

MEL KEEGAN

NARC
3.5



STOP OVER

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Narc #3.5
STOPOVER
Mel Keegan

DreamCraft, South Australia

STOPOVER

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DreamCraft Multimedia
Box 270, Brighton 5048, South Australia

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STOPOVER

1

In the moments before waking, the brain tried to integrate the sounds of reality into its own dreamscape, and to a point it succeeded. Jerry Stone felt weightless, floating in the cold, clear water of the Hudson River while his eyes followed an arrowhead flight of geese over the south ramparts of the Kernaghan Range, where the aspen and birch were already becoming gold with the season. He knew Jarrat was an arm's length off to his left, messing with the line which hitched the boat to a gnarled old log beneath the surface. They were naked, sun-brown after three days in this retreat, and the only thing in the boat should have been the cooler chest full of beers and char-grilled bug-tails.

The comm buzzed, and Stone cast about for it. Jarrat angled an accusing look at him — as if either of them would be guilty of bringing a comset into the precious realm of their downtime. If it was there, it would surely intrude. Stone flicked a handful of water at him in reproach, but the comm that should not have been there buzzed again.

“You know it has to be Bill Dupre,” Jarrat muttered disgustedly.

“Ignore it.” Stone reached over, caught him up and dumped him into the water, where the surface layer was warm and the bottom was icy enough to take his breath away.

"Ignore it?" Jarrat surfaced, shook the water from his eyes and raked back his hair. "You want to be skinned alive?"

"I want to be left alone," Stone argued.

"Shouldn't have brought a comset, then." Ignoring Stone's protests of innocence, Jarrat reached over into the boat and rummaged for it. He slid the clip over his ear and flicked the selector. "Jarrat. And this had better be bloody good."

The comm buzzed a third time, and the Hudson River dissolved into mist. The last Stone saw of the scene was the faint rime of 'termination dust' above the treeline on the high slopes of the Kernaghans, before reality froze, tilted, righted itself, and he gave an eloquent groan.

Jarrat's voice was muffled against the pillow. "We're on vacation. Go back to sleep."

But Stone was awake now, and worked an elbow under himself. Over Jarrat's shoulder he saw the half-dimmed screen in the corner of the cabin, a designer-framed comm relay terminal where a bare fraction of the ship's in-flight data was displayed when the CRT was not pretending to be a picture.

The *Pacifica* was still eighteen hours short of Rethan, which Stone had expected to see; but the display numbers had shifted into blue. While they slept, the clipper had quit her hyperflight envelope. The drive had powered down, she was cruising on inertia at seventy percent of lightspeed, yet to Stone's knowledge there were no ports out here, no reason to drop the ship out of hyper.

This time he saw the red glow from the comm as it buzzed. His nerve endings prickled as he reached over and punched for voice-only. "Stone."

The tingle of his nerves woke Jarrat faster than a kick in the ribs. Their empathic shields were always relaxed when they slept, and since they left the *Athena* two days before, they had not troubled to maintain them. Free time was their only opportunity for the indulgence, and it was rare indeed.

The cabin lights came up a few degrees as they moved. "Trouble?" Jarrat turned over toward Stone. The slate gray eyes were still sleep dark, but every reflex was coming online. "Here? You're kidding."

As he spoke, the comm said sharply, "Did I wake you?" Yvette McKinnen had obviously not been sleeping.

"Of course you did," Stone told her. "The clipper's out of hyper."

"You notice that?" McKinnen skipped a beat and the Paris accent thickened. "I thought you'd appreciate a head's-up. You might want to watch yourselves while I dust off my NARC ID and call Flight, find out what's wrong ... if it's trouble, *I* won't be the target."

She made a good point. McKinnen had spent her whole career 'buried' in R&D, which meant her face was unknown on the street. But it was far from impossible that Jarrat or Stone himself had been recognized as they came aboard.

Without a word, Jarrat leaned over, halfway out of the bed, and slid his hand into the bottom drawer. A pair of discreet palm guns were in the back, with the wallets, visas for Rethan — and the ID which would pass command of this clipper into their hands, if the situation demanded it. Stone took one of the guns from him and groped for the slacks he had dumped by the bed four hours ago. Jarrat had thrown back the sheet and was swiftly sorting jeans from sneakers.

Security was supposed to be better than this, and Stone grumbled soundlessly as he checked the gun. It weighed just over one hundred grams, fully loaded with forty drug-tipped darts and a capsule of compressed gas. It would not be his choice of weapon, he admitted, if they had been recognized; but these tiny guns were perfectly suited to such a confrontation. There was no safe direction in which to shoot, with delicate systems behind every panel and the clipper's unarmored civilian hull all around, and vulnerable.

Still, no confrontation should ever have happened. NARC security had screened both the crew and passenger lists before Jarrat and Stone were booked on the *Pacifica*, through to Rethan. No flags went up, no questions were asked: Cygnus was satisfied with its own security, and the NARC database came up blank.

The empathic shields were still mostly down, and the flare of Jarrat's swift anger shimmered in Stone's own nerves, so familiar, the sensation might have been his own. He reached over and set his flat palm on Jarrat's spine. "It could be nothing. Let McKinnen call Flight. They're aware they have NARC personnel aboard."

Two Gold Ravens, a medic and a tech from Budweisser's department on the *Athena* were headed back to Darwin's World, via the cities of Chell and Elysium. Jarrat and Stone would spend seven days on the island of Tarataga, on Rethan's northern tropic, and then they were on the *Cygnus Stardust*, back to Venice. The carrier would be drydocked for maintenance in her base port four days ahead of them, while Yvette McKinnen was booked right through to Earth. She was going home — Paris itself, where the suburbs of the ancient city sprawled over the horizon in every direction and NARC funded several labs in the cyber sector.

A small part of Jarrat's quicksilver annoyance settled, and Stone let him slip away. He swung his legs off the bed, slid them into the black denims and hit the comm. "McKinnen." No answer. "Mac!" The line remained silent, and Jarrat zipped the jeans. "Christ, I don't believe this." He slid the gun into his belt, snug in the curve of his spine, and snatched up a shirt to conceal it. The linen was as garish as anything from Harry Del's closet, better suited to white beaches and room service with an ocean view. It hung loosely from Jarrat's wide shoulders as he flattened out against the panel beside the door and palmed the lock to 'open.'

If there was going to be trouble, they were better out than in. The cabin had assumed every characteristic of a cage. Stone was out of the bed, slacks in one hand, shoes in the other, when the comm buzzed.

"Stand down," McKinnen said tersely. "Get some sleep."

The fist that had been clenched in Jarrat's belly relaxed. Stone felt it as clearly as the adrenaline-prickle of his own skin — and he saw Jarrat shiver faintly as his own nerves registered the prickle. The fight-or-flight reflex was powerful. Sleep was the furthest thought from Stone's mind.

"So why are we out of hyper?" Jarrat was asking.

"Drive trouble," McKinnen told him. "Flight tells me it's 'nothing serious,' but you know what that means."

It could mean anything from a five-minute fix while the techs from Murchison worked on some errant component, to sixteen hours dead in space here, waiting for a salvage tug and a tow to the nearest dockyard. Stone tossed the gun onto the pillow and pulled both hands over his face. Their downtime was wasting fast.

"The Auriga-4 engine," McKinnen's voice said acidly, "is a piece of crap. I don't know why Cygnus still operates them. Probably because they're too parsimonious to upgrade."

The carriers, NARC, Army and Starfleet, ran the Auriga-9, which had a reliability the civilian models could only envy. Cygnus was careful to the point of paranoia, and the manufacturer, Murchison Aerotech, was still haunted by the ghost of the *Adelle Challenger*. It was decades since a ship had been lost in a drive ignition accident, but only fools took chances, especially with engine systems as underpowered and delicately balanced as those in civilian service. The *Adelle* was an asteroid miner, an industrial exploration vessel out of Chryse, Mars; and in one blast of stellar proportions she was gone, and two hundred souls with her.

"How long is this going to take?" Jarrat asked in a resigned tone with an edge of acid.

"Not long. We got lucky for once." McKinnen actually chuckled. "There's an engineer's tractor, civilian operation, maybe three hours away. They just finished up a scheduled job at Beacon 288, and they're going to tow us into Sheckley for a fix. Flight Control estimates eight, maybe twelve hours in dock, and we're good to go."

"Sheckley?" Stone's ears pricked.

"Oh, that's just sweet," Jarrat growled. "We have a date with the *Stardust*, shoving off from the port of Chell in seven days from right now, and we just traded a half day on Tarataga for a stopover in the most aromatic armpit of space."

"Sheckley," Stone repeated, under the comm's audio pickup. "That's your old stomping ground."

Jarrat gave him a dark look. "Okay, Mac," he said to the comm, "thanks for the heads-up. We appreciate it. Where are you?"

"In the casino with the Gold Ravens," she told him, "nursing the best hand I've held in years. Get some sleep."

The line had gone dead when Jarrat said, "Fat chance. Sleep on top of a shot of adrenaline? The woman spends way too much time with machines."

"The woman *is* a machine," Stone corrected. He tossed the palm gun back into Jarrat's hand, watched him drop the matched pair back into the drawer, and gave the bed a glare. "You want to go play

poker?" In fact, the adrenaline had hit Jarrat in every fiber. Stone knew exactly what he wanted.

Very deliberately, Jarrat shrugged out of the gaudy shirt and zipped down the jeans. "I could make you a better offer."

He was in fine condition, lean and hard. Stone let his eyes feast for a moment, and then dropped the slacks and hit the bed. The mattress was still bouncing when Jarrat pounced, straddling him, and Stone looked up at him in the soft sidelight from the lamp. "Sheckley, goddamn it," he muttered, and sank his teeth into Stone's shoulder, hard enough to leave a transient brand.

"You were born there." Stone palmed his buttocks and pulled him in tight.

"Not born there, but I grew up there. I also got out, soon as I was old enough to enlist," Jarrat reminded. "It's the ass-end of the universe, Stoney. You don't want to waste time with it."

"Still ... your old hunting ground." Stone lifted his knees to cushion Jarrat's back. The weight on him was welcome, the press of skin on skin was delicious, and the empathy resonated like bell-chimes in a breeze. Stone's eyes slitted as Jarrat's teeth closed on his nipple. Every sensation was long-familiar now, yet the rainbow-spectrum of response in his nerves shattered into delight, still fresh as a rain shower.

Then the tousled head lifted and Kevin gave him a suspicious look. "You actually *want* the ten-credit tour?"

"Never stopped by Sheckley before," Stone said easily. "Never expect to again ... eight hours to kill, kid. Maybe twelve. You heard the lady."

"I heard." Jarrat sat up, and both his hands were busy between them, full and working. The empathy flared, hot and so fast, Stone could barely breathe. He knotted his fingers into Jarrat's hair to pull him down, buy himself some time to think, and Jarrat breathed against his ear, "The ten-credit tour. The watering holes, the make-out places where sixteen-year-olds disappear to get laid in peace, and the cranies where kids half their age can hide and watch Sheckley's third-rate idea of Companions strip down and do their stuff."

In that moment Sheckley was so far from Stone's mind, it might not have existed at all. Muscles bunched as he rolled Jarrat over,

pinned him to the mattress, and the long legs scissored about him. His mouth silenced Jarrat with a kiss that began hard and deepened as they began to rock together. Kevin's arms wound around him, held him to the task he had set himself, and Stone shivered with a surge of excitement. Jarrat felt it too, and his back arched, almost lifting Stone bodily. They shared a deep groan and Stone's mouth closed on Jarrat's neck, tasting the salt of fresh sweat over the heavy beat of his pulse.

The empathy fed on itself, and Stone searched for any fragment of reality as his mind spun away. Better than Angeldreams, he thought minutes later as he sprawled into the pillows and drank in the mirrored sensations of possession and surrender. Jarrat was big in him, too wound-up to be still even for a moment, and through his nerves Stone felt the sublime push and pull, as surely as the almost overwhelming sensations which commanded his own body. He embraced the empathy completely, where once he had been afraid of it, and not for the first time he wondered if he were addicted all over again. Hooked, now, on *this*, and on Kevin Jarrat. If he were, it was a magnificent way to go.

2

There was no sign of McKinnen. The two Gold Ravens were lounging in the bar adjacent to the docking rings, and Jarrat guessed they had not slept. They were Brad Cooper, Gold Raven 4, and Ron Yu, Gold Raven 9. Both had been injured in the firefight in the warrens under Inquanoc, and they were ordered to four weeks' rest and rehabilitation before they returned to their unit. Kip Reardon might have kept them on light duties on the *Athena*, but Cooper was due leave in any case, and Yu had a five-week-old son he had not yet seen. Their replacements had come out from Darwin's World by Starfleet courier, but the ride home was not priority.

The Ravens were in civvies, and so conspicuous among ordinary civilians, Jarrat had to smile. Like Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos, they towered even over Stone, and they far outmassed the dock techs who had secured the *Pacifica* minutes before. Other bar patrons looked sidelong at them, and whispered speculation would be lively. Army, or maybe Tactical? NARC? Stone was making his way back from the bar with a beer in either hand, and he stopped by the Ravens' table.

"You guys heading into Sheckley?" he asked of Cooper, whom he knew from some previous assignment. Jarrat knew neither of these

Ravens well. Ron Yu's assignment to the *Athena* had begun only after the Equinox bust.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Cooper observed disdainfully. He lifted a large pink gin in one massive chocolate-brown paw. "Got better things to do, Cap. Like getting some decent shuteye."

"And figuring out how we're gonna get even with Mac," Yu added. "Rule 77, Cap Stone: never play no stud poker with nobody who designs AIs for a living. It should be written into regulations somewhere."

"Amen," Cooper breathed.

Stone was still chuckling as he joined Jarrat, and handed him a schooner glass. The bar stocked mostly colonial beer, and Stone had ordered Suzuki. The light amber liquid froze Jarrat's throat as he swallowed, and he glanced back at the status board by the docking rings. Passengers were still not permitted to debark, and he made a face.

"What's the hold-up?" Stone wondered.

"Quarantine," Jarrat informed him tartly. "Like a fleapit checking visiting royalty for bugs. Wipe your feet on the way *out* of this place, mate."

"Good thing we've had our shots this year." Stone tried the beer and grimaced. "God, what is this stuff?"

"You ordered it." Jarrat drained the glass and set it on the nearest coaster. If there was any booze in it, he had not happened upon a molecule. "One good thing about Sheckley," he said philosophically, "they brew their own. And it's not bad."

"Microbrew?" Stone was interested.

"Green Goose." Jarrat stirred as the indicators on the status board shifted from red to amber and the docking rings rolled open with a deep, bass growl.

"Sounds like a nasty ailment." Stone set his own beer aside half full, and was a pace behind Jarrat as they headed off the clipper.

A blue-uniformed Cygnus steward ambushed them just inside the rings. He was Gene Cantrell's age, with a bored, fake smile and a belly which strained the pale blue tunic at the seams. "Your overnight passes for Sheckley, gentlemen, and vouchers for The Pavilion, compliments of Cygnus Lines. Please be back aboard within one hour

after you hear the boarding call. It'll be broadcast station-wide, but we regret, the ship can't wait for you."

"Understood." Jarrat slipped the plastex cards into the breast pocket of his denim shirt and angled a glance at Stone. "You sure about this?"

Stone gestured with the cards. "Vouchers for The Pavilion, on the company, who could resist?" They were a pace outside, in a sudden chill and the glare of harsh artificial light when he added, "What exactly *is* The Pavilion?"

"Oh, it's the happenin' place," Jarrat said dryly. "Meaning, if it happens at all on Sheckley, that's where it's likely to be." Five strides across the dock he stopped, thrust both hands into the pockets of his jeans, and permitted himself a small shudder. "I just broke a promise I made to myself fifteen years ago."

"You swore you'd never come back to this neck of this particular wood?" Stone guessed as he zipped his brown leather jacket to his throat. "Damn, they keep it cold here."

"When you're born and bred in this dump, you don't notice it," Jarrat said darkly. "It's also damp in here. The whole place is humid, all of it, all the time. It's easier to tolerate when it's cold."

He was moving then, with Stone on his heels. Without hesitation, he strode right by the signage warning visitors to 'remain on the marked trails.' Not far behind those signs, the lights cut from a garish blast of photons which sizzled the irises to a dimness to which a man had to give himself time to adjust.

They had just stepped off the rink. The two-kilometer 'tocamac' girdled the entire colony, and once, many decades before, ten colony ships might have been docked there at one time. Now, Sheckley was servicing a single ore hauler which had berthed on the other side of the station from the *Pacifica*, and the moment a visitor stepped off the rink, the lights were out and the damp cold began to prick the sinuses.

From space Sheckley looked like a big minor planet, overgrown with antennae, the porcupine spines of aerals and comm arrays, the curious phallic protrusions of fueling booms and gantries. It had the mass to command almost one tenth gravity; its Earth-normal gravity was generated by big Arago units buried in the core, and any warmth

one perceived was pumped in, circulated via conduit from the cooling ducts under the reactor housings.

“They spent over a year hollowing out the planet,” Jarrat said over his shoulder as he and Stone ducked to pass under a rank of pipes, each a meter in diameter. “They’d have terraformed the surface if Sheckley’s orbit took it closer to the sun, but you saw for yourself on the way in. She’s too far out to rationalize the work.”

“She’s also the only usable body in this system,” Stone added. “I took a look at the system plot. Two gas giants and field of ice rubble further out, three heavy asteroids in captured rotation, close in and molten, and maybe eight or ten chunks of rock like this one, orbiting between.”

“Out of which,” Jarrat finished, “*this* one has the most stable orbit and the highest natural gravity field. For what that’s worth.” He came to a halt at the head of a deep, ringing steel stepway. “Hang onto your lunch and look down.” Stone’s curiosity shimmered under his skin, but for himself Jarrat was aware of odd feelings, down deep, as if currents were moving in a dark ocean he had not thought of in so long, it might not have been there.

