The low gravity staged the entire crash in weird slow motion, and long before the Corsair had skidded to a halt, the canopies were hand-cranked up, high enough for two suited figures to be out.

On one knee in the lee of the wing, Stone scanned with every instrument he had, looking for movement on the close horizon. Callisto was small by comparison with a world like Darwin's or Earth. It seemed to Stone that he could reach out and touch the horizon, and not much under two million kilometers away, Jupiter loomed on the horizon like a thunderstorm. The light levels were low, the whole landscape seemed to be rust and green, with the immense highlands of an impact structure in the east, where the gas giant was rising, sullen as a vengeful god.

"Nothing," Stone said quietly. "Where in hell are they?"

"Imaging us," Jarrat guessed. "They probably don't want to walk right into a pair of rotary cannons, but that —" he paused to grunt with effort — "is what they'll be doing. Give me a hand here."

He was manually opening the weapons hatch in the belly of the Corsair. Ice dust coated it thickly, the mechanism was dead without power, and the aircraft was partially reclining on it. The hatch would only open half a meter, and Jarrat was reaching in, working by the light of one of his helmet floods, turned down to minimum. By touch, he had located sidearms and rotaries, magazines, power cells, and the beacon.

Piece by piece, Stone took it all from him as fast as he could pry it out.

He activated the beacon in the ice dust under the Corsair's tail, and as Jarrat stood, handed him the rotary. It mounted solidly into the clips on his right forearm, and while Jarrat was looking at charge and load, Stone mounted his own. A pair of Steyr .44 pistols clipped to his left thigh plate as he scanned the horizon again.

"They must have seen us. Green Raven! Ops room. Gable!" Nothing.

"The ECM's pretty good," Jarrat observed. "They have nice toys, like the one that picked up Gene's wire."

"They'll be just as well armed." Stone was checking his rotary cannon, seeing a full charge and a load of armor-piercing incendiary. "You *know* they've seen us, Kevin."

"I know." Jarrat rose carefully to his feet. "But they might be low on options. The Mercury's fast but not long-duration. Full of hyperventilating passengers, they have ten hours *if* they planned ahead with consumables, which they probably didn't. Who'd be expecting this? They might have three, four hours, before they all just black out."

"They'll unload their people," Stone mused, "into one of the facilities, to wait for a pickup later. Or maybe they'll be looking for another ship, or even lying low and slithering out a long time later."

"Here's their big problem," Jarrat added thoughtfully. "Their airlock only handles two at a time, and you can make that one, if the person's in a hardsuit. They have at least eight aboard, and if they let us see the ship, she's going down. Getting somebody out to open up a facility'll guzzle time, and then they run into pressure and heat worries." He gestured at the lights of a factory on the west horizon. "These are drone plants. Nobody bothers to get them up to pressure and temperature till humans show up, and it wouldn't be often."

"I'm reading 150 below, surface temp," Stone added, "which doesn't bother drones, but until our bolters get the heaters on, they can't just shove people into any pressurized chamber. They'd be dead in minutes. Less." He followed Jarrat carefully to his feet. "All of which buys us some time."

"Some," Jarrat agreed. He was panning his sensors around, and swore softly. "We know where they *were*."

The Mercury had been concealed in the junk of ages, parked in a position where it could take at least one perfect shot at the Corsair. The instant he knew the VM-104 was going down, the pilot had higher priorities. Stone zoomed his visual out to maximum, searching in the infrared, back along the path of the Corsair's long, slow crash.

And there it was, wreathed in darkness, bright in thermal imaging. "Heat traces," he said softly. "Five thousand meters at 305 . Could be drones?"

"Could be," Jarrat mused, "but it'd be a hell of a coincidence ... and the heat's dissipating slowly. Check my readings."

"You're right. If it was drones, the heat traces would be constant." The location could only be the lingering hotspot where the Mercury had settled, waiting to make its one shot. Stone lifted his right arm, and the rotary. "It's

time we went hunting, and we have a good place to start.”

The Corsair offered up another hotspot, visible to instruments from any part of this quadrant of Callisto. The more distance they put between themselves and it, the harder they would be to find, when the Aphelion agents had offloaded the Mercury and came poaching. A kilometer to the south was a mountain of tangled girder and conduit, super-cold, long abandoned. If they needed cover, the old smelter and massdriver provided plenty of it. But Stone was more interested in stalking than being stalked, and Jarrat was already making tracks in the ice dust, headed a little north of west.

In the low gravity, each giant stride was thirty meters long. They moved as fast as any ground car, and the hardest part of covering the distance was juggling repulsion to brake and stop. They slithered to rest in the dense shadows of a massive ice boulder tossed out of the surface of Callisto by an impact so ancient, dinosaurs might have been Earth’s dominant species at the time. Machine tracks crisscrossed the surface, churning up the ice dust, and the running lights of several industrial drones sparkled through a haze of crystals thrown up by recent activity.

Of the Mercury, there was no immediate sign, and Stone bounced up to the top of the boulder to scan again. “It’s a clutter,” he growled. “Mines, refineries, massdrivers, gantries, old workings, new ones.”

“Heat traces?” Jarrat asked.

“Several, all drones.” Stone reconfigured his instruments and kicked up the range. “They’re not close. Let me look further out.”

Jarrat had tackled the comm problem. Neither the carrier nor the Green and Red Raven gunships were answering, and Sequoia might as well not have been there at all. Nothing from orbit was getting through the dense fog of jamming, but he had taken the opportunity to listen to other bands at closer range.

“I can almost get some of the drone command frequencies,” he mused, “at least from machines working east and south. You’d have to assume there’s just as many drones north and west, but nothing gets through. Tells you where the jamming’s coming from.”

“Can you get a rough fix on it?” Stone wondered as he dropped down from the boulder.

“Maybe. Using the deadzones in the drones’ command frequencies. It wouldn’t be too accurate,” Jarrat warned. “Stands to reason the source is close, though, and if I can get us inside of ten, twenty degrees, thermal imaging should pick up the slack.” He glanced up at the top of the boulder. “Anything?”

“All drones,” Stone told him. “They’re taking their sweet time.”

Busy reconfiguring his instruments, Jarrat did not answer at once. “The Mercury’s probably overloaded and under supplied. Too many passengers, not enough O₂ aboard.”

“Then allow for the panic factor,” Stone added. “Any joy?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jarrat was intent on his helmet displays. “If there *are* drones

working in the deadzones, I've nailed the ECM jammer inside of something like a fifteen degree arc. Then again, if there's just no drones out there, it's a wild goose chase."

Stone paused to consider the multiple hotspots he could see in the infrared, in every other direction. "Like the man said, time to ante up. There's drones working out there, I'd put money on it."

Satisfied, Jarrat clicked his display back to surface scan. "We need a way to come up on the bastards without being seen."

"About a klick south." Stone pointed. "It's a jungle of girder and pipes. Even military imaging would have a hard time picking us out of it from the other side."

"Good enough," Jarrat agreed. "Let's hustle, Stoney. The longer they have to get clever, the harder they'll be to take."

The ice boulder covered them for several hundred meters, and in that time they had pushed hard, flying through the low gravity, fast and close to the ground. Instruments would still pick them up, but they covered the kilometer in under a minute and were at jeopardy for less than half of the time.

The ruined jumble of an old minehead and refinery sprang up like a field of rotten, decayed toadstools. In the cover it provided they accelerated again, kicking off with repulsion-assist on every fifty-meter stride. Still, Stone was intent on his helmet display, and as they swung around into the fifteen degree arc Jarrat had pinpointed, he slowed. Jarrat cut speed beside him, and they both began to scan, dividing the spectrum of bands and modes between them. Stone was intent on the visual feed and infrared, while Jarrat concentrated on motion detection and the micro-changes in the strength of the comm jamming itself.

Instinct told them they were close. The tangle of wreckage was two thousand meters behind them when Jarrat held up one clenched fist and cut speed again. "We're on top of it, Stoney." Even comm between them was breaking up, though they were not three meters apart. "It's so strong right here —"

He was certainly about to say the jamming was so powerful, it had begun to fry his instruments, but the signal was so broken up, Stone heard no more. He abandoned comm and with the sureness of long practice fell back on sign, and the empathic link: he would scan for heat traces while Jarrat physically hunted for the jamming device. Jarrat gave him a flare of acknowledgment through the link, and Stone switched his instruments over to medium range.

They separated, and Stone circled around, mounting a shallow rise to get whatever elevation he could. He was open to Jarrat, monitoring the link as if it were one of his instruments. He would know when Jarrat found the device, even before he destroyed it, and the air cleared.

The jamming was so powerful, the helmet display had begun to break up, and he swore vividly as he panned through a three-sixty. The dim Callisto twilight was oppressive, as if he were wading at the bottom of a thin, cold

ocean. Jupiter was rising, casting a bloody light and macabre shadows which only confused the dirty-ice landscape.

Heat traces were difficult to pinpoint because they were so faint, so scattered by the ice, but his laboring instruments picked an infrared shadow out of the background cold. "There they are," he said, more to himself than to Jarrat, who might not hear. "There are —"

The shock of an immense impact ripped the breath out of his lungs and he staggered, though it was not himself who had been bowled off his feet and swept along through the ice dust. Jarrat was down, winded, gasping. The round could only have been a grenade. The armor was intact, but his power was out and, as he spun, Stone saw the reason. He had taken the hit between the shoulders, where the umbilici left the pack for power and air. The armor was scorched to dullness, the pack was delved in, as if from a massive punch, and the power coupler was out of its socket. He was getting air, but his instruments would be dead and only Callisto's light gravity made it possible for him to move, carrying the armor.

As Stone dove toward him, Jarrat was up on his knees. His apparent mass was close to sixty kilos, and while Stone was feather-light, Jarrat found his weight almost normal. He was hunched, as far as the armor would permit, and pain knifed through his back. Breathing was not easy, and every breath was a stab. He had at least one cracked rib, Stone knew without doubt.

He dove for Jarrat, caught him about the shoulders and let his own repulsion neutralize their combined mass. Jarrat grunted at the wrench of movement as Stone propelled him into the grudging cover of an outcrop. They were down, kneeling, and Jarrat's right gauntlet groped uselessly at the backpack. Stone swatted it away, turned on one floodlight at a tiny lick of power. He swore as he saw the pack. The socket was a fused, crumpled mess.

"No go," he said to Jarrat, knowing Kevin could not hear him. With his main power out, he had emergency cells worth twenty minutes which would maintain his air supply, but comm was beyond the power budget. Stone's reaction carried through the link, and Jarrat's helmet turned toward him. Stone pointed to his own pack and shook his head. He patted his chest and mimed gasping for air. Jarrat spread the fingers of both hands twice, indicating a full charge. Stone laid his hands on Jarrat's back, let his concern flood the link, and echoed a fraction of the pain he was feeling through the bond. Jarrat nodded, held up both hands, and with an effort pulled back his shoulders. He was mobile. Stone pointed to Jarrat's rotary, and the Colt. The weapons were autonomous, and again Jarrat nodded. His left hand closed on Stone's arm to secure his attention, and he pointed, one finger stabbing at right angles to the direction the shot had come from.

He was saying something, but all Stone felt was the acid-burn pain of the rib, and intense frustration. Jarrat pointed again, and then laid his visor against Stone's and shouted. Vibration carried from helmet to helmet, and a distorted metallic voice said, "I *saw* it. Saw...*jammer*. Cover me!"

"Cover him," Stone muttered as Jarrat slid away. He primed the rotary

and bobbed up above the line of the outcrop's ice boulders. The thin, gray-green twilight was shot through by ray-straight streamers of blood, the ghost light of Jupiter itself, and the landscape was a confusion. For a moment Stone was disoriented, and he cursed at the helmet display as it broke up, Infrared refused to read for crucial seconds as Jarrat worked his way around the far side of the boulders, and back out into the open.

He knew the direction from which the shot had come, but he could not begin to guess the range. His own rotary was trained on the rough bearing, and he drew the Colt left-handed from its thigh mount. Stone followed the line of the Gattling, and as Jarrat stepped out into the open, he kicked his floodlights on full, muted the empathic bond to dull the pain he was getting from Jarrat, and concentrated on the infrared scan.

In the glare of the lights, half-hidden by the macabre, lurid shadows cast by the rise of the gas giant, he glimpsed a blockhouse. Beyond it was a fluted shape he knew instinctively was the Mercury's high tail spoiler. Jarrat was intent on the jamming device, and he had no direct line of sight to the Mercury's tail, but from Stone's position he saw it clearly.

The Gattling was swinging up and over into his firing line when a burst from the blockhouse shriveled his irises. He dove, triggering at the same time, but he knew he was off target by a narrow margin. He hit the ice, rolled and came up against a boulder. He had swung the rotary cannon back into line when he realized, the shooter was after Jarrat, not himself.

A second impact shattered through his body, but the white-hot pain and shock were secondhand. The round had taken Jarrat in the right shoulder, just a glancing blow, and though the armor easily deflected the grenade, the impact wrenched his whole body, like a kick well-placed into the broken ribs. His pulse soared, his ears sang, and Stone felt the spasm of his throat as he yelled. He was airborne, still twisting as he fell, when the Colt came back into line.

The kick through his left wrist and arm shuddered through Stone's bones and joints. In the same instant, the jamming device erupted in a shower of blue-white sparklets and gray smoke, and Stone's rotary began to reverberate, silent in the vacuum, as it churned out fifty-round bursts. The armor-piercing incendiaries tore the tail off the Mercury as if it were sculpted from putty. He held down the trigger, hunting for the engine exhausts, and though he saw nothing through a haze of ice dust and debris, he knew he found at least one of them. Shrapnel scythed in every direction, razor-edged and windmilling. He rode several fragments on his right arm and breastplate, and even the kevlex-titanium surface of the armor was raked, scored. With a grunt of reaction, he triggered the rotary again to make sure it was in firing condition, and the familiar vibration told him, it was.

Firefly sparklets were still glittering in a halo around the jammer when the air cleared and his helmet audio filled with the NARC loop, but Stone had no time to listen. Jarrat was down, perilously exposed, and slow to move. The Aphelion shooter had perfect line of sight, and only the shock of realizing the

Mercury had been disabled had stopped him firing again. In moments shock would turn to rage, and Stone moved fast.

He tweaked his apparent mass to fifty kilos, dove for Jarrat, landed lightly on him and rolled, taking the battered armor in a bear hug. On a barked command, their combined mass shifted back to twenty kilos and he kicked off like an aeroball player. They plowed into the boulders a scant meter ahead of another grenade from the blockhouse, and shards of ice lifted into a curtain of coarse fog. Cursing lividly, Stone kicked off again, rolling them over the top of the boulders and into cover.

Pain lanced through him — not his own. He put Jarrat down on his left side and chanced a trace of light. He peered at the pack, where the main power coupler was fused and useless. The external jacks looked to be still viable. While Jarrat caught his breath and waited for the pain to subside, Stone flicked open the service panel and surveyed the damage.

What he saw was troubling. Emergency power, which should have given him a full twenty minutes of rebreather time, was down to two minutes, and a swift diagnostic showed him why. The superconductor was shot, and the circuit to the rebreather was leaking. The system had been dribbling power away in tiny amounts, leaving Jarrat a little life in the O₂ cyclor, plus about five minutes in the pressurized reserve.