He had forgotten the *smell* of Sheckley. It made the hair rise on the nape of his neck, and his belly tightened. The air was sharp with the tangs of steel, iron oxide, mildew, and the taints of so many chemicals, they blended into a single new aroma. The olfactory sense was a powerful trigger to memory, and scenes Jarrat had not replayed since he was a child sprang out of the recesses of his mind. He seemed to hear the voice of a friend yelling his name, feel the touch of a lover’s hand in the darkness, see the dance of neon around the dens on the rink long past midnight, when hospice kids were supposed to be grounded by the curfew, but many, like himself, were out hunting.

He hauled himself physically away from the memories as Stone peered over into the abyss. “What’s down there?”

“The reactors are right at the bottom. Service spaces above, and right under your feet, the water tanks. Under them, the fuel tanks have eight times the capacity of the water tanks, but most of them are empty. This place doesn’t refuel the rimrunners anymore, and the colony ships don’t pass by. But they used to call us a ‘gas can with lights’.”

Stone's eyes were on him, reflecting the guide lights which marked out the structures in the abyss. "You okay? I didn't think coming back would bother you."

"It doesn't."

"Bullshit," Stone said quietly. "I guess the whole place is full of ghosts."

"More than you know," Jarrat admitted.

"Tell me?" Stone invited, but Jarrat would say nothing. Stone's hands closed on the metal of a service ladder leading over the side. "Do we climb down?"

"Two levels, then look for the gantry on your left." Jarrat gestured, apparently into thin air. "Something I want to show you."

"If it's still there." Stone turned and with his right foot, felt for the first step. "It's been a long time, Kevin. Fifteen years has to make a difference."

"Not here," Jarrat said cynically. "Nothing changes here, not unless it's made to. There's no weather, no environment, no ecosystem, unless you want to talk about the weird blue-green algae that blooms on the walls under the heating pipes. You don't smell it? Stinks like a pond."

"I smell it," Stone's voice said from two meters below the platform where Jarrat waited. "I can see the gantry. I go left?"

"Yeah, and then wait for me. It's easy to get turned around in here," Jarrat warned, "and there's a lot of dangerous places."

The memories were back, mocking him as he climbed over onto the steps. They were as flimsy as he remembered, without even the benefit of guide lights. The next lights were on the gantry, thirty meters below, and then nothing for two hundred meters, before the service catwalks above the reactor housings. The chill air was constantly moving with the breeze that wandered the whole station. From place to place it would smell of steel and rust, sometimes of spilt fuel or hot jet exhaust, or the pond reek of the algae. Here in the core, all those smells fused into one which in Jarrat's mind was just *Sheckley*.

The guide lights marking out the gantry were mint green for the horizontal formers, blue for the verticals, and hazard points blipped blood red. Stone was waiting for him, his face outlined weirdly in the green and blue, his eyes full of the witchfires of the hazard markers.

“Something you wanted to show me? Here?” He cast about. “I don’t see anything but girders, conduit, pressure valves ... and thin air, with one hell of a long way to fall.”

“You just haven’t been here long enough.” Jarrat gave him a wink, dropped a kiss on the side of his neck as he pushed by on the gantry, and struck out into the airy darkness. “This catwalk circles the whole rink. *The Pacifica*’s docked about twenty meters above us. There’s service ways, crawl spaces, machine bunkers, coolant pipes, air vents, fuel lines, fiberoptic conduits, like an ants’ nest under the docks. Anything goes wrong with the guts of the machinery, this is where you get in and fix it. And because there’s fuel tanks and two-meter flex-hoses feeding the umbilicals up top, you’ve got hard-points.”

“Blast shelters?” Stone’s voice called from a little way behind.

Sound was weird, distorted, bouncing off close surfaces and lost in the massive emptiness of the core. Stone could have been a half kilometer away. Reflexively, Jarrat glanced back over his shoulder. In fact, Stone was a few paces away. He had paused to look over the side, into the almost uterine darkness. Their eyes had fully adjusted by now, and his peripheral vision could pick up the dull red glow issuing from the structures around the reactor housings.

Industrial drones worked there, in hellish recesses, radioactive and acidic. Few humans ever ventured there, and then only in armor to do work that was outside the scope of robots. If anyone fell from these gantries, little would remain to be salvaged for the funeral. More often than not, there was no retrieval. An accident marker would be welded to the gantry, and for a while someone would come by with silk flowers or candles, before they set grief aside and moved on.

“Better than blast shelters,” Jarrat said as he slowed and began to search the darkness for a pattern of lights, head-high, in the steel-and-plascrete wall. “Now, where is it? You know, I think I passed it already. Everything’s a lot smaller than I recall. And dimmer,” he added as he turned back toward Stone. “And colder.”

“Damned cold,” Stone agreed. “Is the whole station like this?”

“It has its bright lights,” Jarrat said, preoccupied as he searched. “A few dens. Danceshops, sexshops, clubs, the dorms, the ’burbs, the mall ... and The Pavilion. Ah, here it is.”

A sequence of marker lights, three green, three blue, one dim red, and a bar beneath them, recessed into a panel. Stone was at his shoulder as Jarrat hit the bar with the side of his fist. A shush of moving air, a sudden smell of old electronics, a growl of machinery, and the door ground open. Emergency lights glowed in the chamber, and Jarrat stepped inside, into a three-meter-by-three space he had never quite forgotten.

“Blast shelter,” Stone observed, “nuke-proof, airtight. Supplies?”

“Rations, water, air, for four days.” Jarrat surveyed the chamber with an odd feeling, and wondered what was on his face. “They figured, if they hadn’t dug you out by then, there’d be nobody left to come looking. Accidents happen, way too often. Luckily, the big ships don’t try for a drive ignition sequence until they’re rubbing shoulders with the gas giants, but there were some fueling accidents when I was a kid. Busted lines, ruptured tanks, a few toxic spills, chemistry that’d flay the flesh off your bones. These bunkers are actually for the techs working the rink, and they’re not code-locked, because anyone on the station might need fast access. You might not have time to mess about, trying to key in a code with fingers that are burned off while your lungs are being stripped. And there isn’t a kid on Sheckley who doesn’t know where they are. See?” He nodded at the corner of the chamber. “A bunk, a blanket, a medkit.”

Stone cocked his head curiously at his partner. “You came here?”

And Jarrat nodded while he focused on Stone, refusing to let the memories overpower him. “I’d come here to do a little fizz, when I could get my hands on it. Nothing heavy, you understand, but ... anything to get away from reality for a while.” He worked his shoulders to loosen the tension that was creeping up on him. “I’d come here when I was beat up, use the medkit, get myself squared away before I went back.”

“To the hospice?” Stone asked softly.

“They got all bent out of shape if they thought you’d been fighting.” Jarrat shook his head over the memory. “They figured a bloody nose or a black eye or a busted arm meant you’d been running with the gangs.”

“And were you?” Stone sat on the end of the bunk and frowned up at him.

“Me? No. But some of the others did, and you could also get beat up for *not* running with the bastards. Some of the big kids took it as a personal insult. Look, here.” Jarrat lifted the boxes of rations and flasks out of the corner opposite the bunk, and beckoned Stone to see. The plascrete there was marked, gouged with the tip of a knife. Two sets of initials were inscribed into the wall. KJ and BI. “I used to come here with some other kids,” Jarrat said, bemused by his own wilful memory. “Barry Ingram and a girl ... whose name I can’t even remember. She was older than me, bigger, taller. Not that you’d have known she was a girl, till she dropped the cammo fatigues and kicked off the cockroach-crusher boots. She was the first girl I was ever with. About three weeks before she signed an Army enlistment contract and shipped out on a troop transport.”

“Now, where have I heard that before?” Stone held out his hand; Jarrat took it. “How old were you?”

“Twelve, thirteen,” Jarrat hazarded. “Barry liked her a lot. He was only a year older than me. Said he was waiting for her to come back, and maybe they’d leave Sheckley together.”

He said no more, and after a long silence Stone prompted, “And then...?”

Jarrat stirred with an effort. “She came back in a box, killed in action, in the bust-up on Kelso Prime. Cremated with honors, name up on the boards in the Hall of Fame. A lot of Sheckley kids are there. I was almost one of them, three or four times ... Sheal, you know?” He reached out with one fingertip, tracing the initials he had carved into the plascrete almost two decades before. “Then it was just Barry and me, and we had some good times. Humped each other a lot, drank some very good pilfered beer, until —”

He could not say it, and did not have to. “Until Barry Ingram became an Angel statistic,” Stone guessed.

“Yeah.” Jarrat heard the roughness of his own voice. “It stinks, Stoney. But he wasn’t the only one. There were a lot like him.”

“But not you,” Stone added. “You stayed the hell out of it, away from the gangs, and the Angel, and off the rink, till you were old enough to enlist. You survived, Sheckley and the Army. I know all about the war on Sheal.”

“I survived,” Jarrat echoed. “But the truth is, Barry Ingram’s the

reason you and I are together right now. I watched him die by inches. I had a ringside seat at the whole event, from the first snort of that pig-shit to the seizure that took him, two years later. I was sixteen when they cremated him. I was the only one who showed up at the service. I was six months too young to enlist, but not too young to get offers up on the rink, if you follow me.”

Stone could guess. “You might have had a ride out of this dump, as a Companion. One of the clippers would have taken you on, and if not, you could have been out on a freighter.”

“As a boytoy,” Jarrat snorted. “God, what a career that would have been!” And then he laughed, though it was a short, acid sound. “You might have visited Randolph Dorne’s sky palace that night during the Equinox bust, and seen me in the courtyard there, with Jesse and the others, covered in platinum jewelry and body paint.”

“If I had,” Stone said dryly, “I couldn’t have afforded you.” He pulled Jarrat into an embrace, hugged him hard, and Jarrat was grateful for it. “Come on, Kevin, let’s get the hell out. It’s just depressing you.”

But though Jarrat was pleased to leave, he would have argued that the ‘ten-credit tour’ had depressed him. It *reminded* him, he thought. It made him take stock of who he was now, and how far he had traveled. Made him reevaluate what he had, and appreciate it a little more.

He took the long way back to the rink, showing Stone many nooks and crannies of Sheckley which visitors never saw. Places where the deck vibrated constantly with the grunts and clamor of heavy machinery, and where the maze of the halfway station seemed to ravel into knots in which a man could be lost, abandoned, forgotten. He would soon perish in the damp, blue-steel cold.

The lights of the rink were welcome to them both as he led the way back to a service chute. He kicked open the grille, dropped two meters onto the deck and stepped aside to make way for Stone. The *Pacifica* was docked two hundred meters away, around the curvature in the tocamac. No one saw them drop out of the chute, just as they had been unobserved heading into the labyrinth behind the warning signs.

“So ends the tour,” Jarrat said acerbically, deftly refitting the grille

while Stone's eyes struggled to adjust to the harsh dock lights. "Anything else you want to see?"

"Taste, maybe," Stone allowed. He lifted a hand to shade his irises and squinted ruefully at Jarrat. "Green Goose."

"The Pavilion," Jarrat groaned.

"Vouchers," Stone said, rummaging through his pocket for the cards, "compliments of Cygnus Lines. Very gracious of them. These have to be good for a free beer, if nothing else."

"Green Goose." Jarrat pointed him in the direction of the passenger elevators, beside which were a ragged assortment of posters for holoshows, live theater, masseurs and masseuses, Companions of every gender and description. Only one poster was animated. Out of it, an androgynous dancer in flesh-toned skinthins smiled coyly over his or her shoulder, and one kohl-rimmed eye winked while a scarlet neon logo painted itself across the dancer's shapely backside: *The Pavilion*. "Like you said, it's lucky," Jarrat remarked as the elevator opened and they stepped into the car, "we already had our shots this year."

3

In many ways Stone was impressed; in others, he was appalled. Sheckley was a testament to the indomitable spirit of the pioneers. In the decades when the colonies were opened up by sleeper ship, this halfway station was a critical link in a human chain stretching from Earth and Mars out to Darwin's, Rethan, Avalon, Sheal and beyond. It exceeded the merely spartan; it was purely functional. Sheckley had never been designed for beauty, pleasure, or even long-term habitation.

The engineers who shelled out the planetoid would have been shocked to learn how generations of humans had made their homes here of necessity — stranded in a place where work and education were hard to get, unable to move on or go home, making babies and raising families in the dormer 'burbs' between the rink, the mall and 'upstairs,' where they could enjoy Sheckley's single luxury, so long as they did not stay more than two hours.

Between the cooling vents from the core and the deep space comm arrays was Cayman Park, an armorglass dome just over a quarter kilometer across. Shrubs and trees from Darwin's and Rethan grew there; grasses from Sheal, and a few exotic plants which were

indigenous to Darwin's World and could survive the artificial environment.

The park was 'closed for maintenance' when Stone had followed Jarrat up from the elevators. He stooped to peer through the viewport in the inside pressure door, and saw a tech gang riding an Arago 'cherry-picker,' working on the dome while civvies pruned and trimmed among a thicket of straggling shrubs. According to the board beside the door, entry tickets were available from 'selected outlets' on the mall; the waiting list was ten days long, because no more than one hundred people were allowed in the park at one time. Jarrat had been inside on three occasions, always as part of a supervised 'excursion,' with a grade school class.

The part of Stone which was impressed by the ingenuity and courage of the pioneers quickly began to sour as he surveyed the station's interior. The population was still up over a hundred thousand, almost half as many as had lived here when Jarrat was scooped up on the rink. He was forgotten or misplaced, left behind while the *Lombard Explorer* embarked, or tried to.

Was Keith Jarrat his father? Even Kevin could not be sure. Stone knew as much about his early years as he did himself. There was not much to know. The *Explorer's* records did not list the mining engineer Jarrat as having brought a family aboard with him, but the odds of an informal relationship were high, and a child issuing from such a partnership was likely. The *Explorer's* complement was only sixty percent male; twenty kids of various ages were aboard when she left the homeworlds. Three more were born inflight. Kevin was almost certainly one of them.

Sheckley Tactical had contacted the outbound *Explorer*, but before Keith Jarrat could get time on the high-band transmitters to return the call, the ship's Auriga-2 drive unit failed during ignition. She was gone in less than a tenth of a second, as surely as the *Adelle Challenger* and too many doomed ships like them.

The technology behind the first- and second-generation hyperdrives made Stone shudder. He could only marvel at the audacity of the pioneers, who were willing to trust their lives to systems that would never have been man-rated by the contemporary Merchant *Astra* Commission.

The *Explorer* was an old ship when she was chartered to open up a mining colony on the far side of the frontier. She had made the haul out to Rethan with a hundred thousand cryogen tanks aboard, when the city of Chell was so new, the first coat of paint was still fresh. Later, she was refitted twice, and hauled out to Avalon with the Second Fleet, in the decade before the last sleeper ships were converted to bulk cargo and mining exploration. Murchison Aerotech installed a reconditioned Auriga-2 drive unit and a new Prometheus generator.

Someone in the orbital docks over Mars certified the *Lombard Explorer* 'good to go.' They were wrong. The drive was several generations earlier even than the Cygnus *Pacifica*'s engine, which McKinnen described as garbage. She was fraught with mechanical problems from the moment she left the homeworlds, and she put into Sheckley to have the engine realigned. According to Sheckley's records, the work was finished to the highest safety standards.

Someone, somewhere, Stone had long believed, had fudged the numbers to save his or her own career. Nothing could ever be proved, because the implosion of the old, rudimentary e-space generator reduced the *Explorer* to molecule-sized debris.

From the rink, the 'A elevator' fed right into the mall, and Stone saw at once, it was Main Street. The two-kilometer thoroughfare bisected the whole station, and from that level other streets and levels were accessed via the linear 'ways' or the transit tubes. The 'ways' were alley-like passages branching off the main drag at right angles. Often, they were little more than tunnels drilled right into the bedrock, where storefronts and apartment complexes were gnawed out of solid stone, in every direction.

The ways were well-lit and well signed, obviously familiar enough to the locals; but a scant fifty meters off Main, a visitor would be lost in the warren. Stone was reminded of dockland in the city of Chell. He had wondered how Jarrat made sense of the labyrinth there. After the insane maze of Sheckley, it would have been easy. Resolutely, he kept his feet on the mall.

By local time it seemed to be late afternoon. Buggies and gyro-bikes competed for space on the thoroughfare, and the sidewalks were busy. Long lines were forming up for the holoshows, and the VR

parlors were already doing brisk business. Some local school had just launched its daily exodus, and a rampage of youth commanded the mall. In a few hours these too-young faces would be gone. The same spaces would be filled with the 'big kids,' hunting for very different kinds of entertainment.

The danceshops and sexshops were usually located *down*, Stone saw. Lurid signage pointed into basements where the neon was dormant at this hour. Cleaners dawdled through their work in kerchief-sized yards off the main drag; off-duty Companions lounged — smoking, bored and sullen — in the few bars which were open to trade. They came in every gender, size, shape and race, but they were hardly Stone's idea of Companions.

He thought of Jesse Lawrence now, and lifted a brow at Jarrat. The words 'rough trade' came to mind, but he left them unspoken. Jarrat would have heard the witticism too often. Sheckley was like a mining town in the desert, a trawler port in the arctic. How good the Companions looked was geometrically related to how desperate one was for the company, and how much booze one had imbibed.

The hospice to which Sheckley Tac had delivered the three-year-old Jarrat was a half kilometer back from the mall and two hundred meters higher. To reach it, one climbed the 'step streets,' passages which mounted the terraces under which the fuel tanks were bedded into the planetoid's native rock. A sign at the corner of Oakley and Brookes pointed the way, but Jarrat gave it one glare and turned his back on it. He walked on, headed for the brighter lights where Main fed into Katei Square.

Thirty meters on the diagonal, it sat dead-center in Sheckley, as if the whole station revolved around it. City hall, Kravitz-Hogarth Mercy Hospital, the Shoenbrunn University campus, the Temple of Gaia, the VeloBike dealership, the transit bureau — everything upmarket and legitimate fronted onto this space, and Stone gave due credit to the city. They were trying to make something of it.