Worse, with the power out for so long the hardsuit was starting to chill. He was cold, and Stone knew his right shoulder had been injured in the last impact. The bone might be chipped, he thought — a dislocation was impossible in the armor, but a single heavy impact from a military-grade projectile, though it would not punch through the kevlex-titanium, could damage bones.

Using language that would have awed a drummer in a traveling band, he opened the service panel on the right of his own breastplate and ran out the cable. Jarrat knew what he was doing, and turned to give him access to the jacks. Stone held his breath as they connected, until his helmet display told him he had established a feed. The power drain registered at once, putting his own suit in the red zone.

“Kevin? Kevin!” He heard the rasp of Jarrat’s breathing over the comm. “Kevin, can you talk?”

“Course I can bloody talk,” Jarrat said hoarsely. “I can also hear the loop! Get us a pickup, Stoney, fast. Don’t worry about me. I’ve got my pressurized reserve, even when the power’s flattened.”

“You’re freezing,” Stone muttered.

“Tell me about it.” Jarrat forced his way up to his knees and propped himself against Stone’s shoulder. “I’m also shocky as hell. Ribs.”

“And shoulder,” Stone added. His left arm went around Jarrat to hold him upright, and he shunted more power into the other suit. “Crank your heaters.”

“You’ll flatten right alongside me,” Jarrat warned. “You can’t power both suits, much as I wish you could, not in this cold.”

"I've got at least sixty minutes' power and air for us both," Stone argued. "Barring accidents."

"Optimistic, aren't you? Just shut up, now, and turn up your heat," Stone told him with rough affection. He clicked over to high band. "Raven Leader to ops room! 7.1 to carrier."

Gable's voice was a bellow into the loop. "Jesus bloody damn Christ, where the sweet *fuck* are you guys?"

"Locate on this signal." Stone's voice was hoarse. "Get us a pickup."

"What is your situation?" Gable demanded.

"Crappy," Stone informed him, "but we're alive, and we've immobilized the Aphelion bolters. They're not going anywhere in a hurry."

"Can you hang out there?" Gable asked distracted.

"For how long?" Stone glanced at his power levels. "We're not in great shape, Curt. Thirty minutes, and we'll be starting to push our luck."

"Goddamn." Gable paused. "Stay right where you are, I'll get Red Raven to pick up you. They'll be with you in ten. They're standing by Sequoia, with Green, in case any other syndicate smart-asses get ideas ... there's been a couple, but we locked 'em down fast."

"Where's the carrier?" Jarrat rasped.

"We're across the system, out by the Trojans. Hold. Red Raven, you're pulling out of Sequoia. Locate on Raven Leaders and retrieve. Acknowledge." The pilot acknowledged at once, and Gable was back. "Like I said, we're out in the Trojans. Gold Raven took one hell of a beating. Two dead, four injured. Blue Raven caught 'em up and they pounded 55187. We took it under tow, and we've got Gold back aboard. She's depressurized, the medics are working in hardsuits."

"Damn," Stone breathed. "I'm wishing we'd just let it go."

"Don't doublethink it," Gable said sharply. "You and Jarrat must be psychic, you called it dead right, she was going out loaded. A bunch of Blue Ravens got aboard just before you called in. She's carrying enough weapons to fight a small war, and enough Buran to finance one, not to mention the raw materials for manufacturing enough Angel to keep a major colony permanently out of its gourd. Friedman and Voigt have been cussing about a pocket-sized Angel problem on their turf, and my guess is, the shit was coming out of the Hellas Lode, south Mars, where 55187 was parked." He paused for several seconds and changed tack. "Red Raven are set to swing around Callisto, and I'm up to my eyeballs in medics, engineers and Tac emergency services. Can you hold your position for ten minutes?"

"Can do," Stone told him. "Raven Leader to Red Raven. Prep the Infirmary, and standby to take on prisoners."

The Red copilot, Stroman Li, was on the air at once with the crispness of a Starfleet carrier air group coordinator, which he had been for eight years. "Infirmary is already online, Cap. Can you estimate how many prisoners?"

Stone cleared his throat and looked at his gauges. "Could be eight, and put at least that many troops on the ice. These bastards are well armed, and

they've holed themselves up in an installation. Looks like a minehead."

"A mine?" Li echoed. "Christ, Cap, we could be digging 'em out of there for a month!"

It was Jarrat who mustered the breath and strength to say, "Relax, Stro, they can't get air and heat to any more than a fraction of it. The mine'll be two hundred below, and vacuum."

"Copy *that*, thank gods," Li responded. "Sergeant Rhodes is plugged into the loop. Call it done."

"How long till you —" Stone began, but the rest of the question was punched out of him along with his breath.

The outcrop of ice boulders seemed to explode around them, and he spun, helmet over boots. The power feed ripped way, cutting comm between them and returning Jarrat to the five minutes of pressurized air. Stone rolled onto his back and pinpointed Jarrat before he swung the Gattling over into the laser-bright beams of his floods.

A vehicle had nosed out of the blockhouse and was accelerating away behind the pall of ice fog. He saw at once, it was too small to carry more than two men, and it was not pressurized. Two armored figures were in a semi-open cab, and both of them were armed. The armor was heavy, bulky, the kind of suits worn by civilian engineers half a century before. The vehicle was as old as the armor, a runabout riding on eight massive tires rather than repulsion.

"Cap Stone! Cap Stone!" Li was shouting.

And Gable's voice, from far across the system: "Stoney, what the hell goes on? Stoney!"

"They're taking their best shot," Stone panted as he ranged the cannon and triggered. "Two shooters, found themselves a runabout and some old armor ... grenades. They can hurt us."

He dropped the Gattling into line as the runabout swung broadside to him, and ripped fifty rounds into the tires. Two shredded, but the runabout kept moving and Stone dove flat on the ice as another grenade spat out of the wide, gaping launcher. Ice exploded to his right, and he swore as twenty-kilo chunks pelted his armor. He might have shouted Jarrat's name, but Kevin would never have heard him. Instead, he reached out through the bond and touched him as surely as if he had set hands on him.

Jarrat was thirty meters away, curled on his right side in a patch of dense shadows, catching his breath, willing pain to subside and let him breathe, think. The Colt was in his left hand, but his right arm was close to useless. With the power out, even under Callisto's light gravity he massed sixty kilos in the armor, and as Stone touched him, he felt Jarrat hit the quick-release clamps on his right forearm to drop the rotary.

Then he was hunting, dogged, driven by fury, and Stone turned his attention back to the runabout. Its driving lights were on highbeam, blindingly bright, but the visor compensated, leaving him the perfect target as the vehicle bore down on him. His rotary ripped across it, killing the lights on one

pass, and once again the visor compensated, a split second before he was diving on repulsion.

"Grenade!" he yelled, though Jarrat could not hear. A storm of ice and shrapnel hailed down on him, and before he came to rest, he reached out to find Jarrat. There he was — scrambling back to his knees with his right arm held tight against his side and his left arm outstretched. Ribs and shoulder had fused into one white-hot wall of agony, and only fury kept Jarrat moving. Stone felt the multiple kicks, jolts through his left wrist, elbow, shoulder, as the Colt fired. Jarrat had configured it to cycle four per second, and held down the trigger.

Small arms had been his specialty since his first tour with the Army. He was not naturally left handed, but he had deliberately rewired his brain. Many times Stone had seen him work this way. Fifty caliber was not heavy enough to punch through the old armor, and Stone knew he was not targeting the shooters. He was targeting the vehicle itself, and in twelve rounds, three interminable seconds, he had found both its front tires and the control console. The runabout slewed to a stop, with only one tire left to hold it up on its right side. Its electronics were fried, its mobility finished.