The massive overheads, recessed into the rock far above, cast a muted flood of full-frequency 'daylight,' not quite enough to make him forget he was standing in a cavern; and it was warm enough here for him to zip down the jacket. He watched the locals hurry by, each too preoccupied to notice the visitors. He saw clenched faces full of angst,

woe, even fear. A water feature gurgled between four real, living trees which were nurtured in plascrete tubs. A gaggle of musicians competed for his attention, as well as a the few credit coins in his pocket.

"Welcome to Sheckley," Jarrat said acerbically. "Doesn't leave you much space for wondering why Angel got in here like a plague, does it? You've seen all of it that's worth seeing, except The Pavilion ... and there it is."

Stone had already picked out the sign. It seemed to be the only club which operated at street level, and was open during 'daylight' hours. From the info on the vidscreens by the caryatid-columned doorway, it was a licensed restaurant as well as a danceshop with live bands every night; but the female figures supporting the portico were as outrageous as anything Stone had ever seen flanking the doors of a citybottom sexshop. They inspired shrewd guesses at the business that would prosper in The Pavilion's basement by midnight.

"Green Goose," he said succinctly.

"Complimentary vouchers," Jarrat added, and dodged the gyro-bikes as he cut a line diagonally across the square.

The light dimmed to some tone between blood and purple and the air seemed to thicken as they stepped in between the mock-marble figures. Stone's pupils expanded, and he saw a bar stretching away to his left, a dance floor to his right with a raised stage in the corner, and every conceivable games machine was ranked on either side of the entrance. The low, prefab ceiling was spangled with tiny lights; the elevators were opposite, and guarded by a uniformed gorilla.

"There's a lot of thieving in this community, you want to keep out the riffraff," Jarrat told him before he could ask. "They run a licensed sexshop in the basement, and a VR-parlor on the mezzanine. There's also accommodations upstairs, with or without live furniture."

"You mean, live-in Companions," Stone guessed.

"Oh, yeah." Jarrat glared at the elevators. "I had plenty of offers, Stoney."

"I'd have been surprised if you didn't," Stone said honestly. "I took a look at the Companions on the way over." Jarrat quirked a brow at him. "It's quite the cabbage patch out here," Stone said, amused. "You can't blame people for recognizing a genuine bloom when they saw one."

In this context, the compliment made him grimace. “The sexshop doesn’t open for business till about 22:00, and if you don’t want to check out the VR-parlor —?”

“I’ll pass,” Stone decided.

“Microbrew,” Jarrat intoned. “It’s actually quite drinkable.”

He headed off into the dim recesses of a bar which seemed to stretch halfway into the bowels of the planetoid. Some of the exterior walls had been left in natural rock, where the stratae formed patterns like abstract art. The interior walls were plastered with posters and holosnaps of touring bands which had played here, and aeroball games on which the locals had won enough credits to quit Sheckley and not look back.

So early in the day, the tables were mostly empty. Jarrat pulled out a chair with a view of the vidscreen where some regional playoffs were displayed. Stone recognized neither the team colors nor the arena, but aeroball highlights were always arresting. The primary colors of the skinsuits and the incredible freefall acrobatics on the court captured the eye and held it.

“Vouchers,” Jarrat was saying as a waiter ambled toward them. Stone handed them over and listened as Jarrat said, “We’ll take a pitcher of Green Goose. And nachos,” he added. Stone angled a look at him as the waiter headed back to the bar, and Jarrat shrugged. “Growing up here, I was permanently hungry. It’s cold, and you never seemed to get fed enough. Just being here gets my stomach growling. What, you need an excuse to eat nachos?” He sounded disbelieving.

In fact, Stone was contrasting his own youth with Jarrat’s, and not for the first time he admitted how privileged he had been. His memories were of London and Barcelona, flying ultralites, letting the family groom him for a career in science or engineering and then politics. He was still in his teens when he turned his back on the scenario and the people driving it. They had never forgotten, nor forgiven, but the rancor of later years could not leech the privilege from his youth.

The local beer was quite full-bodied, golden and sweeter than he had expected. Harry Del would have liked it. Jarrat seemed to both savor it for the memories it brought back, and resent it for the same reason. The waiter returned moments later with a tray of flashed

nachos, and Stone sat back to study his partner. Jarrat was filled with contradictions behind a face that deliberately gave nothing away.

Only Stone knew he was haunted by ghosts he had never even thought about since he left this place. He was hungry because his belly was twisted with odd feelings — they might have been misgivings, regrets, even a kind of stone-cold dread, save that he was only passing through, and he would not be back.

The emotions were echoes, Stone knew, the backwash of the fifteen-year-old feelings which had driven Jarrat to enlist. The day he signed his name to the form, an Army carrier took him aboard and he was headed for war. Anything rather than a lifetime on Sheckley.

The gray eyes met Stone's and warmed. Jarrat was as aware of Stone's feelings as of his own, and the waft of compassion dispelled many of the shades. He had taken a breath to speak — he might have put his thoughts into words, since Stone could only ever know the emotions, never the thoughts which inspired them. But before he could frame them his eyes flicked on, over Stone's shoulder, and widened for an instant.

Stone watched them darken just before the rush hit him in every nerve, and he took a deep breath. His voice was a bare whisper. "Kevin?"

"Now, will you look at who just walked in," Jarrat murmured. "We lost 'em on Aurora, before the bust. We knew they'd shot through, and I wondered where they'd land. It sure as hell won't be here, not for long, but you have to admit, this is a great place to go to ground, lie low till the dust clears. *Ice* dust, that is."

Very slowly, Stone swiveled the chair and looked back in the direction of the doorway. Framed there were two figures he had never seen in person, but which he knew at once from copious archival footage. They were instantly recognizable, anywhere. Damon Vaughan still looked like a ballplayer, with the big shoulders, the thick thighs stretching a pair of gray designer slacks, and the wink of jewelry in both ears. The dark hair was ruthlessly shorn to his skull, and his skin was as pale as that of anyone from the city of Thule and its attendant spheres.

Still beside him, just as recognizable, was Leena Reineck. The white-blond hair was roped in a single braid, the pneumatic bosom

strained the front of a pale blue sweater, and the rest of her was squeezed into a matte black skinthin. She had the look of an off-duty Companion, and for a moment Stone wondered if she was back in the trade, since she and Vaughan had left Aurora so fast, they could hardly have taken much out with them.

"They know you as Max Tyler," he said quietly. "No news got out of Inquanoc after the bust. Leo Michiko is still on the *Athena*, on his way to Darwin's. Cassius Brand wouldn't breathe a syllable of NARC business, and even if he would, Harry's part of his entourage, monitoring Marcus for as long as it takes, live or die. Harry wouldn't let him blow our security. Pete Denehy and his people are either dead or in custody, and nobody, *nobody* else, could identify you as anything but Max Tyler."

"That's the theory," Jarrat agreed levelly as he watched Reineck and Vaughan, only waiting for them to survey the rest of the establishment and recognize him. "I could wish I was armed. These pissy little palm guns don't exactly fill you with optimism. You want to vanish, Stoney? Call the *Pacifica*. There's two Gold Ravens aboard, polishing bar stools with their bums."

It was a fine idea, but it came a half second too late. Before Stone could even begin to get his feet under him both Reineck and Vaughan had seen Jarrat, and they knew him. They were heading over, in no great hurry, while Vaughan beckoned a waiter. Stone held his breath until the man who had been Scorpio's mule in the cities of Thule and Inquanoc said,

"You just get in, Max? What the hell are you doing here?"

Before Stone's eyes, Jarrat slithered into the undercover persona he had designed to find the chink in the syndicate's armor. Very rarely did Stone have the opportunity to see him work. Almost every time they went into the field it was alone. He sat back, content to observe for the moment, though he had already searched Vaughan and Reineck visually, looking for the telltale sign of weapons about them. As far as he could tell, they were unarmed. They might have been carrying something as discreet as the palm guns, but certainly nothing larger.

"We just got in on the *Pacifica*," Jarrat said noncommittally. "She docked a couple of hours ago. Engine trouble or something. They

weren't too specific. Cygnus gave us vouchers for this place."

"Us?" Reineck echoed. Her eyes were hot on Stone. "Who's your trick?"

"Not my trick," Jarrat — Max Tyler — said nastily. "Watch your mouth, lady. You're not on Aurora now, I don't want *nothing* from you, and I don't owe you a favor. In fact, you bloody owe me, and you know it."

"She knows it," Vaughan said affably. He draped one big arm over the woman's shoulders and steered her to a chair. "She's just needling, Max, because she likes the look of your partner, and if he's with you ... well, it means she probably can't have him."

"How perceptive," Stone said in glib tones. "I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't say it." Vaughan settled into the chair and beckoned the waiter a second time. "What are you drinking, Max?"

"Beer," Jarrat said, gesturing with the schooner glass.

Vaughan made a face. "Green Goose, is it? The house brew?"

"You don't like it?" Stone guessed.

"Horse piss. I grew up on Vanhorne Gold Tankard ... jet fuel in a green bottle, best brew on Aurora." Vaughan gave him a speculative look. "You look more like a bourbon and soda man."

"Tequila on the rocks," Stone corrected, and offered his hand. "Crenna, John J."

"Vaughan. Call me Damon." Vaughan took Stone's hand in passing and sat back. He was frowning at Jarrat. "I have to say, I'm surprised to see you here. I thought you'd have gone down with Scorpio."

"Me? Not a chance," Jarrat said dismissively. "I was savvy enough to get out of Death's Head before the crap hit the fan. You think I was going to sit around and wait for NARC to bust Michiko? I wasn't so fond of the man that I'd hold his hand in a prison cell."

"He's dead." Reineck poured a glass from the pitcher. "You didn't get the news? It was on the vids."

"I saw it." Jarrat drained his own glass. "But the bastard was alive when I got the hell out. I was about three days behind you, Leena, headed for Rethan or Avalon or anywhere else. Speaking of which, I could wonder what the hell you two are doing on Sheckley. It's not

exactly your style. You passing through? You're not on the *Pacifica*. We'd have seen you around."

"Passing through," Reineck said darkly.

"Eventually," Vaughan added. "Forgive her the gloom. She hates it here."

"Too much like Thule citybottom." Reineck did not have to pretend a shudder. "Mostov. You remember Mostov?"

"Never been there," Stone — John Crenna — said thoughtfully.

"Oh, I remember it." Tyler studied the woman with narrowed eyes. "I remember Thule well, from Barsoom to Mostov. And El Relámpago."

The name made Vaughan's brows rise. "You dropping hints? Like, maybe we owe you the favor?"

"You do," Tyler informed him.

"You *need* a favor?" Vaughan asked. Reineck leaned closer, and they shared a taut glance.

A thread of fascination coiled through Jarrat's belly — Stone felt it as clearly as if it had been his own. "Just what *are* you doing on Sheckley?" Kevin wondered. "I'd have expected to find you somewhere on Rethan, maybe Eldorado if Chell's not your style. NARC blew through there like a hurricane a few months ago. The city's back in the tender care of a fat little Tactical colonel with a foul mouth, but NARC won't be back for years. You'd be safe."

"Safe? Sure," Reineck agreed. "And punching somebody's clock, or maybe right back on the meat rack."

"Meat rack?" Stone echoed.

"Later," Jarrat growled.

She gave Stone a sultry look. "You don't have a meat rack where you come from, handsome?" At the core, she was still a citybottom Companion, Stone decided as she arched her back, struck a pose, licked her lips. Reineck had none of the finesse and artistry of Jesse Lawrence.

And she was needling Vaughan as much as Jarrat or Stone. "Leena!" He barked the name. "Quit while you're ahead, before somebody gives you a black eye. Or a tanned backside," he added in a rasped undertone. "She can't help it, Max. Sheer force of habit."

"Don't sweat it," Max Tyler said as if it were unimportant, which

had to infuriate Reineck. Deliberately, he reached over the table for John Crenna's hand. Stone gave it to him. "I'm not worried. Right?" He gave Stone an amused look.

"Do I look like I'm buying?" Stone poured himself another beer. "So what's all this about you owing Max a favor?"

"What's all this about him needing one?" Vaughan countered.

Jarrat actually laughed, and the humor behind the sound was genuine. "I do, and I don't, if you follow me. I can get work. If I *want* to work."

"Who the sweet fuck wants to work?" Reineck muttered.

"She makes a good point." Jarrat leaned back and studied Vaughan darkly from beneath lowered lids. "You know me. You know what I do."

And Vaughan's dark, shorn head nodded. "You've got guts, and the devil's own luck, you're not a bad shooter, and if you were on the level, you're a decent pilot. You could get work in security, or freight hauling ... if you wanted to work." His brows rose, creasing his forehead. "You got money, Max?"

"Not anymore." Jarrat gestured in what might have been the vague direction of Thule. "I told you the story of where most of it went, anything Hal Mavvik paid me. Any credit Leo Michiko sent in my direction turned into a fistful of smoke when NARC moved on Scorpio. Thule Tactical froze every account Michiko had, on-world and off. I wound up with *squat*."

"You wound up with your life, your liberty and ... him," Reineck rasped. "Where'd you meet up with this one, since Avalon?"

"It's none of your business, Leena," Vaughan warned.

"Max and me go back a long way," Stone said offhandedly. "Sheal, Elysium, a lot of other places." All the locations where they had used the cover identities of John Crenna and Raymond Landham. "He called me."

"And you came running?" Vaughan's eyes flicked from Stone to Jarrat and back. "Partners?"

"Obviously." Stone cocked his head at Vaughan and ignored Reineck. "Like I said, we go way back."

"And you," Vaughan prompted. "What do you do?"

"Same as him." Stone nodded toward Jarrat.

"You any good?" Vaughan spoke in a harsh whisper as the waiter passed by.

Stone summoned a rasping chuckle. "I better be, or I'm dead." He finished his beer in one swig and shoved out the chair. "Come on, Max, we don't need this. I didn't come here to sit through some dumb-ass interrogation."

"What he said," Jarrat echoed, and followed him up. "See you around, Damon. It's been nice chatting."

They were turning toward the foyer, where a group of office workers from the campus and city hall had just crowded in, when Vaughan called them back. "Wait up, Crenna. Max is right, we do owe him a favor ... and Leena makes a point. Nobody in his right mind wants to punch some clock. You want *work*?"

"Well, now." Stone hesitated and turned slowly toward Jarrat, though he spoke to Vaughan. "It all depends on what you mean by the word, doesn't it?" He felt the thrill of excitement rush through Jarrat's chest and belly, the tingling in his nerve endings, though Jarrat's face was a mask betraying nothing save boredom and annoyance.

For just a moment Vaughan hesitated, and then he beckoned Jarrat and Stone back to the table. He and Reineck swiveled their chairs in close, and Vaughan dropped his voice. "We've got a load."

"Jesus Christ," Jarrat hissed. "Angel?"

"Buran," Reineck corrected in a forced whisper.

"For the Sheckley kids?" Jarrat's brows were up. "They can't afford Buran, and Tactical will be down on you like a load of bricks."

"The package isn't for Sheckley, goddamn it," Vaughan growled. "It was supposed to be in Chell and Eldorado two days ago."

"But our pilot got himself busted," Reineck added. "The cargo's aboard, we're ready to shove off out of this rat's nest, and what's Tate Buchanan do? Gets so shit-faced, he picks a fight with a couple of off-duty Tactical goons. How brain-dead can you get?"

Stone whistled. "He's in custody?" The name of Buchanan tickled his memory and he began to search for it, while he gave Vaughan the larger part of his attention. Jarrat's brow had quirked, and Stone felt the twist of his curiosity.

"The bone-head's sittin' on his ass, waiting for his big day in

court.” Vaughan gestured in the direction of city hall and the municipal chambers opposite The Pavilion.

“Why don’t you just bail him?” Jarrat suggested shrewdly. “Pay a few credits to get him out, then split-and-git. Sheckley Tac doesn’t have the resources to come after him, or you, and if you’re smart in the *gitting*, they won’t know who to call.”

But Vaughan was shaking his head emphatically. “Two bastards from the local goon squad did a dance on him. Tate had eleven broken bones by the time they were through, and a concussion, and his front teeth are snapped off at the gums. Somebody crammed a boot into his mouth. He’s still in Hogarth Mercy, waiting to get fixed up. He’s not an emergency case, you see, so they shuffled him down the list, pumped him full of pethadex and parked a guard beside him.”

“The thing is,” Reineck said in her rasping whisper, “that shit-head is going to be out of commission for at least a week, even if the local magistrate only hits him with a fine. And meanwhile, we’ve got people waiting for us on Rethan ... and they won’t wait forever, if you take my meaning.”

“In fact,” Vaughan added grimly, “they’re not even going to wait much longer before they tap into their other sources, and that’s fucking bad news for us. After this balls-up, who’s gonna do business with us? We make big promises, then we don’t deliver the merchandise.”

Jarrat sat back and wiped a smile off his face. An unholy mischief was dancing in his eyes as he looked sidelong at Stone, and Stone felt the bright effervescence of his amusement. A drug bust had just dropped itself into their laps. It was Buran rather than Angel, but Buran was illegal in the colony of Rethan, and it came expensive. Fortunes made in the Buran trade built pocket-size empires, and when someone at the helm became ambitious, Angel rode in on the coattails of the lesser drug.

“You need a pilot,” Jarrat was saying. “Somebody nuts enough to take a load of Buran into Chell, duck Tactical for you, run the gauntlet of a syndicate that’s pissed off with you, make the drop and bring out the credits.”

“You have access to a decent ship?” Stone demanded. “We won’t duck Tactical in a piece of crap junker.”

"Buchanan has a Rand Arial," Vaughan told him. "Under the circumstances, him being sick-listed and maybe even headed for the cage, he won't have to get pissy if we borrow it for a while. It'll be back in a week or so, long before he gets out of the hospital."

"Buchanan," Jarrat mused. "I know the name from somewhere."

"So do I." Stone had been hunting for the right reference since Reineck mentioned the name, but it remained elusive.

"You probably knew his big brother," Reineck said sourly. "Neil Buchanan was a damn good pilot, right out of Starfleet. He flew industrial cargo, charter jobs, between Avalon and the Cygnus colonies ... he also flew for Equinox."