Bulky, clumsy, slow, the shooters clambered out. One held a heavy assault rifle, Stone could not tell what type. The other had the grenade launcher. He had already reloaded it, and wrestled it over his shoulder as Stone watched. Even the Gatling was barely enough to stop the engineers' armor, but like Jarrat, Stone picked another target.

He held down the rotary's trigger and scythed across both figures, plucking the rifle out of one's hand and flinging it away, and then hammering the launcher clean out of the other's grasp. The tube crumpled under the punishment, and the shooter sprawled backward in the silver-gray dust. Stone took a breath and bounded on repulsion, one vast, diving stride that put him right beside the man.

The muzzle of the rotary cannon nudged into his visor, which was the weakest point of any civilian suit, of any era. The other shooter went down, kneeling on the ice, holding his hands wide of his body in an obvious gesture. Stone's voice was a rasp in his own ears as the comm clicked over onto wideband. "Can you hear me?" he said to the shooters, but neither responded. "Red Raven!"

Li was there at once. "Three minutes, Cap."

"We don't have three minutes," Stone said harshly as Jarrat joined him. "Make it fast."

"Call it two," Li said tersely. "Hang tight."

The Colt in Jarrat's left hand was aimed on the visor of the other shooter, and Stone had lifted one boot onto his man's chestplate. The tableau froze in place, and now they were waiting. Ahead of them, not a hundred meters away, was the blockhouse of the minehead installation, and beyond it was the Yamazake Mercury, with its tail assembly crippled.

Slowly, very carefully, Stone turned toward Jarrat and rested their

helmets together to transmit sound via the surfaces. He raised his voice to a shout to get anything through at all. "How's your air?"

"Reading zero," Jarrat said baldly. "Red Raven?"

"Two minutes," Stone shouted. "Jack into my air!"

"No." Jarrat's voice was distorted, metallic. "Give these bastards a chance and they'll jump us. I'm *done*, Stoney, understand?" As he spoke, he sagged to his knees and the tenuous verbal communication between them broke.

Stone opened the empathic link wide, felt the cold sweat on his face and the burn of his lungs. "Red Raven!"

"Jumpers will be with you in 90, Cap," Li said in a raw tone.

"Copy." Stone looked away toward the blockhouse.

Were there only two suits left in there when the facility shut down, and one vehicle? Many years ago, it was standard procedure to leave an old vehicle with viable power, a suit, an O₂ supply, water, a med kit, comm gear. The abandoned facility became a survival hutch. In this harsh environment, anyone could be caught short, at any time.

A second vehicle, a third suit, would change the equation, and Stone was still asking himself what had brought the Mercury here. He could only guess it was to make a rendezvous with another ship, more powerful, better equipped to make the haul out to Itzhak Loyola, and join 55187 in the icy confusion of the Oort.

He panned his helmet up and around, scanning to the full extent of his range, looking for a ship, but he saw only one, and it was Red Raven. The gunship was coming in fast from the northeast, out of the looming face of Jupiter, ugly and brutal. It was the most beautiful thing he could have wished to see.

"See them?" He said to Jarrat, though Kevin could not hear. His lungs had begun to spasm, his head was swimming. "Red Raven," Stone called, "you tracking anything inbound?"

"Nothing," Li told him. "Bet your pension they saw us from way out and bugged off. Jumpers are in the bay. Standby."

"Make it damned fast," Stone barked as his lungs began to spasm in reaction to Jarrat's, "we're on borrowed time. Medics, grab 9.4, fast as you can get down here."

Both the shooters had seen the gunship coming in. They knew by now, their pickup had pulled out and gone, and their bid for escape was over. The syndicate runners who had holed up in the blockhouse, and anyone left aboard the Mercury, would have watched the whole performance on instruments. Their best chance now was to surrender and strike a deal via the services of uptown Angel lawyers like Griffith Shand-Pike himself. Like so many other syndicate survivors, they would be eager to trade intel for reduced sentences, to be served in comparative comfort, and fresh identities when their release dates came up.

The legal wrangles were not Stone's concern. NARC Central would snatch up the baton, and the case would make headlines as far away as

Aurora. Cassius Brand would gloat over a victory he considered his own, at least in part, and he would be right to claim the victory.

As Stone watched, fifteen mirror-black Red Ravens jumped into the fog of ice dust which was gradually settling in the light gravity. He let himself relax and turned his back on the shooters. He focused completely on his partner now, and had stooped toward him as Jarrat slithered down into blackout and sprawled at Stone's feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He was still asleep, and Stone moved quietly from bathroom to AutoChef to work station. Three cracked ribs, a chipped bone in his shoulder, several frostbitten toes and countless contusions had been repaired in the Infirmary, before Harry Del laid his hands on Jarrat's skull. He delved into the regions of his brain where oxygen starvation had killed cells by the millions. New cells were replicating there, but it took the skills of the Rethan mutoid to weave them into a network that was instantly accessible. Memories, skills, faculties, depended on the neural network, and it was almost too delicate. Stone was often appalled at the risks they accepted, the damage which accumulated. Old spacers could be as punch-drunk as overworked prizefighters. The trick, Stone thought as he swiveled a chair in to the CRT, was to know when to quit. Now, Jarrat needed downtime, rest, more than anything, and Stone was determined he was going to get it.

The damage and casualty reports made bleak reading. The Gold Raven gunship had sustained heavy damage. The flight deck was gone, the comm arrays had been torn off, one hangar was smashed, the jump bay was crushed, and the hull had been breached in four places. Budweisser swore she would fix, but she would be 'on the ramps' for several weeks. The time frame for repairs suited Stone. The *Athena* was back at the NARC dock, and for the moment she, like her command crew, was waiting for reassignment.

The Basilisk syndicate would almost certainly have been her next task, but Stone had heard nothing of it in the two days since they redocked. Petrov was still in Chicago, liaising with NARC brass who were alternately furious that their authority had been disregarded, and delighted that a syndicate had been busted in their own backyard. According to Gene Cantrell, the feeling which drove their opinion of Jarrat, Stone and Cantrell himself depended on who you spoke to, and when. General Gaunt was hamstrung, and he knew it. There was a syndicate rising from its own ashes, right under his nose. There

was another Aphelion, arming and supplying itself for business either in the homeworlds or the colonies. Tactical was muzzled at the political level, and if NARC stood by and did nothing, the brass would have to admit that as a department they were equally muzzled.

The admission would sting a man like Gaunt. He would never make it, and he had only one other choice. The *Athena's* commanders might be censured for not going through channels and requesting authorization for the action, but their work could not be criticized; and the arguments Cantrell and Petrov were already making against the censure were bulletproof. It often happened that time and politics were ranged against NARC, which was the reason the charter granted command rank officers high levels of autonomy. If Gaunt was going to object to the Aphelion bust, he could only complain that it had taken place in the homeworlds. And, tradition aside, no clause anywhere in the NARC charter prohibited the carrier from operating there.

Several messages from Cantrell and Petrov were waiting for Stone, and he paged through them without disturbing Jarrat. Certain NARC officers who felt themselves insulted had demanded a formal inquiry into the action, but Tactical dossiers from both Friedman and Voigt were so strongly in support of it, Gaunt had already dismissed the call for an inquiry. Aphelion was a reality, and Tactical on two worlds was delighted.

No civilian property had been damaged in the Jupiter system, and no civilian casualties were sustained. Two Gold Ravens had perished, including the gunship pilot, Karoda, and two of the *Athena's* three command officers had been injured. Friedman and Voigt counted the operation a resounding success and NARC was unlikely to contradict them. Stone felt the loss of the Gold Ravens keenly, but the descant troops themselves were stoic. They regarded themselves as professional soldiers, and nowhere was it written that soldiers would not die.

A message from Harry popped up as Stone was looking over the manifest from Commercial 55187. The legal documentation covering Marcus Brand was kosher. Owing Harry more favors than he would admit, Leo Michiko had read the agreement in detail, and NARC had met every particular specified by Harry Del and Cassius Brand. If Marcus woke, Brand would be notified. If he died, he would be repatriated for cremation at home; and he certainly would not be euthanased in two years, as per homeworlds medical law. Harry had signed the physical papers, they were already aboard a courier, bound for Chicago, and Marcus would be transferred before the *Athena* shipped out. Stone was satisfied, and deliberately closed the Marcus Brand file.

Commercial 55187 was another question. The Blue Ravens had taken inventory of her load, and it was shocking. Her holds were heavy with weapons, ammunition, explosives, bullion, drugs, and the raw materials for the manufacture of Angel. Colonels Voigt and Friedman were horrified, and had been complaining bitterly, albeit in private, about the restrictions of their powers. Like NARC, they had their political opponents. Like NARC, their

masters were civilian. Political. Stone was not surprised when the names of Sorenson and Steinberg were mentioned.

Those names nagged at him like toothache, and he could not put out of his mind the fact that an uptown Angel lawyer's financial records were sealed, syndicate dealers were walking free, and the chain of political connection was tangible, all too easy to follow. The probability of a civilian-level security leak in Central itself was numbing. Jimmy Lo's information from Chryse's citybottom only strengthened Stone's certainty that Steinberg was their weak link. Still, the situation was no longer Stone's business. Central had taken custody of the eight Aphelion people who had fled aboard the Mercury, plus another dozen who had wreaked mayhem on Sequoia during the action. A few had slithered through, but the NARC holding cells were busy and the intel was already flowing. Some of the prisoners were naming influential names. Jarrat and Stone had not been made privy to them; their part of the Aphelion dossier was complete.

Reassignment was a matter of time, Stone was sure, and if he told the truth, he was grateful for the break. He and Jarrat needed it, and for the next four days their time was their own. Colonel Bill Dupre was on the *Cygnus-Indiana*, the next clipper due to cruise the homeworlds. He and Cantrell would negotiate with Central, officially close the Aphelion files. Stone had no doubt the *Athena* would be reassigned, and himself and Jarrat with her. A handful of the NARC senior officers might have been furious to have their authority undermined, but Stone felt a rich sense of pride and satisfaction in the operation.

He had intuitions about where the carrier would head when she shipped out of the homeworlds, but only Dupre could confirm them. It would either be Basilisk, he thought, or he and Jarrat would be headed back to Rethan. Death's Head was reviving, and Stone was as sour on the subject as Cantrell had been about Aphelion. If they were not sent back to Rethan, he and Jarrat would request the assignment — and they had said as much to Harry Del.

The healer was still working aboard, using Reardon's labs and the carrier's idling mainframes to churn through a good deal of his research while he waited for Bill Dupre. If the quadrant commander did settle accounts with Central, and *did* assign the carrier to Rethan, Harry would stay aboard for the ride home. He growled about saving the price of a clipper ticket, but Stone was sure he wanted the *Athena*'s labs and computers for as long as he could get them. Stone was happy to accommodate him.

A rustling of sheets behind him announced Jarrat's waking, and he turned his back on the CRT. Kevin was looking better. The residual aches were easier, the welded bones had settled in well. Like Stone, he was no stranger to reconstruction, and he knew how to rest, be patient, let his own body and Reardon's nano augmentation do their job.

"Hi." Stone sat on the side of the bed and propped his weight on both palms, on either side of him. "How're you doing?"

"I'm good," Jarrat told him. "How long did I sleep?"

"Only an hour. I tried not to wake you." Stone leaned down and kissed his forehead, his cheek, the bridge of his nose.

"You didn't." Jarrat's arms went around him. "I was dreaming."

"I know. I felt it." Stone slid down onto the bed beside him. "Were you swimming? That's how it felt. And there was someone there, you were talking, maybe arguing."

"It was Harry," Jarrat said ruefully. "He'd done more work on me, done something to my lungs. I could breathe underwater, and I said, great, but can Stoney breathe water?"

Stone laughed softly. "Could I?"

"I don't know. I woke up." Jarrat yawned and stretched, and gave a catlike purr as Stone stroked him through the sheet. "You hungry?"

"Mm," Stone rumbled. "But not for food."

Slate-gray eyes looked up at him, warm and dark. "We'll miss the shuttle."

"No, we won't." Stone's hand molded about the velvet-soft bulk at his groin and began to knead. "There's plenty of time for the shuttle." The velvet was not so soft now. "We also have to swing by Kip's territory on the way out and sign the releases for Marcus. Harry signed off on him, they'll transport tomorrow ... and we won't be here." The softness had more of a velvet over steel quality now, and Stone teased down the sheet. "There's time."

"If there's time," Jarrat murmured, "why are you still dressed?"

"Excellent question," Stone agreed. "You want to do something about it?"

The territory was long-familiar, the hands on him light, sensitive, and so well known, they might have been his own. Stone moved around to make it easy for him, mindful of the new welds in his bones, and the soft tissue trauma which had just been healed. He had not set a lover's hands on Jarrat since the night they spent in Lassiter, and he was cautious, now, until Jarrat laughed in his face and dumped him onto the bed.

"Give it a rest, Stoney, I'm fine," he chided. "I also know what you want."

"You do?" Stone felt a flush of heat in his cheeks. "Of course you do."

The weight on him was welcome. Jarrat's hands were splayed over his breast, teasing both his nipples, while he slithered down the length of Stone's body. Stone was not even breathing as the mouth he loved closed about him, and coherent thoughts flew away like little birds. The shields were forgotten, the bond between them was filled with the resonance of lust and love, a melange of blue and green — his own sensations and Kevin's. Stone surrendered to it, let Jarrat fly him like a kite in the wind, until he was on the edge. He felt the bulk and heat on Jarrat's tongue, in his throat, as surely as if it were himself lying across Kevin's legs, and they both felt the edge coming closer.

Jarrat lifted his head away with a groan and was still, catching his breath while Stone simmered down. Without a word, he snaked out an arm and rummaged in the drawer by the bed. The gel was pale blue, glycerin sweet, and cold. Stone hissed as it slicked him from root to crown, and then Jarrat

knelt back and looked down at him. He was beautiful, Stone decided, lean and honey brown, his shaft up and hard with desire, his hair tangled and his eyes dark with invitation.

"Where do you want me?" Jarrat asked, low and husky.

And Stone put him on his back, where the stress on the ribs and shoulder would be minimal. Jarrat knew what he had done, and smiled up at him as he hooked his legs around Stone's waist and wriggled to comfort. He closed his eyes and opened himself, body and empathic bond.

Sometimes it seemed to Stone that the line between them, where one body and mind ended and the other began, blurred into nothing. Jarrat's emotions were in his mind, and his own body was overwhelmed by the phantom sensations of possession, the push and pull of himself deep inside Kevin. He heard himself cry out, but it was Jarrat's reaction, as his hands dug into the muscles of Stone's back like talons, urging him.

A long time later, a chime from the work station roused them and Stone opened one eye to look at the time. "If we want to miss the downshuttle, this is the way to do it." He rolled up, dropped a kiss in the middle of Jarrat's chest, and climbed over him to get to his feet. "Shower, and then we dress to kill and get out of here."

They shared the water, but Jarrat lingered under the hot stream, which told Stone he *was* aching, no matter what he claimed. The repairs were sound, but the human body was not a mechanism. He let Jarrat soak as long as he dared, while he dressed in black slacks, dark blue shirt, and gave his reflection a frown.

"Admiring yourself?" Jarrat stepped out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his hips, his skin still running with water.