"Till NARC blew him away," Vaughan finished. "He bought it in some kind of a firefight on Eos. I never knew the details, but I do know he took on a whole NARC squad, gunship and all ... which is just about as about as dumb as you can get in this life. The gene for stupidity must run in that family."

"Neil Buchanan," Stone said quietly. "Oh, yeah, I remember him."

"You knew him?" Vaughan was not surprised. "He got around a lot."

"I didn't know him personally. He ... tried to kill me a while ago," Stone said honestly.

"Us," Jarrat corrected.

In Stone's mind's eye was a scene in a docking bay, on the small, smog-toxic and hostile sister moon of Avalon. Zeus loomed in the night sky like the face of a vengeful god, but all Stone could see was the demolition tractor which plowed down the loading ramp out of Buchanan's ship and tore the bay to windmilling plascrete tatters. Stone was on his back, pinned down by the mass of tumbled masonry on his armor, gazing up at the Blue Raven gunship which eclipsed the face of Zeus. And Neil Buchanan had tracked the barrel of a geocannon to its maximum elevation, trying to put a shell into the engine deck of the gunship —

"Crenna? What's the problem?"

Vaughan's voice cut through the scarlet haze which had settled for a moment over Stone's mind. "Nothing," he lied. "I can't say I'm sorry NARC blew the man away. It saves us the trouble of doing it. Max?"

"Yeah," Jarrat agreed. "Nothing personal, Damon. Buchanan probably made a regiment of enemies in his time. He'd be the first one to tell you, it goes with the territory. And I don't expect this buddy of yours, Tate, has anything to do with the bad blood between us and his big brother."

"Who gives a fuck?" Reineck said impatiently. "Tate's in dock till he goes up in front of a magistrate, and with his shitty brand of luck, he'll do six months in the Sheckley Medium Security Penitentiary. You had a problem with his brother? That's your business, not ours. All we care about is, can you get this load to Rethan? And us," she added hoarsely.

"Passengers?" Stone leaned closer and dropped his voice. "You're coming along?"

"Yeah. For three bloody good reasons," Vaughan said levelly. "One, the folks in Chell and Eldorado will want to see my smiling face before they part with four million in colonial dollars and good, old-fashioned credits. Two, if Reineck and me don't get the hell out of Sheckley soon, this pressurized tin can is going to drive at least one of us right out of his or her gourd ... and the other one'll need tweezers to collect his brain cells. And three — no offence, Crenna, but I don't know you from the proverbial hole in the ground. I'm supposed to trust you not to vanish with the load and Buchanan's ship? I don't think so."

"It's nice to be trusted," Jarrat said acidly. "Okay, Damon. We're interested. Time to make us an offer."

Vaughan did not hesitate. "Five percent."

"Of how much?" Stone demanded.

"The drop-value of the load has to be four million," Vaughan judged. "I can't cut you into the street value. We just drop it and get the hell out, we don't cut it and supply it."

"Ten percent," Jarrat suggested, mock-sweetly.

"Seven ... and a half," Vaughan allowed.

"Yeah?" Jarrat looked sidelong at Stone; Stone nodded. "Deal," Jarrat told Vaughan, though he did not bother offering a handshake. "And you're along for the ride?" He lifted a brow at Stone. "In fact, it'll work out just fine. John?"

Stone was on his feet. "Where's the plane?"

“Bay 27, other side of the rink.” Vaughan looked up, eyes narrowing against the sparklet lights in the ceiling.

“27.” Jarrat finished his beer and pushed back his chair. “You said she was prepped for the flight? No monkey business, Damon. If she’s not up for the run — neither are we.”

“She’s fine,” Vaughan said tersely. “Check her out yourself. But I told you, we were on hold, just waiting to shove off when Tate decided to get plastered and tackle a couple of goons from Tac.” He gave Jarrat a hard look. “How long?”

“Give us an hour,” Stone hazarded.

“Be there,” Leena Reineck barked.

With an acid chuckle, Jarrat sketched her a rough salute. “Yes, ma’am. Go grab your trash and sling it aboard. Later, Damon.”

“Max.” Vaughan threw a few credits into the table and swiveled out his chair. The last Stone saw of him, the mule was heading for the bathrooms.

4

The status boards in the *Pacifica*'s docking lounge showed eight hours till departure. Jarrat spared them a cursory glance on the way to the elevators. Too many civilians thronged both the lounge and the rink for them to speak openly before they had privacy, but as the doors had slid over Stone said acidly,

"If we intend to bust a whole Buran syndicate before it can branch out into Angel, there's about a thousand ways for this to go wrong."

"Tell me about it." Jarrat thrust both hands into the hip pockets of his denims. "First, maybe the news escaped from Inquanoc by routes we know nothing about. Vaughan and Reineck know us for what we are, and they're just setting us up here. We walk into a sniper's nest in Bay 27."

"Or, second, maybe they're on the level," Stone reasoned. "But this Tate Buchanan character is as big an idiot with his ride as he is with the rest of his life. The *Arial*'s not spaceworthy. We get halfway to Rethan and go up in a bright blue flash."

"Or maybe," Jarrat suggested, "the ship's fine, we get to Chell and walk right into forty wannabe pro shooters ... say, Damon Vaughan's made a whole lot of enemies in the Chell underground, but

he's not about to warn us, and we're the ones who get shot as soon as we show our faces."

"Or," Stone sighed, "the underground's friendly enough, but as bone-headed as Neil Buchanan's kid brother. They've been staked out for months by Tactical, and don't know it. You and I get caught in the middle of a bust. If we're not shot dead in the crossfire, we'll collect mold in a security cell till we can make somebody, somewhere, believe we're NARC and make a call."

For several moments they were silent, and Jarrat watched Stone's blue eyes sparkle with wry amusement. "You want to tell Vaughan to find some other damned fool pilot, and just get back on the *Pacifica*?" Stone wondered. "It's Buran, not Angel."

He made a good case. Their only obligation was to inform Tactical, both here and on Rethan, that a small-scale smuggling operation was bumbling along, right under their noses. But the Buran business would soon head downmarket and become the Angel trade, and they both knew it.

There was a lot of money in Buran, and in the more affluent colonies, like Avalon and Darwin's, it was actually legal. So long as users could afford both the drug and the blockers, the authorities had no concern. It was equally true that Buran would eventually rot the user's brain; but the high med-tax levied on both the drug and the blocker was reckoned more than enough to pay for their care and euthanasia, when the time came. The problem took care of itself; it had been likened to the nicotine and alcohol dilemmas of other centuries, which were eventually solved the same way.

But the taxes made Buran expensive — much too costly for poor colonies like Sheckley and Rethan. There was still a great deal of money to be reaped from the trade, since Buran was coveted and craved by the dope pack everywhere. The 'ride' was a *little* like Angel, even like chimera, and the name was derived from the ancestral Russian, meaning 'snowstorm.' Still, in poor colonies the Buran trade remained strictly underground, and gross sales were limited by the cost of the raw substance.

All too soon, the growing syndicate would start to look at Angel, which was dirt cheap to manufacture, and easy to sell at much lower street prices. On the theory of 'small profits, quick returns,' in a

marketplace ten times larger, the cheaper Angel was far more profitable than Buran would ever be; and in old, thickly-populated cities like Chell and Elysium, the Buran trade would surely lay the foundation for a new syndicate to fill the void left by Death's Head. The process took years, but it was as sure as it was slow.

The elevator beeped a warning that other people wanted to use it. Jarrat's hand hovered over the control pad. "So? Am I punching for Flight Control, Stoney? Are we doing this?"

"What the hell?" Stone smothered a snort of humor. "We're going to Rethan anyway. All being well, we'll beat the *Pacifica* there, unless Tate Buchanans's ship belongs in a service garage. Flight Control ... but for godsakes let's get the kinks ironed out before showtime."

They would certainly run hours ahead of the liner; the problem was, they would also outrun the tachyon highband by several hours. Any transmission to Colonel Pete Stacy — the warning of an incoming shipment, the notification of an impromptu NARC operation — would arrive at Tac HQ in Chell long after Buchanan's Rand Arial dropped into Rethan orbit. If they wanted backup in the field upon arrival, it would only come from creative deception right now.

The elevator opened onto Deck 3, which was technically off-limits to passengers. The lighting was subdued, and a video drone picked them up at once. Jarrat turned toward it, showed his face clearly, let it image him. "Captain Jarrat, Captain Stone, looking for the Flight duty officer, and make it fast. NARC business."

They were headed forward, toward the liner's answer to a carrier's ops room. Twenty meters ahead, a face looked out of a door from which spilled muted lighting, and Jarrat recognized the ship's XO. He had never bothered to register the woman's name, but she was as senior as an officer could become without getting a Merchant *Astra* command of her own. She was ex-Starfleet and proud of it. She was entitled to wear the insignia of the carrier *McKinley* on her left shoulder, contrasting the Cygnus Lines badge on the right, and she made sure they saw it.

Her name and service number were embroidered on both sleeves right below the insignia: Margot L. Cheng. She was no taller than Stone's shoulder, with dark hair wound up at her nape, through which

a few strands of silver had begun to show like chic highlights. Jarrat saw little Asian in her lineage, but the mismatch of names and genetic types was common among colonials.

“Captain Jarrat, I recognize you, of course.” Cheng gestured back into the Flight office, where the viddrone’s image would still be on a security monitor. “NARC business, you say? How can we help?”

Cygnus carried a lot of NARC personnel. They had a good relationship with the department, and save for rogue incidents such as the Angel smuggling racket Vic Duggan had broken in his early career in Elysium, they had a sound reputation. They were always aware of NARC officers aboard, and the more highly ranker the officer, the tighter the security cordon.

“We have to send a transmission, highband, with as much power behind it as you can manage,” Stone was saying. “You’ll be tagging the message for Chell Tactical. Specifically, for Colonel Stacy. Can do?”

“No problem.” She stood aside. “Come in, please. Use the main comm terminal. Dub your message, and we’ll have it on its way in a few minutes. I’ll inform the captain, and I’ll call Engineering about kicking some extra power into this. I assume you’ll require encryption —?”

“Level four,” Jarrat agreed as Stone slid in at the terminal. He dropped a hand on his partner’s shoulder. “I’ll brief McKinnen. We don’t have time to mess about with telemetry for Central, but she can handle it.”

“And rouse the Gold Ravens.” Stone’s fingers were busy on the keypad. “We want some backup in the hangar bay. If Vaughan and Reineck are on the level, they won’t even see our guys, but we want them there. I feel a little ... naked.”

“Naked?” Cheng shot an odd look at them as she waited for Engineering to answer.

“Unarmed,” Jarrat translated. “This was supposed to be a vacation. Downtime,” he added cynically.

“People like to say you folks ... NARCs, that is ... are never off-duty,” Cheng observed.

Jarrat and Stone shared a rueful glance. “When we’re on assignment, that’s perfectly true,” Stone told her. “The moment we take a

job, we're *on*, every minute, every day, for as long as it takes. Weeks, months. Then we get free time. This was supposed to be it." He leaned out from the console to let Jarrat see the blue screened CRT. "Anything else you want to tell Stacy?"

The message was brief to the point of terseness, but Pete Stacy would appreciate the brevity. Jarrat had no liking for the man, but Stacy took his work seriously, and he had liaised with NARC on several occasions before. The Death's Head bust was the biggest, dirtiest of those encounters.

In fact, Stacy bitterly resented NARC for the loss of his authority in the field, but he would have been the first to admit, the department had its place. Stacy *used* NARC, and Jarrat and Stone understood his position. They negotiated from a foundation of mutual dislike and complete trust.

In a hundred words, Stone had told Chell Tactical everything they needed to know, including the make and model of the incoming smuggler craft. He could not give Stacy an exact ETA and landing site, but the ATC net would be on alert moments after this message was received, and Tac squads would be on a three-minute standby.

"Good enough," Jarrat decided. "Officer Cheng —?"

The *Pacifica's* XO was still talking to Engineering. "Hold on a second, Paul. The highband arrays just came online, Captain. Queue your message, and as soon as we're powered up for a tachyon stream, the system will take care of it."

"Done." Stone pushed away from the CRT and made space for Jarrat.

The comm in Yvette McKinnen's quarters buzzed for some time before she answered, and she sounded, Jarrat thought, annoyed. He glanced at his chrono and guessed she had been asleep for perhaps two hours after fleecing the Gold Ravens. "We have a *situation*," he told her baldly. "Come up to Flight Control. We won't keep you long."

"A situation?" McKinnen echoed.

"Flight Control, Deck 3, get here," Jarrat said tersely.

She was grumbling in French, just inside the audio pickup range. "Give me a half hour."

"You have ten minutes." Jarrat heard the knife's edge in his own voice.

McKinnen heard it too, and skipped a beat. “Jesus, you’re serious.” She dropped the Gallic grumbling at once. “Five minutes, Jarrat. And have a damn’ cup of coffee waiting for me!”

“Coffee’s right there, Captain,” Cheng offered, with a nod at the AutoChef in the corner opposite the door. “Let me raise Captain Sylvestri and crank up this apology for an ops room. It sounds to me like you could use some support.”

“Thanks,” Stone said honestly. “You were on the *McKinley*. In what capacity?”

“Carrier Operations, three tours. Kelso, Sheal, a few other latrines not worth mentioning in this ... distinguished company.” Cheng studied the NARC men shrewdly, as if anticipating the next question.

“You fancy a transfer?” Stone wondered.

But Cheng made negative noises. “I admire what you do, but ... the truth is, it’s way too much angst for me, Cap. I don’t mind some excitement for one shift, especially since it’s your responsibility, not mine! And I appreciate the offer, but ... no thanks. In nine years aboard the old ‘Big Mac’ I saw enough to make me run away and seek out a flying desk.”

“Kelso and Sheal,” Jarrat said philosophically. “I was in the field in both places myself. Army. And after you did your time there, nobody’s going to blame you for flying a desk. Thanks for your help on this shift. If you can get your ops room booted up, we appreciate it.”

“Done. And let me drag Sylvestri up here. Engineering is already pumping some extra heavy-duty juice into the highband feeds.” Cheng was still waiting for the *Pacifica*’s captain to answer, and as he did she turned her attention back to the comm. “Sorry to disturb your sleep, Skip. We have a NARC situation simmering. I’m powering up the office, and you might like to be here.”

By the chrono in the bottom of the comm station’s CRT, it was 05:03 shiptime. According to Jarrat’s belly, which was still running on *Athena* time, it was evening. On the island of Tarataga, he judged it would be almost time for lunch. He gave Stone a wry look. “You hungry?”

“Yeah. You want to eat before we rendezvous with Vaughan and

company?” Stone glanced at the chrono. “We have thirty-five minutes.”

Even then, Jarrat was buzzing the two Gold Ravens. Brad Cooper and Ron Yu were in adjacent cabins on Deck 7, and they had enjoyed less sleep than McKinnen. She stepped into Flight Control as he gave the Ravens a rapid briefing, in the kind of shorthand in which descant troops were fluent. McKinnen took a mug from Cheng and listened, tight-lipped, until he killed the line.

A blip on the CRT told Stone the highband was transmitting. He was at the 'Chef, punching for coffee, ham and egg rolls, fruit strudel. The machine had been set up for the breakfast shift, and Jarrat grimaced as he took a plate. His belly was expecting dinner.

McKinnen was in sweats and sneakers. She was a redhead now. She had clipped her hair haphazardly on the back of her head, and her eyes were the only part of her that seemed to be awake. Her voice was a croak, as if she had inhaled far too much kipgrass over the poker table. Without makeup, she was pale, freckled, and a little smudged about the eye sockets. “Tell me I’m dreaming this.”

“No such luck.” Stone perched on the side of the navigation tank, which was dormant, dark, since the *Pacifica* lay docked. “You recall the names of Damon Vaughan and Leena Reineck?”

“I waded ankle-deep in the Scorpio dossier, for the sake of interest. Mules, weren’t they? Working between the spheres and city bottom. What about them?” She buried her nose in the mug, as if she could inhale caffeine molecules.

“They’re here, and they knew me on sight.” Jarrat’s fingertips drummed on the comm station’s workspace. “You heard what I told Cooper and Yu?”

“Most of it.” She worked her neck around to loosen the vertebrae. “You want me to run you, wrangle data, collate a telemetry feed, till we lose you in transit.”

“You got it. Nobody else on this ship is qualified, or has the authority to do the job.” Stone lifted a brow at Cheng. “We’ll need to borrow a bunch of your viddrones ... and I know your security crew are quite well armed, since the hijack incident last year out of Elysium. We’ll need to borrow something decent in the hardware department, too.”

She was moving at once. "I'll call Security, get it organized. Sylvestri will have to authorize it, but he's on his way up. Shit, why does this stuff always happen in the wee, small hours? You want more coffee, Doctor McKinnen?"

"Thank you." She passed over the empty mug. "Any chance, Stone, of raising the *Athena*? She's not far away, by now."

"Probably not," Stone judged. "She ought to be in transit, on her way back to Darwin's. Sure, she's close, but she has no reason to drop out of hyper ahead of schedule, and her next comm linkup is — what, Kevin, thirty hours?"

"Closer to thirty-five," Jarrat said, after a glance at the chrono. "Too late to do us any good, Doc, though you can certainly feed them telemetry. I doubt they'd divert to Rethan, even if they knew what's happening here. We'll be liaising in the field with Colonel Stacy's department."

"And I'll inform Sheckley Tactical they have a few rotten apples in this barrel," Stone added.

The liner's commanding officer chose that moment to appear. He was a tall man in his sixties or seventies, gaunt in the blue Cygnus uniform, which looked like it had been thrown on in a hurry, and wearing a bemused expression. The Gold Ravens were right behind him as he strode into the ops room, and Sylvestri seemed to be more than a little perturbed to have what he took to be jumbo-sized civilians loose on his Flight Deck. Cooper and Yu found the situation vastly entertaining, and were milking it. Stone gave them a glare.