"What *do* you wear to a launch?" Stone wondered, and gave Jarrat a heavy-eyed look of appraisal. "Now, the costume you have on..."

Jarrat slipped off the towel and threw it at him. Moments later he was in the next cabin, going through his closet. Stone dropped the towel into the chute and hunted for his boots. "The shuttle leaves in thirty minutes!"

"We'll be there," Jarrat assured him. "All we have to do is sign the release to transport Marcus Brand, and we're on downtime."

"Hustle," Stone warned. "I don't want to miss this."

"I *am* hustling ... and it was your idea to get laid," Jarrat observed.

"Complaining?" Stone leaned on the bulkhead by the open door to watch him dress in white slacks, a black cotton shirt, a charcoal gray jacket.

"Only if we miss the shuttle." Jarrat gave him a wink and sat down to put on his boots.

The Infirmary was quiet, with most of the lights off and only one bed occupied. Kip Reardon's office was deserted, but voices issued from the annex at the opposite end of the compartment from the wide, empty triage area. They followed the sound, catching the end of a conversation, and Stone felt Jarrat's surprise clearly.

"I'm not going back to Aurora," Leo Michiko was saying. "I have a

number of favors to call in, and I'm calling them. I'm going to Avalon."

"Avalon?" Harry Del echoed. "Why not home, to Aurora?"

"His face is too well known there," Jarrat said as they came around into the small bay where Marcus Brand lay, still oblivious to the cosmos, in a transport gurney.

The repulsion was off, it was standing on its struts, but its monitors were already coupled up and he could be moved at any time. Reardon would not be aboard when the NARC medical crew came for him, and since Harry had signed the documents, he was no longer legally entitled to deal with Marcus Brand as a physician, except in dire emergency.

"So, what's in the city of Elysium to attract you?" Harry asked of Michiko.

"A big population in an engineering town, with volatile politics," Michiko said without hesitation. "I can vanish into the crowd, and with a modicum of capitalization, I can start again —"

"In a place," Stone added, "where the Tactical commander is an old, old friend of mine, and will keep him under surveillance." Michiko glared at him, but Stone only shrugged. "You *were* Scorpio, Leo. You're being allowed to wriggle off the hook, but you sure as hell aren't going to slither your way back into any kind of citybottom dirty money."

"It's a fair deal," Michiko allowed. "I regard it as probation. Your Colonel Vic Duggan runs a tight ship in Elysium. After the Equinox bust, our routes into and out of the Zeus system were shut down, and stayed shut down." He made a negative gesture, banishing the memories. "That part of my life is over. Scorpio was mostly Pietro Denehy, though I don't deny my interest in it. I've paid the price, Stone. Leo Michiko is dead and buried."

"He's also about to be reborn," Jarrat added. "Where's this 'modicum of capitalization' coming from? Your assets were frozen, on Aurora and Mars."

Michiko's brows arched at him. "Let's assume for a moment I have assets you people never knew existed, and it will be relatively easy to access these hypothetical accounts from a terminal in Elysium. I'll expect you people to get me there, since you're in my debt, and Captain Cantrell and Colonel Dupre decided, months ago, to honor Colonel Janssen's amnesty. I've delivered my side of the bargain. I'm waiting, now, for my fresh identity."

"Nail Bill Dupre," Stone suggested. "He gets insystem in three days."

"I know, and I intend to." Michiko was frowning at Marcus Brand. "For what it's worth, I deplore what happened to the boy. He was a fool in many ways, but every man has the right to make one mistake. Two, if he's lucky enough to get away with the second. Marc had no luck at all." He glanced darkly at Jarrat and Stone. "It was Denehy who gave the termination order, even if he didn't administer the drug himself. Do you believe me?"

"Harry?" Jarrat prompted. "Is he lying?"

The healer was still frowning at Marcus, but he could hardly fail to hear Michiko. "Not ... quite," he decided. "He had something to do with it, but he's also telling something of the truth. He didn't give the order to murder Marcus, and he didn't drug him."

"Empath," Michiko said with acid humor. "Of course I had 'something to do with it!' What Marcus knew would have gotten me executed on Avalon. I'd have made him vanish. He'd have woken up a complete amnesiac, in a colony on the other side of the frontier ... but he'd have had his life." He stirred. "Forgive me, this whole thing depresses me and I have things to do."

"Things?" Stone echoed. "How busy can a dead man be?"

The remark won him an odd look. "A man who is about to be reborn has a great deal to do, Stone. You'll meet me again soon enough."

"In engineering?" Jarrat wondered.

But Michiko shook his head. "In Elysium politics. Pro-Angel. Let the little imbeciles have all they want. The faster they rot their brains and buy their way to the crematorium, the better. NARC can soon be dismantled and your trillion-credit annual appropriation can be invested in free education, zero-percent business loans — we can breed out the users, the losers, in a single generation. In twenty years, you'd have a next generation that was brilliant, wealthy, and Angel will be gone. *If*," he finished darkly, "you legalize the shit and get rid of NARC."

"You're still harping on that?" Stone demanded.

"Harping?" Michiko's chin lifted. "You prefer the Sorenson bill? Cut off the license supply, let the poor little victims, die sooner rather than later?"

Stone was not quite sure if Michiko was serious or not, but Jarrat was swiftly growing annoyed. He slung one arm over his partner's shoulders. "I *prefer*," he told Michiko, "to bust the syndicates and keep the colonies clean until Harry Del works his magic. There's a blocker out there, and he'll have it sooner that you think." He steered Jarrat away to Kip Reardon's office. "We'll sign the release for Marcus, Harry. Are you coming groundside? It'll be quite a party, and you're welcome."

"Me?" Harry looked down at his baggy shorts, loud shirt and sandals. "They wouldn't let me in. And no, I have no intention of changing. Seriously, Kevin ... I'm wasn't comfortable on Earth, even in the NARC building where I was known and halfway respected. I'll watch the vids."

"We'll see you later, Harry," Jarrat told him. "We'll do dinner at the High Five ... if they'll let you in with the bare feet." He gave Harry a wink, and followed Stone to Kip Reardon's office.

It was quiet, with most of the screens dark. Reardon was dressed for the event, in a dark blue suit that gave him a certain elegance. He wore the NARC insignia and the *Athena's* unit badge on the left lapel. The documents were waiting for Jarrat and Stone, and the signatures were a mere formality.

"I'm taking the shuttle back to Lassiter after the party," Reardon said as he closed the files and uploaded them to Central. "You're welcome to come along. Or are you headed back to Spain?"

"Perhaps. We haven't made plans. Every time we do, they get upturned." Stone looked at his chrono and stirred. "They'll be calling the shuttle in ten minutes. You ready to shove off?"

Reardon swung an overnight bag off the end of the workspace. "The

Gold Raven casualties were transported to Central for reconstruction, and the two dead are being sent home, one to New Zealand, the other to Chryse. Marcus is prepped for transport, and I finished the report an hour ago.”

The elevator opened as he spoke, and from the back of it Evelyn Lang raised a hand in greeting. She was meeting the downshuttle too. The blue and silver-gray NARC dress uniform looked good on her, and the unit badge of Gold Raven was bright on her left lapel. With Reynolds back aboard, Lang had been the standby ‘heavy’ pilot, and with Ray Karoda returning to Auckland in cryogen, Gold Raven was automatically her assignment.

“First and last call for downshuttle 14 to Kure,” Curt Gable said from the ops room, where he was monitoring the carrier’s air traffic. “Departure in ten, and for those of you going to the event ... this is it. Miss this one, and you’re watching vids.”

His voice had a lilt of self-satisfaction which made Stone chuckle. “Now, he’s pleased with himself. And why wouldn’t he be?”

“Promoted to XO and staying on his own ship?” Lang gave Stone a crooked grin. “Curt’s a happy boy.”

“Not as happy as Captain Petrov,” Jarrat observed philosophically. “Damn, I’ll have to get used to saying that. *Captain Petrov*.”

“Gene’ll keep him in line,” Stone speculated. “He won’t take too much of Mischa’s crap.”

The elevator opened onto the docking ring opposite the shuttle platform. A crowd milled about and the shuttle was already boarding. Stone saw Jon Semler, Bill Parish and several Blue Ravens, but Cronin and Ramos were not among them. They had witnessed this spectacle more than once, and had taken the opportunity to return to the border country where Arizona became California. Cronin had no family, but Joe Ramos — half Mexican and one quarter Apache — had taken an Army enlistment fifteen years before, to escape from a vast clan.

The downshuttle undocked with a familiar chime through the airframe. From the window at his elbow, Stone watched the blue-green surface of the Earth expand to fill the sky as the aircraft slid back into the atmosphere. Repulsion made the flight so smooth, Jarrat slept again, and Stone let him. Europe and Asia were shrouded in cloud, but he caught a glimpse of Siberia and whispered to Reardon that the summer ice had retreated north since the last time he had seen it.

The Pacific Ocean commanded the horizon, but the shuttle was braking down, spiraling in toward Japan, where the air became a orderly confusion of traffic through which the NARC pilot dropped like a rock. He was headed for the exclusion zone around the yards, a no-fly area, drone-patrolled and secure. In the center of the zone was Kure, on the inland sea, the biggest groundside construction yard on the planet, where vessels the size of the carriers and tenders were built from keel to double hull. They launched from Kure and were finished, pressurized, fitted and tested in the Mitsubishi orbital yards, at geostationary right overhead.

"We're almost down ... Kevin." Stone shook his arm and Jarrat blinked awake. "Clear skies. It's the perfect evening for a launch."

The air was heavy with humidity and the sea wind tugged at the pennants, fluttering them as if the yards were hosting a carnival. The sun was low, the sky cloudless. Music wafted from the viddrones flitting just overhead, and three massive displays offered images of the new hull. It was the first carrier launch Stone had attended, though he had seen many in the news vids. GlobalNet had thronged to this one, since there was an operational carrier insystem and NARC was still headlining after the Aphelion action.

Without fanfare, the shuttle touched down at the crew platform. Politicians, celebrities and visiting nobility were enjoying the spotlight, and Stone was pleased to leave it to them. He and Jarrat, Reardon, Lang and Semler debarked unnoticed. They followed the rope barricades, jetting viddrones and fluttering bunting to the grandstand.

One side of the construction yard had been cleared for the event. Big, ugly industrial drones were drowsing, only semi-aware, behind the stands which had been sky-cranned in the previous day. A marquee was serving champagne, sushi and chicken, and after the swift sunset and dusk of the tropics, the fireworks would erupt like an air battle over the sea. Mitsubishi Kure came alive like a carnival at launches. The atmosphere was festive, the party had already begun and would continue till dawn.

Framed on the screens, the *Huntress* was steel blue, hulking, just under a kilometer in length even before the drive module was mounted over the stern. The hull lay in a sled powered by forty Arago units, and she already shimmered with heat. The repulsion had been tested, no mistakes were permitted before the GlobalNet viddrones.

"Take a seat, I'll bring you a champagne," Stone offered as they elbowed to the shade side of the grandstand.

Jarrat gave him an exasperated look. "Stoney, I'm fine. The welds are good, I'm not even aching. You don't have to mollycoddle me."

"Maybe I like having the chance to spoil you, once in a while." Stone gestured at the seats. "At least stake out a couple of good places while I get something to drink. We'll have a clear view from here."

"I can do that." Jarrat parked himself in a seat and stretched out his legs. "I'd prefer a beer, if they have it."

"So would I, but we'll probably have to settle for champagne." Stone touched his cheek, a fleeting caress which Jarrat appreciated. Affection flooded the bond, and then Stone elbowed his way toward the marquee.

The view from the grandstand to the repulsion cradle where the NARC-*Huntress* lay was uninterrupted. As twilight gathered floodlights would bathe the whole hull, and Stone was impressed. He knew what Gene Cantrell must be feeling, and when he looked for Cantrell, he found him on the side of the podium with Petrov, talking to celebrities. The *Huntress* was their ship, and they were singled out to be feted, though GlobalNet would rather have turned their lenses on Jarrat and Stone. NARC security kept them away, for which

Stone was grateful, though he was conscious of being imaged from a distance. Those images, like the frames of Cantrell and Petrov, would be vetted by the department before they were screened. The last thing NARC wanted was to have its captains recognized on the colonial streets. Deep cover assignments were already dangerous.

A steward had poured two tall flutes when the public address growled into life. "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Kure, and welcome also to an event, a spectacle, and a festival. The launch of a supercarrier is always a time for celebration, and this year both the Company and the City have made NARC welcome indeed. Later in the evening you'll have ringside seats at the biggest display of airborne pyrotechnics ever staged in the homeworlds. There will be live music through the night, six dance troupes from across the world, from London to Shanghai itself, and for many of us the evening's highlight will be the solo performance by Michael Chan of *The Barbarian*. Ladies and gentlemen, please take your places and welcome Charles Steinberg, the Senator for Shanghai-Hangzhou."

"My gods, they're going to make speeches," Jarrat groaned as Stone handed him the flute.

"Let them kill an hour while the sun sets — the pyrotechnics'll look better," Stone said with deliberate pragmatism. He dropped into the seat beside Jarrat's and rested one hand on his knee. "No law says you have to listen. So where are we going after this? Gene and Mischa will be recruiting and training while the carrier's finished, and until Dupre settles with Central, we're free. I don't want to waste it."

"I also don't want to spend it on Earth, at least not in a city," Jarrat said darkly. "The planet is as beautiful as Darwin's, but a city's a city. They're all the same. And the people here give me weird looks —"

"They fancy you," Stone informed him.

"I know they do. I also hear them muttering between themselves about what they'd like to do to every orifice I possess," Jarrat said tartly, "and me being a 'cloney-yokel,' well, I'd enjoy the hell out of it, wouldn't I?"

"They're worm-eaters," Stone reasoned. "They don't know any better. Ignore them, they'll go away."

Jarrat seemed less certain. "If you want to stay on Earth, we can just get the hell out of the city. I'd enjoy flying sailplanes over the Alps, and there's some hole-in-the-wall restaurants in places too small to show up on a map." He tried the champagne. "No beer?"

"No beer." Stone was determined not to listen to Steinberg, nor to any of the politicians who followed him to the podium.

A shape blocked the view for a moment and Stone looked up, about to protest, until he recognized the face. "How are you, Scott?" he asked as Auel dropped into the seat beside him.

"Fine, considering," Scott Auel allowed. He was cradling a flute of champagne, looking deliberately elegant in black slacks and jacket. "Kevin, how're you doing, man? I heard you were injured."

"Mended." Jarrat worked his shoulder around. "Broken ribs. You know how it goes. Cruz isn't here?"

"No." Auel shrugged. "She's ... high as a kite. Needs to be."

"I know how *that* goes, too," Jarrat said bitterly. "They're not after Harry anymore. He's headed home to Rethan, probably on the *Athena*. What about you and Cruz?"

But Auel could only shrug. "Nobody's sure, and I'm getting the mushroom treatment. I live in the dark on a constant diet of bullshit." He raised the flute in a salute to the NARC emblems on the wind-tossed flags by the grandstand. "They can't keep me hanging around much longer, and they know it. The truth is, it should have been me partnering up with Gene, that should have been my ship you're looking at." Then he set aside his grievances with a deliberate effort. "What the hell, it'll all work itself out, right? Janine is ruined, that much is sure. She's holding on for a clipper ride out to Rethan in six months or so, and she's giving R&D hell. They're trying to talk her into staying put and taking on another partner, after I've gone."