He offered the clipper's CO his hand, and Sylvestri took it. "Good morning, Captain. I believe Officer Cheng briefed you?"

"She threw me the bare bones." Sylvestri detoured to the 'Chef for tea. "Good gods, Captain — Stone, is it? You're not saying this smuggling operation has anything to do with Cygnus Lines!"

"In no way," Stone said quickly. "Cygnus's only involvement is that NARC needs your resources."

The older man's eyes narrowed. "Cheng told me this is a Buran smuggling enterprise."

"Correct." Stone glanced at Jarrat as he felt the quick surge of Jarrat's annoyance. "Meaning ...?"

"Meaning," Sylvestri said sharply, "Cygnus is under no obligation

to offer any assistance to NARC. We're not culpable, we're not involved, and the materials being smuggled are outside NARC's operating brief."

"True," Jarrat admitted. "But you won't score many merit points by refusing us your assistance. We're not asking for a lot, and unless you've been underwater for the last ten years, you know as well as we do, where Buran goes, Angel soon follows."

Cheng was at Sylvestri's shoulder, cheeks flushed with either anger or embarrassment, or both. "For godsakes, Gordon," she said in a harsh whisper, "what's it going to cost us? We put up a few viddrones, a few bloody cannons, dub some data, make our highband feeds available — the comm system's stood down anyway, while we're in dock. You're making us look like — like right royal *dickheads*!"

She might have been the subordinate officer on this ship, but Jarrat knew at once, Cheng was the one with the practical experience and the motivation. Gordon Sylvestri could only have come up from some civvy flight school. A twenty-year unblemished and uneventful service record with Cygnus won him the liner command, but Jarrat doubted the man had done anything to earn it, other than steer well clear of trouble.

"I won't have my people endangered," Sylvestri was warning.

"Putting your people, or any civilian, in the field was never an option," Stone said tersely. "And if we break your hardware, file a requisition. NARC will replace whatever you want. In fact, NARC would come up owing you a case of beer."

"So long as we don't come up looking like morons and stinking like horseshit," Cheng added harshly. "Gordo, goddamn it!"

They were the words Jarrat might have longed to say, but he was wearing the department's official face here, and he had clamped his tongue with an effort. For a long moment Sylvestri seemed to hesitate, and then he threw up his hands and turned back to the door. "All right, go ahead. You're responsible, Margot. Just — be so kind as to keep me informed."

He was gone then, and Jarrat smothered a chuckle as Cheng made a very old, rather obscene gesture in his wake. "He's not usually such an iron-clad bastard," she said, making his apologies for him. "Something gets into him, brings out the moron in him. For what it's

worth, this ops room is powered up, and Security's on standby. Tell me what you need, the guys'll break it out."

"Cooper, Yu." Stone beckoned the Ravens who had been listening while they cleaned the AutoChef out of breakfast supplies. "Meet the Cygnus Security Chief. Handguns, plenty of ammo ... three or four viddrones. And a handful of audio bugs."

"Take the lift straight down to Deck 10, right on the keel, just forward of the engine deck," Cheng told them gleefully, as if she had not had so much fun in months. "I'll tell our guys you're on the way. Ask for Chief Frank Teague. I just woke him, so he might be an SOB. Any arguments, call me."

Cooper gave the diminutive Carrier Ops veteran a large-toothed grin. "Thank you, ma'am."

"And hustle," Stone called after the Ravens as they stepped out. "We'll be out of time in fifteen minutes!"

A dozen CRTs were online, and McKinnen had pulled up a chair. Her fingers were flying over a keypad, she was not even blinking as she followed the blinding array of text-based data which raced through the screen. "No chance I could bug you?" She did not even spare a glance for Jarrat or Stone.

"Not a chance in hell," Jarrat told her. "Bugs are fine for lab work and exercises, but you should know by now, in the field they only get you killed."

"I do know," McKinnen agreed, still watching the data. Red blips were rapidly turning to blue and green on her screen. "I spend most of my time in the lab, Jarrat. Forgive me if my work skews my thinking ... and I just hacked my way into Sheckley Security. We don't have time to go through channels."

"You did *what* —?" Cheng echoed, appalled.

"NARC's responsibility," Stone assured her.

"Which hangar am I looking for?" McKinnen was scrolling through a vast list, while wide shots of a hundred empty docking bays flickered through the CRT.

"27," Jarrat said quietly. "You should see a —"

"A Rand Arial," McKinnen whispered. "Got it. Apple green with electric blue trim." She had zoomed on the registration plate, on the high tail over the backswept module which housed the drive unit, and

her fingers pattered once more. "Running it. Let's see what worms wiggle out of this can."

The data came up fast. Sheckley Security was required to interface with Tactical, and any Tac department, on any world, had access to the same files, routinely refreshed through the data conduit every four hours. The Arial identified itself at once.

"Registered to a Tate W. Buchanan," McKinnen read off. "Buchanan ... now, there's a name I know."

"Brother of Neil, the smuggler, charter pilot for Equinox, who gave us a run for our money on Eos." Stone leaned closer to see the fine details. "The maintenance schedule is up to date," he mused. "Last safety checks are A-1. The hyperdrive was serviced two months ago."

"That's what it says," McKinnen said shrewdly. "You can also pay *trinkgeld* to an unscrupulous service garage to run your bucket of bolts through the car wash and rubber-stamp the maintenance schedule, keep Tactical off your back." She leveled a hard look on Jarrat, then on Stone. "Take nothing for granted. Check it out yourselves."

"You," Jarrat accused with a wry grin, "have been hanging out with NARCs too long."

"Tell me about it," McKinnen breathed. "I just found Buchanan for you ... you know he's hospitalized and in custody?"

"He's in Kravitz-Hogarth, thoroughly busted up." Stone's finger drummed on the workspace by the terminal. "Have they charged him formally?"

"Multiple charges," McKinnen snorted as she reached for her third coffee. "Drunk as a skunk in a public place. Causing an affray. Resisting arrest. Willful destruction of private property. Assault of a Tactical officer. Using profanity in the presence of minors ... not to mention being in possession of two pops of Buran. All of which works out to something between six months and three years, with labor, depending on how charitable the magistrate feels on the day."

Cheng whistled. "Well, shit. Let's see him wriggle out of this one."

"He won't," Stone said emphatically. He gave Cheng a wink and tapped the side of his nose. "I was career Tactical before I transferred to NARC. And we," he added to Jarrat, "are running out of time. Gotta hustle, kiddo."

“R/T,” Jarrat said tersely, to McKinnen. He had dug through a pocket to produce the little gold cigarette lighter, so familiar to any NARC. He slipped it into his breast pocket as Stone produced his own. “We’re on open channel, passive monitoring.”

“Reading you.” McKinnen had adjusted her comm pickup to the high NARC bands. “We’re going to lose you the instant you make the hyper transition.”

“Duh,” Jarrat muttered. “You know exactly where we’re going.”

“And trust us,” Stone added as he headed out. “By the time we get to Chell, Pete Stacy’s going to know we’re coming in hot.”

“Break a leg,” McKinnen called after them.

5

Two carry-ons were dumped by the door and Stone was listening to a whisper of feedback from Cooper and Yu. Their audio was channeled via the R/T in his breast pocket, and the Gold Ravens were in a buggy, already just short of Bay 27. McKinnen was eavesdropping on the bay, and with ten minutes' grace before Max Tyler and John J. Crenna were expected to show, there was no sign of activity. The Arial was locked up, cold, its engines dormant, only its antitheft system showing a trickle of power.

"Two minutes," Stone said softly.

Jarrat was searching for some oddment, and as Stone spoke he abandoned the hunt. The rest of their baggage would remain aboard and the cabin would be locked on their way out. The *Pacifica* would languish at Sheckley another eight hours and then dawdle to the orbital docks above Chell, while the Rand Arial — an executive light transport on the budget-priced, entry-level end of the market — would make the journey so much faster, speed was actually the problem.

"You're sure about this?" Stone asked as Jarrat turned toward him.

"Too late to back out now, anyway," Jarrat said with a twist of rueful humor. "We'd look like a couple of wusses. Our own descant

troops'd never let us hear the end of it. We wuss out, and it gets back to the Blue Ravens ... Gilly's boys'll have our balls." He caught Stone in a bear hug which gentled gradually into an embrace, and when Stone kissed him he opened hungrily to it, wanting more.

Whiskers rasped, the flashfire of Jarrat's willful feelings hit Stone in every nerve, and his hands slithered down to cup both his buttocks. The truth was, Kevin was a fraction ambivalent, and they both knew it. A large part of Jarrat was eager to play big-boy games, as he had all his adult life; but another part of him, just as large, hesitated, reluctant to place either of them in danger when they were under no obligation.

"Hey," Stone reasoned, "if we nip this in the bud now, we don't have to come back next year. Makes sense?"

"Makes too much sense. That's the problem. Tarataga," Jarrat said against his mouth. "White sand, green water. I want you on a rug on the beach, slick with sunblock, with a couple of drinks in you, under one of those stupid parasols ... keep the sun off the parts of you that don't see a whole lot of daylight. You'll get all the humping you can handle, Stoney, soon as this thing's over — and it's a tinker-toy setup. Pushing it over's going to be easy."

"Don't jinx it," Stone warned as they stepped apart, and swiped up their bags. He lobbed one at Jarrat and slung his own over his shoulder.

"You mean, don't be counting your chickens. Or do I mean eggs?"

"Like a kid from Sheckley would know the diff." Stone gave him back his own quip, and then thought about it. "Now I've seen the place, I'd have to guess the only chicken any Sheckley kid ever saw was battered and fried." He palmed the door open. "Time to scram, if we're going to."

"We're going to." Jarrat was out before him. "Doc, you hearing me?"

They were in the nearest elevator before McKinnen answered. Over the tiny speaker her voice was muffled by his shirt and jacket. "Not clearly, 9.4."

He moved the brown leather lapel aside. "Better? We're out and moving. The Ravens are done?"

"One more minute," she reported. "Audio bugs are in place."

Viddrones are being tasked. One's on station in the passage leading around the tocamac from the transit elevator, two more in the hangar, concealed. All drones are coming on line, and they look good. I'm getting plenty of realtime data." She paused to listen to another channel, and then, "Gold Raven 4 reports job done."

"Any activity in the bay?" Stone asked as they left the elevator and headed through the lounge just inside the docking rings. At this hour, shiptime, only a crew of cleaners saw them go by.

"Not a squeak. The Gold Ravens are out of sight, in a machine shop off the access passage. They have a good view of the hangar's interior blastdoors. You're securely staked out, 7.1."

"Let Vaughan and Reineck go in ahead," Jarrat said as they stepped out of the *Pacifica* into the cold, shifting air and harsh lighting of the rink. "You hear me, Cooper, Yu?"

"We hear you, Cap," Cooper responded. "We have your hardware ... will buzz you when Studly and Bimborella go by."

"Studly and —?" Stone echoed.

A car was waiting in the transit elevator opposite the docking rings, and Jarrat dumped his bag on the seat. He punched B-94 from a menu which was still partially visible through a bird's nest of graffiti, and the car closed up. It headed not up or down, but around the tocamac, and fast. Stone was looking at his chrono and saw a bare minute pass before the maglev 'zug' decelerated and growled into a station.

The lights here were sparse, broken, fluttering, some missing altogether. On the far side of the rink from the docks where the liners infrequently tied on, maintenance was of no priority. Empty bays opened off either side of a dim passage; the air was icy and smelt metallic.

"You ever get over to this side of the station, as a kid?" Stone wondered as they walked. He spoke in a bare whisper. Any sound seemed to carry and their footfalls echoed.

"Not often," Jarrat admitted. "It's too cold. They don't bother to heat or light what they don't use. It's just machine shops and hangars, nothing here for kids ... except a few new surfaces to graffiti." He was scanning the walls, which were covered with several layers of abstract art and a few shrewd, cynical slogans.

"You were an artist?" Stone glanced sidelong at him.

"Me?" Jarrat shifted the bag higher onto his shoulder. "I was too busy trying to stay warm and get fed. Hospice kids didn't have the time or resources to cause much trouble. The gangs that roamed this side of the station were from back there." He nodded over his shoulder. "The 'burbs above the mall. Not the rink."

They could see the open mouth of Bay 27 up ahead and Stone had begun to look for the side chamber where the Gold Ravens had holed up. The first he knew of them was Yu's voice, a rasping whisper from his right and a meter behind. "Here's your gear, Cap. Make it quick. They showed up two minutes ago. We heard the hatches open — your pigeons are already aboard."

They stepped into a machine shop where the only illumination was a faint lick of dim red from an emergency light. The shapes of heavy equipment loomed in bloody shadows. On a dust-dredged workbench by the door, the Ravens had set out the borrowed hardware. A palmpad was alive, relaying the data feed from the drones and audio bugs. Stone glanced once at it, and saw nothing moving in the bay.

The handguns were standard Tactical issue, nothing fancy. Stone was intimately familiar with them. Jarrat's preference was for the exotics, but this far off the beaten track, getting the ammunition for anything extraordinary could be too difficult, and Kevin knew it. He made scornful noises as he took one of the pair of Kovak .44 pistols, plus five loaded clips, a spare gas module and powerpack, but he made no other comment as he pocketed the lot. Stone's equipment was identical, and so familiar, he gave the Gold Ravens a wink. They knew he had 'come across' from Tactical.

"Stay put," Jarrat told them as he zipped the brown leather jacket against the sharp, damp cold. "With luck we won't need you."

"We'll be here," Yu assured him. "One thing, Cap. We overheard Studley and Bimborella on the way by. They're talking about waiting for some passenger. You know about this? Coop and me never heard nothing about a third party."

The fingers of ice scampering down Stone's spine could have been in his own nerves or Jarrat's. He could not tell, and nor did it matter. Jarrat's gray eyes had taken on a diamond-hard glitter. "It's a

new one on me,” Stone admitted. “Bloody civilian operations. They screw themselves up so fast, it’s a wonder they ever get off the ground.”

“Yeah, well, you watch your asses,” Cooper advised. “No third party’s gone past us yet, but ... you gotta know what I’m thinking.”

He was thinking, if the newcomer was fresh out of the underground in Elysium or Chell or Thule, it could be trouble. If the same person knew Jarrat as both Ray Landham and Max Tyler, or knew Stone as both John Crenna and John D. Strother, this half-planned, self-assigned bust could blow up in their faces. For a moment Stone genuinely hesitated, and he lifted a brow at Jarrat.

Adrenaline had begun to bring Jarrat’s body alive, like a thoroughbred under the starting gun. “The *worst* we can do is bust the smuggling business from this end,” he reasoned. “Take Vaughan and Reineck into custody, hand ’em to Intelligence, pump the buggers for what they know, send Stacy a file.”

“We can do it that way,” Stone suggested.

But Jarrat gave him an odd look. “If they vanish off the face of the nav-chart with half the Chell underground waiting for them to show, you know how fast the rats’ nest can disperse. By the time Intelligence had a file worth showing to Stacy, it’d be worthless. He’d be chasing Damon Vaughan’s buyers out of system, and then *we*,” Jarrat finished cynically, “would be looking down a gunbarrel at them in six months.”

Stone gestured to Cooper and Yu. “Stay put, monitor the vid-drones. If it goes pear-shaped, you’ll hear the shooting.”

He was moving as he spoke. Jarrat had cracked open the door and was listening. Footfalls echoed alarmingly in these cold, dead passages. If they heard nothing, they could be sure nobody was moving inside fifty meters. Jarrat stepped out with a glance back at Stone, and a moment later the machine shop closed up.

“You with us, Doc?” he whispered to the R/T.

“Getting every word,” McKinnen’s voice murmured. “When this third party shows, I’ll image him. I’ll see if I can get an ID before you shove off. Check in when you get the chance.”

“Will do,” Stone said tersely. “Now, put a lid on it. We’re in the damned hangar.”

Bay 27 was freezing, literally. Liquid water, issued as vapor from

the Arial's breather vents, had puddled in the low points of the battered deck and frozen solid. Icicles of dribbled condensation were suspended in fantastic shapes from the small gantry crane, and the cockpit viewports were steamed up. Lights shone from inside the Rand executive transport, but the hatches were locked up — most likely, Stone decided, to keep out the cold.

As he and Jarrat stepped into the hangar they guessed they had tripped a watchdog beam. Vaughan would have initiated passive security the moment he went aboard the Arial. A face appeared at one viewport; a hand wiped away the mist of condensation and, on cue, the mid-body hatch popped open.

The Arial was thirty meters from the sensor pod under her nose to the six flared vents high above her stern, and four meters across the body, with the stubs of almost vestigial delta wings at her tail, and forward-rake canards just behind the raised blister of the cockpit module. Four Arago generators in her belly gave her the freedom to be closer in shape to a brick than an aerodyne. She was only vaguely formed like an aircraft. In atmospheric flight, a fine-tuned Arago field split the air ahead of her like a sushi knife. For work in the vacuum, only rich kids' 'beauty shops' bothered to trick out a spaceplane with aerodynamic fairings. Tate Buchanan's Arial was factory standard, right down to the apple green and electric blue paint job.

A ramp growled down just far enough to let them step board. Jarrat was a pace ahead of Stone and his right hand was in his pocket, gloved about the Kovak pistol. He did not draw it, but called ahead, "Damon, you there?"

The spaceplane was designed around a central passage, with tiny compartments to left and right. Critical systems were accessed through deck plates, and a number of repairs could be made in-flight. Four escape pods were recessed into the hull to port and starboard, and two cabins the size of broom closets opened off to the starboard side, with the head and the cargo store opposite. The cabin lights were off-white and too bright for the eyeballs, after the gloom of the hangar, but the whole craft could be covered in one glance. Inside, she was gull gray with faux brushed-metal bulkheads, beige upholstery and blue-black decks, like a thousand other craft of her class.

The ramp growled back up at once and the hatch auto-locked. It

was Reineck who looked out of the cockpit. "Up here, Max. Damon's pre-flighting her. We can shove off, soon as our ride-along gets in."

"Not so fast, lady," Max Tyler warned. "I'm not going anywhere till we've taken a bloody good look at this crate."

She gave him a hot glare. "We came over from Aurora in it."

"Well, good for you," Stone said in fatuous tones. "Might mean you're lucky to be alive. Doesn't tell me one damn' thing about this ... bucket of bolts." He knew McKinnen would chuckle. "You want to hire some other pilot? Good luck finding one who'll head into e-space in a plane he hasn't even checked out."

"For Christ's sake!" Vaughan's voice exploded from the cockpit. "Leena, will you just — go shake a martini, or open a couple of beers. So they want to look her over. You think every man's as shit-for-brains dumb as Tate?"

She turned the glare on him now, and Stone thought she might have swung a punch at him if they had been alone. The friction between the two was growing exponentially, exacerbated by the stress of being on the run, short on money and saddled with a pilot like Buchanan. As soon as they were back in the money they would fly apart. This partnership, like their association with Buchanan, was a matter of sheer convenience. Vaughan had the contacts in the Rethan underground, Reineck had a few credits left to invest in an enterprise; Buchanan was just transport.

"Get on with it, then," Reineck rasped, over her shoulder as she headed aft. She stepped into one of the tiny cabins and the door slid over with a slam.

"Just do like I do, and ignore her," Vaughan said tersely as Stone moved up into the cockpit. "There's vacuum inside that skull of hers. Mama nature screwed up on the delivery of brains. She double-shipped the order for boobs instead. The arrangement ... has its compensations."

"So long as you're hiring a Companion," Stone said wryly. "I'd hate to have a bum tooth, get to the clinic and find out she's the dentist."

Vaughan actually laughed. "She's ... scary. More ways than you know." He gestured back down the body of the Arial. "Go ahead, pull up the deck plates, check her out. I'll admit, I don't know as much about these planes as I probably should. Never had the incentive to

learn, you know? Too busy living the good life in Argentia and Barsoom."

"Nothing wrong with that," Jarrat said philosophically. "I've been trying to do the same since I got out of Darwin's." He was studying the tech schematics, a scrawled-on compact chart taped to the bulkhead just behind the cockpit. "We ought to lift plates eight and nine, for a start. If the Aragos check out, and the Auriga diagnostics look healthy, we'll take a quick peek at power hookups and ignition sequencing, bug-out pods and life supports supplies ... and call it good right there, John?"

Shrewd as an old fox, he had named the systems in which any malfunction was likely to cause the plane an accident which was not survivable. If the generators were in good shape, the engine itself was structurally sound, the power conduits were properly set up and the Auriga ignition sequencing was 'timed' right, all other accidents in transit would only be a major inconvenience. They would shut down, drift, call for a salvage tug, and wait it out.

"Tools are in the locker under plate two," Vaughan said helpfully.

"Thanks." Stone gave him a guarded look as he opened it and lifted out two cases. "So, who's this ride-along we're waiting for?"

"A friend of mine." Vaughan said evasively. He reached into the fridge under the Arial's tiny wet bar, lifted out a beer and cracked the top. "You want one?"

"When we're done." Jarrat was peering into the Arago housing. From the same access port under plate eight, he could check all four repulsion generators.

"Old friend?" Stone prompted as he began diagnostics on the four escape pods. "Anybody I might know?"

"Couldn't say." Vaughan took a swig, parked his big frame in the nearest seat, and hung one long leg over the arm. "You spend much time on Rethan?"

"Some," Stone said cautiously. "In the Chell region mostly, but I got out of town, too ... flying visit." He gave Jarrat a rueful look. "Ballyntyre."

"Never heard of it." Vaughan gestured vaguely with the green glass bottle. "I never got much beyond South Atlantis. City of Eldorado. You know it?"

“Nope.” Stone relaxed a little, though he was keenly aware of the prickle of Jarrat’s nerve endings.

“Then you probably never heard of Spencer Carnaby.”

“Never have.” Stone felt Jarrat relax, muscle by muscle, and turned his attention to the job. He checked his chrono and began a mental countdown. They were trying to kill around three hours, and it was by no means sheer wasted time. McKinnen had made a good point; and as for Tate Buchanan, the man was fool enough that Stone wondered how he had ever come by the credits to buy the Arial. As Vaughan hauled himself back to his feet and wandered aft in search of Reineck, Stone stooped closer to Jarrat. “You ever hear the name?”

“No, nor any version of it.” Jarrat was not anxious. “For what it’s worth, the repulsion looks good. There’s a service sticker on the housing, from someplace called Memphis Salvage and Charter, dated eight weeks ago, which bears out McKinnen’s data. The chances are, Buchanan’s enough of a moron to *know* he’s a moron, and he doesn’t trust himself to tinker with the plane. I think she probably *is* good to go.” He looked up from the work and favored Stone with a wicked grin. “So we just blow off a few hours here, and then maybe swear up and down to Vaughan that there’s a few minor problems, and take our sweet time getting to Rethan.”

While the tachyon highband hurried a message to Chell. Stone leaned down further, planted a kiss off-center of Jarrat’s mouth, and went back to work.

6

The plan might have been to dawdle through the work and buy themselves time in Bay 27, but to Jarrat's amusement the hatch covers were back on, and he and Stone were cleaned up and surveying the ridiculously narrow 'double' bunk in the second cabin, before Vaughan's associate hurried into the hangar.

"Better late than never," Stone decided, and then dropped his voice to address the R/T in his pocket. "Did you image the man, Doctor?"

And McKinnen, exasperated: "I imaged him just fine, but it'll take some time to get an ID, and you're so late, I doubt Vaughan will want to hang around long enough to let me relay data to you. When you get into Chell, be careful."

"Now, why didn't we think of that?" Jarrat leaned out of the cabin and looked along toward the hatch.

Stone snaked an arm around him, yanked him in close and held him for as long as he dared, while they listened to the growl of the hatch and ramp. The Arial's cabin lighting dimmed and Vaughan yelled,

"Max! Get up here. You're on."

"Showtime," Jarrat said against Stone's ear. And then, to McKin-

nen, "Seems we're on our way, Doc. Plain sailing so far. Catch up with you in Chell." He gave Stone a hug that tested his ribs and then fended him off.

"Showtime," Stone echoed cynically.

"You don't think we'll romp this?" Jarrat demanded.

"I didn't say that," Stone said cryptically.

Jarrat was aware of his partner's contradictory feelings as they stepped out of the cabin which constituted their private space, but he let Stone keep his thoughts to himself for the moment. Instead, he turned his attention to the man who had just come aboard, and swore softly. Spencer Carnaby belonged groundside in any one of Rethan's old cities. He had the look of their people, and the sound.

The accent was uncomfortably familiar to Jarrat, who had spent far too much time buried in the heart of Death's Head. Carnaby was tall and thin, in fashionably battered denims and a gaudy vest, and his contact lenses were blue and gold, which made his eyes look odd indeed. His hair was buzzcut and bleached close to white, and Jarrat counted at least seven rings between the cartilages of his ears and nose. His eyelids were some shade of mauve that might have been natural, if he was dying of a gryphon overdose. He dumped two bags from his left shoulder to the deck and looked around expectantly.

"Max Tyler, Spencer Carnaby," Vaughan growled.

"Carnaby." Jarrat offered his hand.

The man took it briefly. "Charmed," he said disinterestedly. The odd eyes had already moved past Jarrat, and had fixed unwaveringly on Stone. He brushed past Jarrat without another word and thrust out his hand. "Call me Carney. My friends do ... my whole life's a carnival. And who could you possibly be?"

"Not one of your friends ... yet," Stone said with an arid twist of humor. "John Crenna." He took the outstretched hand.

"Well, hello, *Mister* John Crenna." Carnaby rolled the name on his tongue. He might have been purring, and he certainly held onto Stone's hand far longer than necessary. "Now, where did you get to?"

"I'm sorry?" Stone looked justifiably confused.

"All the rest of my thirty sorry years," Carnaby told him.

"I guess I had things to do." Stone retrieved his hand and fixed Jarrat with an amused look. "Let's get the hell out."

"Amen to that," Carnaby agreed. "I've seen enough of Sheckley to last me a lifetime. Who designed this pigpen in space? I've seen more style and taste in a gents' latrine in downtown Soho ... and if you know Eldorado, you know that's *not* a compliment."

In fact, like anyone who had sweated through grade school here, Jarrat could have answered his question regarding the design work; but he was not about to. He took Carnaby by both shoulders, physically moved him aside, and went ahead of Stone into the cockpit. Vaughan had already preflighted most of the Arial, leaving Max Tyler only the more specialist manual list, which double-checked the flight computer.

Beside him, Stone swiveled the copilot's seat in and pulled on a headset. Over his shoulder he asked of Vaughan, "What's your call-sign?"

"VJ-614," Vaughan told him as he stepped out of the cockpit. "They might want you to identify as Tate Buchanan ... you better not, or Sheckley Tactical will be all over us like poison oak, because they know exactly where Buchanan is."

Stone spun the seat around. "So who the hell do I identify as? You didn't think this through before you hired us on? Like you want us to bust our way out of here?"

"Just tell them you're me, honeybuns," Carnaby suggested.

The NARC men shared an exasperated glance and then turned toward him. "You're licensed to flyer hyper?" Jarart demanded.

"Honeybuns?" Stone echoed.

"In order of asking," Carnaby said blithely, "Yes, but I wouldn't trust myself to do it, and yes, because I'd consider the name ... apt." He was intent on Stone's legs. "I have a license, it's legal but I haven't flown e-space for so long, I sure as shit wouldn't fly across the system with me. I guess I need a refresher course."

"I guess you do," Stone agreed, and turned the chair back to the copilot's station. "Sit down somewhere, Cassidy —"

"Carnaby."

"Whatever. Take a seat. We're leaving." He was listening to Sheckley Air Traffic, and as the Controller responded to the auto hail he said into the loop, "This is civilian hyper transport VJ-614, requesting permission to leave Bay 27."

"Hold, 614." The ATC sounded bored or tired, or both.

"The ID's going to jog some memory cells," Jarrat guessed. "They know as well as we do, Buchanan's in the hospital."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Stone guessed. "There's no law against borrowing a mate's ride, so long as you have the license to fly it." He held up a hand to stop Jarrat. "Yes, Sheckley Control, I'm still here."

"You're not the registered owner or pilot of VJ-614," the ATC said sharply.

"He'd have a rough time flying this crate from a hospital bed," Stone said pleasantly. "No, ma'am, I'm not Tate Buchanan. I'm his best bud ... Spencer Carnaby." He spelled the name, while he snapped his fingers for Carnaby's attention, and then cupped a hand over the mic. "License code!"

"Anything for you, honeyb—"

"Carnaby!" Jarrat snarled, and snatched the card out of the man's fingers.

"Rethan civil reggo code R3-AL-43589," Stone read off the card. He covered the mic again and glared at Carnaby. "This had better run."

"It *will*," Carnaby protested. "It's a legal license, for godsakes. You think it's a forgery? Jeezus, what do you think I am?"

A smalltime, small-town hood with outrageous ambitions, Stone thought, who was presently begging for a broken nose. He flicked the card back in Carnaby's general direction and yanked the harness strap down across his chest. "Shut up, set your butt on a seat and stay put."

"Well, yes, *sir*," Carnaby purred. "Don't you just have to love it, Damon? Where did you stumble over this big, butch bastard? Any more like him back there? I want one for my own!"

"Carnaby!" Stone bellowed. "Vaughan, tie him down somewhere!"

"*Spencer!*" Vaughan roared. "If you don't get your ass back here *right fucking now*, I'm going to tape your mouth and lock you in an escape pod!"

"All right, jeez, all right," Carnaby growled. "Why is everybody so pissy? It has to be Sheckley, it makes people cranky."

His voice diminished as he wandered aft, and Stone glanced

sidelong at Jarrat. “Do I strangle him and toss him out the airlock, or do you want to do it?”

“We’ll toss for it,” Jarrat decided.

The ATC chose that moment to cut back into the loop. “You’re clear to proceed from Sheckley, Mr. Carnaby, with a twenty minute window. Please log your flight plan right now.”

Jarrat had already assembled it, and Stone had only to hit the transmit key. “Just your standard grocery run, Sheckley through to Rethan, no scheduled stops. Dead simple,” he told the ATC. “We’re good to go. Thank you, Control.”

Instruments showed nothing problematical in the Arial’s flight systems, and her life support was indicating 94%, well above the MAC’s acceptable threshold. Even if they found themselves drifting with minor technical trouble, waiting for a tug, the worst element of the predicament would be enduring Spencer Carnaby — and Vaughan had no more patience with him than had Jarrat or Stone. The threat of the escape pod was not a joke.

As the Aragos throttled up and the transport folded its struts into its belly, 27’s internal blastdoor sealed shut and the bay blew down to vacuum. The heavy, dull vibration through the deck peaked and smoothed out as the generators found their level. In the backwash of the Arial’s blue-white floodlights, flurries of ice dust spiraled into the hangar’s intake vents, and as Jarrat’s sensors read just a few bars of pressure on the hull, the exterior blastdoor dropped open to release them.

“Sheckley ATC,” Stone called into the loop, “this is civil transport VJ-614, departing at this time with a ’jump solution for Rethan pre-plotted.”

“Have a good flight, 614. Sheckley out.”

The floods darkened as the Arial climbed away from the ferro-plascrete outer surface of the rink. Jarrat spared the look-back scanner one bleak glance and deliberately turned his attention to the nav solution. Sheckley to Rethan was by no means a short passage, but it was well inside the time and distance they could make without dropping out for a midcourse correction.

“Aragos are humming,” Stone said quietly. “The Auriga reads in the green. Operating temperature, field integrity, the works. The nav

deck is online and loaded ... she's behaving herself and she knows where she's going."

Jarrat's eyes skimmed his own instruments, which confirmed what Stone was seeing. They were outbound, accelerating fast and counting down to the quarter billion kilometer exclusion zone. The Auriga engine's ignition sequencer had already interfaced smoothly with the nav deck's rudimentary AI; the machinery was only waiting for a 'go.'

Fifteen minutes out from Sheckley, Jarrat saw the green blip in the corner of his CRT. "We're clear for drive ignition. Handing over to automatics." He flipped the cover off the drive panel and hovered his right hand over a broad toggle switch which had lit amber. "On my mark. Three. Two. One ... we're good."

With a wrench, a curious falling sensation in the pit of the belly, an odd-pitched whine which seemed to issue from the air itself, and which would accompany them until they dropped back out of e-space, normal space shifted into the familiar mauve and scarlet dazzle of weird energy signatures.

Both Jarrat and Stone took one glance and looked away. Gazing into the rainbow-hued abyss of the e-space conduit had been likened to looking Medusa in the face. A man held onto his sanity by a whisker. "Seventeen hours to Sheckley," Stone said to no one in particular.

"Coffee, anyone?" Spencer Carnaby offered from the body of the Arial. "I brought along a bottle. Who's for a splash of the Irish and a snort of something *nice*? No? Oh, come on. Force yourself, Damon. Don't be such a killjoy or this trip's going to be deadly dull. Leena, my darling, what about yourself? Did anyone think to bring anything to *do* on the way? I mean, seventeen *hours*, if I heard John right. My gods, even if we got down to serious business and fucked each other's brains out, we'd still be searching the overheads for a year-old magazine before we —"

"*Carnaby!*" Vaughan bellowed. "You want to make coffee, fine. You want to snort a shot of brain-rot — fine. Can you do it with your mouth shut?"

"Did I say, killjoy?" Carnaby muttered acidly. "You bloody owe me, Damon. I was the one that opened doors for you on Rethan."

Without me, you and Leena would be freezing your nuts off — sorry, Leena, love; tits — on Sheckley for the next six bloody months before you managed to score work, probably scrubbing the latrines on a freighter headed somewhere brighter, or at least warmer than that cold, dark pigpen. You're lucky you even got out of Thule, and from what Leena told me, the *only* reason you made it out is because some flash young shooter from out of town grabbed you by the scruff of your bloody nasty neck and dragged you out of the shit!"

"Guilty as charged," Jarrat said philosophically. "I was the shooter."

"You?" Carnaby turned back to him, appraising him thoroughly at last. "Well, well. You want work in Chell, sugar? I can get you in." But he was looking at Stone. "Both of you. Oh, yes, I can get you right in."

"Maybe," Jarrat growled. "Just don't call me *sugar*." He shouldered by Carnaby and headed aft to put distance between them.

"Oh, could I ever get you in, John Crenna," Carnaby was crooning over Stone's shoulder. "Into work, as well. In Chell or Eldorado."

"Really?" Stone swiveled the seat out and studied him with a frown. "So you're well connected, are you?"

"Told you, honeybuns. I got Damon and Leena in. I know the people, if you take my meaning."

Three meters aft, behind the seats where Vaughan and Reineck were still sitting, Jarrat turned back and lifted a brow at Stone. "So, Carnaby, you, uh, had any connections in the old Death's Head organization?"

"Are you kidding?" Carnaby snorted. "I was one of Hal Mavvik's protégés. He was grooming me for great things."

"Then you'd know," Stone ventured, "if any of Mavvik's people made it out of the palace before the bust?"

Carnaby was basking by now, in reflected glory. "Sure, I know. A lot of the 'talent' made it out. Right out — not like Joel. You hear about him? It was a damn' shame. There was this big mother of a fight, someplace way out in the sticks. NARC took down Assante. But a lot of the others made it away. You looking for anyone in particular? Old boyfriends?"

"Are the runners back in the trade?" Vaughan interrupted loudly.

"Of course." Carnaby's eyes were still on Stone, devouring him limb by limb.

"They're back in the Chell underground?" Stone pressed as he released the flight harness and got to his feet.

"Where else would they be?" Carnaby sniffed disdainfully. "You're having some wild fantasy about them being out there, working for a living? Them? Give me a break, honeybuns."

"I'll give you several," Stone offered, "including your jaw and both legs, if you call me 'honeybuns' one more time."

Spencer Carnaby's mouth flapped open. "I'm wounded, fuckin' wounded. That was dirt-brutal, jack. That was so totally shitty, I don't *believe*. You want me to get you into the Chell underground, or what?" His tone became nasty. "Because I can get you filleted just as fuckin' easy!"