"Another partner?" Jarrat was surprised.

Auel looked uncomfortable. "Bear in mind, they don't tell me squat. But you hear things. And I *heard* they've got agents on Rethan, looking for another mutoid, somebody like Harry, same skills but a lot less scruples."

"Well, damn," Stone said bleakly. "Harry saw this coming. If they offer enough incentive, they'll find one."

"They will," Auel agreed. "No doubt about it. But I won't be involved, and if Janine's got the sense she was born with ... and in her case, that's far from certain ... she won't either."

They were silent for a long time, listening to part of a speech from a local city dignitary, before Jarrat asked, "So you're waiting for assignment?"

"Yeah. There's a ride coming available in a month or two. I could go right back to the *Avenger*, when Shane Franco rotates to Central. He's done in the field, and he admits it. He had both knees reconstructed after his last assignment and they're giving him hell. It's a healer like Harry he needs, but they're offering him prosthetics, and the idiot'll take them. He has a problem with empaths, telepaths, whatever. Makes you wonder what he has to hide, right? Anyway, he's sitting out one last assignment on the carrier while Maggie Stride takes the deep cover job, and then they're coming back in to Quadrant, and they'll have to offer me the *Avenger*."

"You'll take it, obviously," Stone began.

"Maybe," Auel said carefully. "The truth is, Stride and me don't get along. It'd be like being partnered with bloody Petrov. She's got a temper on her, and a fast, foul mouth. Don't get me wrong, she's good, but ... way too much friction for me." He settled back to nurse his drink. "You guys are lucky. You always got along, right from the off. The empathic bond was just one more thing that worked for you. Christ, if you'd been competitors —"

He did not finish, and did not have to. Stone lifted a brow at Jarrat, and the link shimmered with amusement. Jarrat had always sworn he was born

lucky. If he had not been, he would have been on the *Lombard Explorer*.

One by one, dignitaries and celebrities droned their way through most of an hour, while the sun set in a lake of crimson and the lights came up across the pennant-dressed construction yard. The first stars were just beginning to show and the sky was turquoise when the last speech finished. Floodlights came on across the yard, bathing the *Huntress* in white light, and Stone felt the hot waft of repulsion on his face.

A celebrity he did not recognize named the ship. A champagne magnum exploded on her bow, and the heat from so many repulsion generators kicked up. Stone leaned forward, waiting to see her break loose, cast off the shackles of gravity and head up into her natural environment.

She rose like a blue whale, slow at first and then with increasing speed, twisting slowly in the turquoise evening sky. Searchlights followed her, keeping her bathed in pure, blue-white light as she drifted a little downrange and began to merge into the constellations. A security squadron launched with her, holding pace and altitude like calves around the whale. They would stand by her until she berthed at Kure High Dock, where a tech shift was already waiting to start on her interior. The drive module was coming in from Europa, the mainframes from Chryse, the weapons systems from Callisto and Marsport, the furnishings from Earth itself.

Running lights winked on, red and green, marking her position as she approached the traffic lanes, but the launch was a festival event, and traffic had been diverted for hours. At last she was a pinpoint among the stars, and on cue the fireworks erupted across the shipyard. The air was filled with noise and color, sharp with the reek of explosives.

On the podium, Gene Cantrell and Mischa Petrov were rubbing shoulders with General Gaunt, and the old man wore a satisfied look. Jay Friedman and Danni Voigt were on the guest list, but duty kept them busy in the aftermath of the action. They would be watching the vids on delay, and Bill Dupre would see them when the *Cygnus-Indiana* dropped out at Itzhak Loyola.

Stone watched the point of light that was the *Huntress* until it vanished, and then looked down at his partner. Jarrat was intent on the pyrotechnics and the bond fluoresced with quirky, unpredictable emotions.

"What?" he wondered. "I haven't become telepathic in the last half hour."

"Nothing." And then Stone mocked himself with a chuckle. "Like Scott says, we're lucky."

"He got that right." Jarrat dropped his hand on Stone's knee and gave it a squeeze. "Luck's the whole reason any of us is still here, Stoney. Don't knock it."

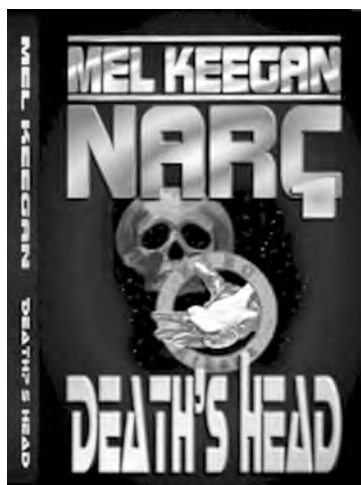
"I never do," Stone said honestly.

High overhead, the drones controlling the display swung the whole show around, changing the view angle, and he sat back to watch the sky erupt into a hundred shades of blue.

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

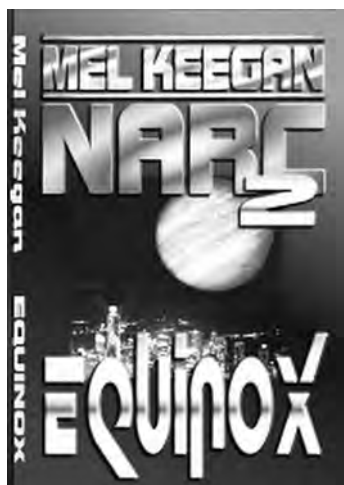
ISBN 0-9750884-5-49

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

**A super-city is at war
with itself –
and NARC is in the crossfire**

In the old colony of Aurora, the city of Thule is rife with Angel abuse, and Tactical has accumulated vast bodies of evidence on a syndicate known as *Scorpio*. Tac Colonel Janssen — last generation of an original pioneer family — has just cremated four officers who attempted to investigate the man at its head. *The time for NARC to deploy has arrived.*



Young Marcus Brand has been preserved in cryogenic suspension since early in the Angel war. Eighty years old now, Marc's father, a Senator on Aurora, is eager for Harry Del to perform his healing miracles for Marc.

As Harry applies for clearances to treat the Brand boy, Jarrat and Stone have just completed the final report on the Equinox Industries operation, and are given their new assignment: Thule's powerful Angel syndicate. *Scorpio*.

Marc Brand's cryogenic coffin must be shipped to the secure NARC labs on Darwin's World. But when it's tampered with, Marc almost does not survive in suspension long enough to reach Del's lab. Jarrat and Stone realize the truth at once. Someone has tried to murder Marc Brand ... to keep secret something he knew, decades ago? Perhaps secrets that could spell the end for Scorpio?

The investigation takes Kevin Jarrat and Jerry Stone into the hearts of Aurora's super-cities, where the street becomes a warzone ... but the seeds of rot lie far away, and in surprising directions.

NARC #3 - Scorpio
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.

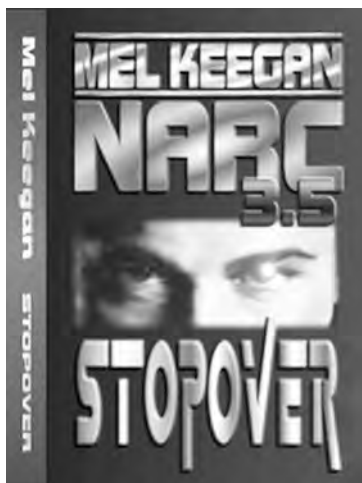
But when the clipper suffers engine trouble and must detour to the halfway station of Sheckley for repairs, the vacation dissolves into unexpected and unpredictable hazard.

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

Meet us online...

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 fic-

tion 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!