Halfway down the body of a transport which seemed to have shrunk radically in the scant few minutes since Carnaby walked aboard, Jarrat and Stone stopped, face to face and far enough from the others that low voices would not be heard under the growl of the generators and the background hum of air cycling and machinery.

"This bozo could hand Stacy the whole Buran syndicate to keep his butt out of jail," Stone said softly.

"Which means," Jarrat added, "he has to make it to Rethan alive. We don't get to strangle him."

"Play along?" Stone's brows quirked. "Let him think we want in?"

Jarrat was watching the man with darkly critical eyes as Carnaby fiddled with the AutoChef, trying to organize some exact blend of coffee. "If we tell him we want in, it means playing nice ... seventeen hours to Rethan."

"But if he thinks he's at liberty to babble," Stone reasoned, "you know the juicy tidbits we'll hear."

"He's quite the babbler." Jarrat sighed and raised his voice. "Okay, Carnaby. We want in."

"Terrific. Good for you." Carnaby was sullen now. "You want coffee?"

"Eventually," Stone told him. "You're going to be too busy to mess with coffee for a while, aren't you?"

"Me? Doing what?" Carnaby hit the 'Chef with the side of his fist. "This piece of crap isn't working."

"Yes it is," Reineck informed him. "You just don't know how to set it up right. Get out of the damn' way, Carny, let me fix it."

"Whatever." He was reaching for one of his bags, and Jarrat guessed he was about to resort to a 'pop' because he was bored, angry and doubtlessly frustrated that John Crenna was not likely to get cozy.

"Not yet," Stone said quickly, as Carnaby rummaged through his gear. "You're the only other licensed hyper pilot. You get the first watch."

"First *what*, now?" Carnaby echoed.

"Watch," Jarrat repeated. "Just get in the cockpit, keep an eye on the flight systems, and if you think anything is starting to look weird and the flight computers don't call it first, yell."

"Yell for you, I suppose?" Carnaby demanded petulantly. "Why, where are you likely to be?"

"Sleeping." Jarrat reached over and slid open the cabin door. "Damon, you reckon you know enough to take the second watch?"

"Oh, yeah," Vaughan said darkly. "Not that I could fly this bus out of trouble if she starts to get herself all screwed up, but ... I know what I'm looking for. I can watch her. And *him*," he added, mouthing the words behind Carnaby's back, as if he had no trust for the man whatever.

"Good enough," Stone decided. "You know where we are, if there's trouble. We'll take the last watch and bring her into Rethan."

The door slid closed on the tiny compartment and in the muted light Jarrat leaned both shoulders against it. The aggravation snapping at his heels might have been his own or Stone's; he suspected a little of both. But Stone was also ruefully amused, and Jarrat let himself embrace the humor as well as the man. Stone's teeth closed on the lobe of his ear and tugged, and at last Jarrat relaxed.

"It's not Carnaby's fault he's an idiot." Stone groaned as Jarrat's hands spanned his back and began to rub him there.

"He's a *babbling* idiot ... and I guess I've known a few like him," Jarrat admitted. "Mind you, I suppose he makes a good point about the buns." His hands slid down and molded about those specific globes.

Stone leaned back to look at him, and then turned around and

physically dumped him on the too-narrow, too-soft bunk. Jarrat's long legs scissored about him, pulled him down, and Stone surrendered without much of a fight. "There isn't enough space," he warned.

"Space is all relative." Jarrat punched the pillow into the corner and leaned against it. "It ain't the size of what you don't have, it's how you get around the lack of it."

A chuckle ambushed Stone, and Jarrat had allowed his empathic shields down a little by now, far enough to share the amusement. Deftly, deliberately, Stone was undressing Jarrat. His hands were everywhere, exploring territory which he already knew so well. The empathic shields lowered further, and the sensations of touching and being touched bounced back and forth, until it was difficult to tell where one flesh ended and the other began.

With a bass groan, Stone closed his eyes to savor the richness of the indulgence. "You're about to regale me with some story about life on an Army carrier," he said against the curve of Jarrat's neck and shoulder, "where there isn't a tad bit of privacy for the raw recruit, and how you learn to have sex in something the size of a boot locker."

"Maybe," Jarrat allowed as he kicked his clothes onto the deck by the bunk. "Then again," he added as he unclasped Stone's belt, "you could tell me the same stories about life in the Tactical Academy, for the raw recruit who isn't even allowed off the base for the first three months of training." He had peeled Stone out of the dark blue slacks and the steel-gray shirt. "But only," he finished thoughtfully as Stone settled heavily on him and shuffled down toward the bottom of the too-narrow, too-short bunk, "if you can talk with your mouth full."

7

From space Rethan looked blue-green, save for the industrialized zones around the spaceport cities of Chell and Eldorado, which stood on the eastern seaboard of South Atlantis. The smog layer there obscured any feature save the tallest mountains. Eldorado boasted three spaceports, but two were devoted to industrial freight, where almost every flight in and out was robot-piloted, and the third was a pocket-sized domestic field with an apron which would handle civvy 'lights' and shuttles bound for the orbital docks. Bulk human cargo flew through Chell, or else was processed directly through the Werner Hausman dock at geostationary.

But the Rand Arial was headed for none of these, and as she slithered into the Rethan system, fed herself into the complex traffic lanes on the long approach to the orbital facilities, Stone felt the first stirring of something very like unease in either his own gut or Jarra's. It was difficult to tell which.

Two minutes before, Kevin had asked Vaughan if he had messaged the port before Tate Buchanan's arrest, and booked any specific docking bay in Chell. Vaughan answered with a derisive snort, and a set of coordinates was keyed into the nav deck. Stone glanced once at

them and once at Jarrat. They were the coordinates of neither Chell nor Eldorado.

The civilian docks were in the east, a wide, white and elegant half-tocamac riding at geostationary high above Chell. The military dock orbited over the pole, where its business was more difficult to track. The network of comm, surveillance and weather satellites extended away in high orbit in every direction, and daisy-chained into the outer system.

"They see us," Jarrat warned as Vaughan hovered in the cockpit behind the pilot seats. "Two more minutes, Damon, and I'm going to have four different ATC monitors and a dozen AIs demanding an ident."

Without a word, Vaughan reached over between the NARC men and tripped the Arial's IFF. Stone lifted a brow at Jarrat and said over his shoulder, "You want to make us privy to the plan?"

"I preloaded it while I was on watch. It's need to know," Vaughan began.

"Yeah, and we need to bloody know!" Jarrat spun the pilot's seat around. "You come across with the info, Damon, or we're out of here so fast you'll be dizzy. You're dreaming if you think we're running the gauntlet of Rethan Tactical without knowing the hows and whys!"

"You have thirty seconds to call it, Vaughan," Stone rasped.

"Oh, sweet Jesus goddamn' Christ on a fuckin' bicycle!" Carnaby exploded. "It's not *your* IFF, Damon, it's *my* IFF, and it's a good one, a *real* one. I paid big money for this! Johnnny, my love, don't break out in a sweat. The IFF's genuine. Even as we speak, you're identifying as a company exec transport out of Elysium. The ATC system thinks you're an incoming corporate officer, headed in to cut a legit business deal. It'll check out. I paid an arm and a leg for this."

"Good enough." Stone gave Vaughan a glare. "And the landing coordinates you just punched into the nav deck?"

Even now Vaughan was reluctant to share information, but Carnaby's mouth was starting to open again, and Vaughan cut him off fast. "Small town in the outdistricts, south of Eldorado. It's high desert country, not much population, since not a lot of folks can ignore the smog pumping out of the refineries. Speaking of which, there's four cracking plants, producing industrial fuels and lubricants, backed up

against the quarries and pump-fields. It's bauxite, rutile sands and good, old fashioned crude. The place was already a mess by the time the main colony fleet got in, so they put a fuel element factory here, where nobody'd know or care. S'why they called the city Eldorado, *Johnny*. The whole south continent is pure paydirt. Motherlode. Where they're not tearing down the mountains, they're farming genetically engineered tropical hardwoods, accelerated growth technology, some sequoia gene-spliced ... something. Not my scene. You're heading for the town of Bundaberg. Enough information for you?"

"It'll do," Stone growled. "Max?"

"Good enough." Jarrat had switched the CRT at his elbow from orbital nav data, relayed from the deck, to local. The screen zoomed on the coordinates Vaughan had supplied, and he grunted as he saw the regional map. "You sure picked your spot, Damon."

"It has to be toxic and sizzling," Stone guessed. "Fuel elements, aluminum, titanium, logging, petrochemicals and synthetics for plastex, kevlex, whatever." He wondered fleetingly if the kevlex-titanium of their own riot armor had been manufactured here. "It's quite the vacation spot."

"It's a pit," Carnaby said curtly. "You won't even want to take a deep breath of what they have the nerve to call air around here. There's folks in Bundaberg who wear smog masks, like they do around the spaceport in Chell on heavy nights when the rimrunners have been in port and the winds quit."

Yet Bundaberg's population would stay on for the high pay offered by employers who must bribe people into the region, Stone thought. The toxic environment of industry gone mad did not send them fleeing for quiet, clean zones like Ballyntyre or the islands. Tarataga ... Outbound.

Even now, months later, a thought of the islands brought Stone a thread of pain, and Jarrat glanced sharply at him. Vaughan had gone back to sit with Reineck, and Kevin said quietly, "You okay, mate?"

"Just thinking," Stone said honestly. There was no reason to lie, even if he had been able to. In any case, Jarrat shared his feelings so keenly, deception would have been impossible. And he knew about

Riki Mitchell. "Thinking about the kid," he added, perhaps unnecessarily.

"I thought you might be." Jarrat reached out, took his hand, squeezed it for a moment, and then deliberately pulled on a headset. "Time to work."

"Time," Stone said acidly, "to work."

The Arial had cruised in the civil traffic lines for ten minutes while the face of Rethan expanded before them, from a blue-green orb to a horizon line which filled the forward cockpit canopy. They were about to duck out of the lanes and make the long, repulsion-assisted dive into the atmosphere, and Stone's right hand gloved about the joystick from which the Arial was flown in atmosphere.

"We're on our way in," he called back to Carnaby, who was still hovering behind the cockpit as if the view hypnotized him — whether of the planet's glaringly bright surface or of Stone's muscular legs. "Take a seat, Carnaby."

The man heaved a vast, theatrical sigh. "Journey's end, Johnny, and you're still not buying what I'm selling."

"I'm not in the market," Stone informed him, for at least the third time. "Go put your butt on a seat ... Aragos are set to reentry trim, we're headed down."

The slight buffeting through the airframe as the Arial began to ride the thick Rethan atmosphere convinced Carnaby to wander aft. Stone was intent on instruments, watching the range counters. Eldorado was over the horizon as they headed into the night side, shedding altitude fast as the fine-tuned repulsion cut the thickening air ahead and below, and blew off the furnace heat of reentry. The Arial dropped like a brick, and was radar-painted from four directions at any one time. The authorities knew she was there; they also believed she was out of Elysium, on legitimate business.

Night was velvet dark, sparkling with diamond-hard stars above and flooded with lakes of cloud below. City lights glittered between vast subtropical cloud banks, connected by the arcs and streamers of massive transcontinental highways. Before Stone's eyes had properly adjusted to the gloom, the sun was back on the horizon, a diamond ring which expanded almost too fast for the UV shielding to compensate.

The canopies darkened again and Stone glanced at the altimeter. "Crossing the coast of South Atlantis," Jarrat said quietly. "That's Isla de Trueno ... heading northeast."

Dead ahead were the Altair Ranges, and beyond them, the ocean of smog marking the industrial zone. The only intelligent thing the early colonists had done was to perform a climate survey and situate the mines, refineries, factories and processing plants in an area where the prevailing winds swept the pollution into an area bounded by the mountains. It was trapped there, quarantined, leaving other areas comparatively clear.

The locals called it the 'dead zone,' and the name was apt. Within its boundaries, the indigenous forests had perished in the first few decades after colonization, and most of the native life had vanished along with them. Little lived there now, and since the face of every foothill was marked to become an open pit mine, if it was not one already, it was too late for any environmentalist lobby to protest. The quarries were the domain of massive, ugly and efficient industrial robots; the few humans who worked in the factories and refineries lived in armor and monitored the machines via telepresence. In another century the zone would be mined out, and it could be reterraformed, restocked with life, but in this century it was as close to hell as any place Stone could imagine.

It was late morning on this part of Rethan. The daylight was smog-muted; the sky was an odd gold color. Running northwest to southeast, on the east side of the Altair Mountains, was the arrow-straight, gleaming maglev track of the main freight line which connected the zone with the sprawling plascrete wasteland of Eldorado South Field.

As the Ariel dropped in, low enough to see individual boulders in the snow on the heights of Mount Verglas, Stone glimpsed the south perimeter of the spaceport on the horizon. The fifty square kilometers of stained plascrete were punctuated by the spines of tracking arrays and the weird, exoskeletal shapes of cranes, gantries, and the robot derricks which dominated the wasteland like the life form at the top of the food chain.

Eldorado was way in the northeast, on the coast, where the constant sea wind kept its air comparatively clean, its skies clear.

Tansy Del and several of Harry's kids still lived there. Stone had no phone codes for them, and he doubted he or Jarrat would have been welcome, even though NARC was paying for the property in the mountains outside Ballyntyre to be rebuilt. They had lost a great deal in the Death's Head bust, and Tansy had not seen her husband in months.

The comm was alive with warning messages. Eldorado Air Traffic was on the air, issuing the standard alert that the incoming transport was about to enter their airspace and jurisdiction, and the pilot should conform to marked air traffic lanes and posted regulations. On an overlapping channel, Eldorado South Field was warning of incoming heavy lifters, and Stone had only to glance at his own air search CRT to see two cargo modules dropping in from orbit. At the same time, the refineries just to the south were clamoring about the risks of overflying the industrial zone, where Rethan United Technologies would not be held responsible for any misadventure. And from the local public radio station issued a synthreggae song with a lyric about a 'prophet from the plascrete' who blew up the world, and nobody noticed.

With a muttered oath Jarrat reached over and turned off the audio. Up ahead was Bundaberg, no less an industrial town than Sheckley, and hardly more appealing. This settlement clung to a bare hillside where no attempt had been made to beautify the landscape. Stone saw perhaps a hundred prefab-style buildings, blocky and drab against a vista of gravel and dust, under the gray-gold sky. Little was in the air; most of the vehicles he saw moving in the area were ground cars, and there was little reason to fly. A spur line from the maglev tracks connected the town with Eldorado. The express freight line passed five kilometers west of Bundaberg, headed for the spaceports and the city beyond, no stops.

"Coming up on your coordinates, Damon," Jarrat called. "You want to be a little more precise, or do we put this thing down in the parking lot outside the nearest pub and head in for a beer?"

"Close," Vaughan told him, "but not quite. Hold up here, Max and spin her around. Let me take a good, long look before ..."

"Before what?" Stone prompted, and his neck prickled as his hackles rose. "Damnit, you're expecting trouble? You expect to run

right into a pack of cityside shooters, and you didn't tell us word *one* about it!"

"Run right into — *what* did you say?" Carnaby bleated. "Damon! You didn't tell me nothing about trouble with Sanjay's people!"

This time it was Reineck who screamed Carnaby's name. Her voice cut right over the whining Arago generators like a harmonic, before she seized him by the shoulders and propelled him toward a seat. "They're just being cautious, Carn. For godsakes pop a handful of tranks before you blow a blood vessel!"

The Arial settled into the hover just a hundred meters above the flat, gray rooftops of Bundaberg, and Stone turned her slowly on her axis with her sensors wide open. "Two kids seem to be trying to light a fire in the trashpack behind the diner ... there's a guy crashed, flat on his face, beside the motel. Could be an Angelhead, might be just the town drunk. There's two ... no, three Companions out looking for trade, two chicks and a guy ... and in this town, I wish them joy. Two *very* fancy groundcars in the parking lot beside the tavern. If I give you a couple of license plates, Vaughan, would they mean anything?"

"Maybe," Vaughan grunted. "Probably not. Just stay where you are five more minutes, Crenna. Make sure we've been seen. Then put her down in the lot with those fancy cars. Bet your bottom credit *they* don't belong in Bundaberg."

"And what the hell would bring cityboys to a dump like this?" Jarrat muttered. He paused as Vaughan went back aft and began to rummage through the cargo locker. Reineck was giving her face a fresh coat of paint, and Carnaby had slumped into a petulant sulk. "Okay, Stoney," Jarrat said quietly, "time to be brilliant, if we're going to deliver the little twerp into Pete Stacy's paws."

"Speaking of whom," Stone whispered, "where the hell is Stacy?"

"He could be here already," Jarrat speculated. "Maybe his Tac team got in a half hour ago. It'd be smart to be invisible until he had a clear shot at all the players in this game. But if I'm guessing, I'd say he's probably getting his act together on another continent. Air Traffic should have been looking out for a green Rand Arial for at least the last hour, but we identified as a private flight out of Elysium, and if the IFF's as kosher as Carnaby thinks it is, Stacy's people can only *guess* we're the Arial they want. I'll give you short odds, Chell Tac pulled

their records and tried to get a match between this bird and anything legit they have on file out of Avalon. Trying to keep egg off their faces. And it'd take time."

"And we," Stone added, "didn't exactly drop into a docking bay in the heart of beautiful downtown Chell. Give him an hour to get a squad here?"

"Oh, yeah," Jarrat agreed. His brows quirked, and he glanced back down the body of the transport. "Maybe longer ... and I'm starting to feel this whole thing slithering through my fingers."

"No way." Stone brought the Arial to an even, buoyant hover and adjusted the downscan video to choose a place to put her. "Play it by ear, kiddo. Death's Head's gone, and all the top talent went with it. If these wannabe syndicate moguls are as dangerous as Carnaby — well, we might get talked to death." And then, loudly, "Vaughan, I'm setting her down."

"Do that," Vaughan barked at him. "And keep your jetwash off those cars!"

The easiest way to make enemies was to strip a brand-new chameleon paint job off the side of a dream car. Stone gave Jarrat a sidelong glance and chuckled. "It's been done," he whispered.

"You spent way too long in Tactical," Jarrat whispered.

"Tell me about that," Stone said philosophically as the Arial dropped in.

The public house was quaintly named Squire O'Malley's, and a few green plastex shamrocks were withering in the sun around the door. Faces peered out through the windows, but no one was eager to step outside. As the Arial's hatches opened, Stone knew why. The air was as heavy and aromatic as the toxic soup around the Chell spaceport. One breath, and he felt the cough reflex begin.

"Home, sweet bloody home," Carnaby muttered. "Fuckitall, I wish they'd just clean up the air. City Hall says it can't afford to do the job, but by jeez, they all fly Volvo and Marshall, and commute to the high side of Eldorado!"

"Local politics, Carnaby?" Jarrat was checking his sidearm. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"Nah. I'm an Eldorado kid, but they sent me to school in Chell —"

"You went to school?" Reineck pretended to gape at him.

“Smart ass,” Carnaby accused. “And yeah, I went to college. They thought I was keeping bad company at home, so they sent me to Chell. Dumb idea. I made two calls, the night I got off the shuttle, and I was plugged right in.”

“And you never looked back,” Stone said acidly. “You do a lot of deals in Bundaberg?”

“Enough to know some of the local political crap.” Carnaby was at the head of the boarding ramp, and he made a face as he took a lungful of the native atmosphere. “And you *know* they could clean up the air, they just won’t, because it’d mean they can’t have a new raceplane apiece this year.”

He was probably right. Stone watched the man swing his bags over both shoulders and make his way down the ramp. Carnaby was coughing animatedly before his designer loafers hit the plascrete. A pace behind him, Reineck swore vividly as she took a breath. After the artificial, ‘canned’ air aboard the Arial and on Sheckley, the taint of dirty industry was like a physical blow. Stone was reminded also of Eos, the sister moon of Avalon itself, under the sullen green gaze of Zeus, where heat, dust and smog combined into a wicked environment.

The rasp of a weapon being primed made Stone glance sidelong at Vaughan, though he made no comment. Jarrat had also checked his sidearm, and Stone himself was about to. Vaughan was carrying two, one nestled into the curve of his spine, the other in a sneak holster against his left calf.

And the ‘load’ was packed into a deceptively small, purple plastex duffel which sat at his feet. He swung it up and over his shoulder as voices began to call in the parking lot, and gave Jarrat and Stone a dark look. “Time to get this freak show on the road.”

The voices calling across the Squire O’Malley’s lot belonged to Carnaby and a man with a thick Chell accent. Stone moved to the head of the ramp, where he could hear without being seen. Jarrat had ducked down to catch a glimpse of the man at the door of the tavern, and Stone asked softly,

“You know him?”

But Jarrat made negative noises. “He wasn’t with Mavvik’s crew, at least not while I was there.”

“You’re late,” the man was saying to Carnaby. “We were pulling

out in the morning. Three freakin' days you've kept us waiting in this cesspit." He was wide shouldered, big bellied, with a bald head, expensive city clothes and a gun held loosely in his left hand.

"Trouble on Sheckley, man," Carnaby told him. "You know Tate Buchanan as well as I do. Everybody knows him. He's a good pilot, but there's a pile of pony poop where his brains should be. Are you ready for this, Sond? The man gets himself beat up and arrested, under guard in the meat works, about three *hours* before we're due to shove off. We had to find another pilot, and for once we lucked out."

"Who'd you get?" the man called Sond demanded, and Stone heard the sharp edge of suspicion in his tone.

"You know Maxie Tyler? Friend of Damon Vaughan's from way back," Carnaby said with a casual exaggeration which made Stone shudder. "Turns out, he hauled Vaughan's ass out of NARC trouble, right before they busted Scorpio."

"Never heard of him," Sond said tersely.

"Hey, ask Leena," Carnaby suggested. "Or ask Damon ... Vaughan! Where the hell are you?"

At that moment, Vaughan was loitering on the ramp just below the hatch, as if he wanted to size up the opposition. Carnaby had referred to his contacts as 'Sanjay's people,' but Stone had not heard any other mention of the name.

"Vaughan!" Carnaby yelled. "What's your problem? Get out here! Leena, will you go drag his butt out here?"

She was not about to reason with Vaughan, and after being cooped up on Sheckley and then on the Arial, her temper was foul. "Damon, for chrissakes!"

Only Jarrat and Stone heard the muttered curse before Vaughan headed down the ramp and showed his face. From his vantage point, if Stone stooped he could see the doorway of Squire O'Malley's. Three figures were framed there, the big, burly Sond standing out in the full sun, another man leaning on the frame of the door, and a tiny woman in the shadows, half-seen behind him. "You know any of those faces?" Stone wondered as Jarrat hunkered down for a clear look.

"No. I think we're clear," Jarrat said carefully. "But they don't look too happy to see Vaughan ... watch yourself, Stoney."

It seemed Vaughan and Reineck knew none of them on sight

either, and Carnaby was the hub around which this deal spun. “Damon Vaughan, George Sondheim. For godsakes shake hands and make nice. We got business to do — and I have to get out of this damn’ sun, and this crap they call air. You can *feel* your chromosomes turning into freaky little mutoids out here!”

For several moments Sondheim hesitated, and then he gave his hand to Vaughan, and Vaughan shook it briefly. “You got the gear?” Sondheim growled.

It was the cue to move, and Jarrat and Stone shared a wry glance before they headed out into the heavy, toxic and humid air. The heat was oppressive, the light glaring, and Stone slid gold glasses onto his nose. Carnaby was still babbling, making introductions, and Sondheim’s flinty blue eyes were sizing up John Crenna and Max Tyler now. Stone did not blame the man for being cautious. As Crenna, he himself was the last link in a tenuous daisy chain of recommendation which began with Spencer Carnaby, and he knew he must look suspicious. All Sondheim knew was that Carnaby knew Vaughan, who believed he was alive and at liberty because of Max Tyler’s quick wits and ambition, and Tyler recommended Crenna, his sometime partner.

“The *gear* is right here,” Vaughan was saying as Jarrat and Stone stepped off the ramp. “You want to do business? Do like the man said, get in out of this soup you guys call air. Buy me a beer, show me your money.”

“John Crenna, Max Tyler,” Sond was musing as he looked Jarrat and Stone up and down thoughtfully. “You won’t mind if we check you out.”

“Be our guest, Sondheim,” Jarrat invited. “We’re still two jumps ahead of Tactical ... and three ahead of NARC. You want to introduce your friends?”

For the moment Sond relented. “Sure. Eric Groffe, Valda Ha-wass.”

“Sanjay’s people?” Jarrat quirked a brow in Carnaby’s direction. “Who’s this Sanjay guy? He doesn’t do his own business?”

Carnaby snorted. “Like you’d have expected Hal Mavvik to get out on the street, dirty his hands with the ass-end of the trade? Sanjay Targ would take your head off for suggesting it.”

"Would he, now?" Stone stored away the name as he cast a careful glance about the dusty alleys and desiccated thoroughfare of Bundaberg.

If Stacy had made it here with a Tac team, this was the exact moment when he should make his move. In less than a minute the whole company would be inside, with enough cover to defend to make winking them out an unpleasant prospect. Stone risked a glance around but saw nothing; he waited — knew that Jarrat was playing the same waiting game — and then the sense of urgency dwindled and they relaxed.

Round one was over without a shot fired. Round two would be more interesting. By Stone's calculations, if a squad from Chell Tactical was going to show at all, it was due in the next forty minutes. Allowing for delays, assorted bungling and ineptitude, he adjusted the estimate back to an hour. He and Jarrat had stepped in out of the heat and glare, into a wide, dim hall with battered furniture and a mock-antique bar, when he whispered,

"We need to stall the whole lot of them. Buy time."

"We might not be able to corral the whole bunch," Jarrat said quietly. "If it comes down to playing options, of the whole company I'd take Carnaby."

"Like he says, he knows the people," Stone said, amused, "and if Stacy offered a trade, what he knows in exchange for a new name, new face, new colony —"

"You'd have to tape Carnaby's mouth to shut him up," Jarrat agreed. He thrust both hands into the pockets of his denims and gave Stone a speculative look. "A little insurance, maybe, against this going up in smoke?"

"Hoi, Johnny!" Carnaby's voice cut across the background chatter of O'Malley's patrons and the jangle of music from the boombox. "Whatchya got to talk about that's so damn' secret, you can't come and have a drink with friends?"

"Friends?" Stone echoed.

"Hell, twenty hours packed in a tin can, all five of us," Carnaby snorted. He already had a glass in either hand, beer in the left, whiskey in the right. "If we weren't buddies, we'd have killed each other. Johnny, what're you drinking?"

Something very like amusement was twisting through Jarrat's belly, and Stone could not resist it. They had never been, would never be, telepathic, but he knew instinctively that they were thinking the same thing. "What the hell?" he said as he turned a chair toward him and straddled it. He fixed Carnaby with a genial look. "You ever hear of a Green Martian?"

Carnaby was seduced either by the promise of an alcoholic delight he had never enjoyed, or the sly wink John Crenna gave him — as if it were a hint that his fantasies might still play out. Jarrat stifled a chuckle as Carnaby joined them at the table beside Sondheim's. A moment before, Vaughan had opened the duffel, while Reineck sauntered away to the bar. She seemed to be trying her charms on the bemused young barman.

"A Green Martian?" Carnaby's voice was whiskey-rough. "I'm all ears."

"Absinthe, tequila and sweet sake, on the rocks," Stone told him. "Squeeze a fresh lime into it if you need your vitamins, stir with a cinnamon stick ... and keep 'em coming."

"I'll get 'em in," Carnaby volunteered. "What'll you have, Maxie?"

"A beer," Jarrat said acerbically. "Somebody's got to drive when you two have finished drinking yourselves under the table." The gray eyes had a wicked sparkle as he looked over at Stone and added, "Somebody has to haul you somewhere and pour you into bed."

Either the suggestion or the double whiskey Carnaby had just swallowed whole inspired sounds that might have been called giggling. "Like I said, I'll get 'em in," he growled. He cut a line for the bar where Reineck had discovered some reason to take off her jacket, revealing a paucity of fabric and a great deal of skin beneath. The barman might have been twenty at a stretch of the imagination. He did not stand a chance.

"Absinthe," Jarrat echoed, "tequila and sake. You made that up."

"Not guilty." Stone watched the barman taking notes. "You need to be in the citybottom bars, groundside in Chryse or Marsport, maybe midnight or two in the morning, when all the Companions start to look alike and all your spine wants is a mattress ... so you pop a couple of ups and ignore it."

"You—?" Jarrat was amused and surprised.

Stone shrugged. "Once or twice. I was eighteen, starting to feel squeezed into someone else's mold, and not happy about it. Looking at seven years of college and then a lifetime of politics, because my family planned it that way. I guess I got a little ... rebellious."

"Busted?" Jarrat wondered.

"Not once." Stone sat back and studied his partner with a wry smile. "And I know I was just lucky. I nearly killed myself one night, flying an ultralite when I had three sheets in the wind. Scared the crap out of myself." He gestured vaguely as the memory bedeviled him. "I was trying to bury myself in something, anything, to make the pain stop. Grief. Like you, like Vic Duggan and how many others? You lose someone to Angel and you go a little mad."

"Mad enough," Jarrat said, dropping his voice because Carnaby was on his way back between the tables with a bus tray he had pressed into service, "to tell your family to go blow itself, and sign a Tactical contract."

"And here we are." Stone's hand lay warmly along Jarrat's demin-clad thigh, under the table.

The tray clattered down and Carnaby pulled up a chair. The barman had made up a pitcher of Green Martian, flanked it with three ice-filled schooner glasses, and Jarrat's dark ale looked innocuous by comparison. Stone sat back, and while Carnaby poured he watched Vaughan, Sondheim and the others at the next table. The duffel sat between them; the quality of the merchandise did not seem to be in question; the price did.

Without hesitation, Stone identified Eric Groffe as a shooter. He was half Sond's age and size, whippet thin, with a straggle of thin blond hair and eyes so pale, he might have been blind. But those eyes were hard, and they were everywhere, covering the door, the bar, the other patrons, and particularly the unknown quantities of Tyler and Crenna. In the clammy coolness of the tavern's a/c he wore a linen jacket, and Stone saw the bulge of a large weapon under it.

By contrast, Valda Hawass was the anomaly. She was not merely old, she had either never optioned the genetic tweaks available to anyone with the money to pay, or she had outlived their usefulness. Age encroached in spite of medical technology, and eventually the line was reached where one was simply ancient. Valda Hawass was frail,

birdlike in her thinness, with the roped blue veins and parchment skin of one many decades past the century. But her eyes were dark, still keen, and it was she who was taking notes, working a palmtop.

They were trying to fix a price, and Hawass was factoring in everything from the cost of hiring Tyler and Crenna to bailing Tate Buchanan out of the Sheckley lockup before he could say the wrong thing to the wrong person and bust everybody. Gnarled old fingers hovered over the palmtop, and she was talking via comm to some third party who might have been as far afield as Eldorado.

Jarrat leaned over the table, closer to Carnaby. "Groffe makes sense. He looks like a punk shooter. But who the hell is she?"

"Her? She's *Madame*," Carnaby said, slurred, as he contemplated his Green Martian as if it held cosmic secrets. "She's *blood*. And she's the brains."

"She's blood?" Stone echoed, wondering if he had heard correctly.

"Blood kin," Carnaby elaborated, "to young Sanjay. As in, Targ. She's his great-grandmother's sister, or something like that. She used to wipe Hal Mavvik's ass when he was knee-high. You thought Hal Mavvik was hatched, or maybe drilled out of a quarry? Dead wrong. Ol' Hal, he come up, right outta the wrong side of Chell." The more Carnaby drank, the more garrulous he became, and the more slurred was his speech. "Ol' Hal, he drug hisself up outta Moorfield, and thass sayin' a whole lot, cuz Moorfield ain't nothin' but shacks way too close to the spaceport. Poor folks live there, no place else to live, y'see. An' the Mavviks and the Targs were outta the same backwaters dump, and the Hawasses were the link between the clans, three, four generations back. They come out here on the colony sleeper from ... some place juss south of tha' sea thass at the big end of Africa, y'know the one? Dunno what they call it. And y'know, they used to spell the name of Mavvik with a Q, but then they changed it cuz everybody was spellin' it wrong anyway. And they started out wreckin' trucks and skytrucks and ... stuff." Carnaby had lost the thread of what he was saying, and busied himself with the pitcher and his empty glass.

In fact, NARC had researched Hal Mavvik back through two generations. But not three. The name of Hawass had not appeared in their files. Stone sat back, leaving his almost-untouched drink on the table, and regarded Jarrat with rueful amusement. Jarrat's voice was

a bare murmur, Carnaby was oblivious as he said, "You always miss something. Nothing's watertight. Damn it ... Death's Head's trying to get its oars back in the water."

"And they're doing it," Stone whispered. "It would have worked, if Tate Buchanan hadn't got so pissed, he took on a couple of Sheckley Tac officers."

"An' another thing," Carnaby said too loudly, "you oughtta know *Madame* keeps ... finger on the pulse. Chell pulse. Iss *Madame* who knows the market, and whass worth how mush, an' where, an' ... all tha'. She used to keep ol' Hal straight, 'bout thasside o' the trade." He took a large swig and belched. "No good at money stuff, wuz ol' Hal, not tha' you'da said it to 'is face, o'course, cuz he wuz *real* good at makin' people disappear ... if you know whad I mean by dis..."

The glass fell out of his hand and he inclined slowly forward until he very gently hit the table.

"One down," Jarrat said quietly, "five to go. Don't underestimate *Madame*. The others may have the brawn, but I'm going to guess she has enough brains to account for any six ordinary people. You and me included."

"And she's on the comm with someone," Stone added in the same whisper, "*and* she keeps looking at us."

"At me," Jarrat corrected. "I'm getting the proverbial bad feeling."

"Like, she knows you?" Stone's brows rose. "How? From where?"

"I don't know," Jarrat admitted. "I never saw anyone remotely like her at the palace. Day and night, it was full of bimbos, of any gender you can imagine and a few you can't. Christ, it doesn't mean she wasn't there, though. She came in overnight, maybe, and was gone in the morning before I was awake. I knew there were video bugs in some places."

"You were under surveillance?" Stone felt the chill which had invaded Jarrat's chest, like the scamper of icy fingers.

"You expected to be, when you were on some half-assed kind of probation on Mavvik's staff," Jarrat muttered. "A couple of times Lee warned me, we were going to be watched. You remember Lee?"

"The Companion," Stone murmured. "Nice kid. Way too good to be working for Mavvik. I was glad he made it out of there."

Jarrat was intent on Valda Hawass now, and the woman was

studiously not looking at him any longer. There was a tightness about her lips, which spoke to Stone. She knew that he knew that she knew. "Lee had been there a few months before I joined the crew," Jarrat was saying. "He knew where the video bugs were. We had one in our apartment for a while. Lee liked to tease — God knows, it was his job, and he was good at it. One time, he had me do him on the table, and he could hardly do it for laughing. He said, 'Give the old dame a thrill.' I just remembered."

"This whole thing," Stone said quietly, "is about to go south. We're going to need some backup, kiddo, and fast."

"One of us better call Stacy. We can get a call through from the Arial," Jarrat suggested.

"And then?" Stone mused. "We can maybe grab Carnaby, lock him down, and just get the hell out before the shooting starts. We'll take the Arial, if we can get aboard."

"Sounds like one hell of a plan," Jarrat said in an acid whisper, and then he raised his voice. "Carney?" He leaned over the table. "Carnaby! Damit, Damon, your man's comatose."

With a grunt of annoyance, Vaughan turned toward them. "Spencer! Oh, Christ. Give him a kick, Max, see if you can get him moving. Leena, get hold of some coffee, and make it strong."

"He's out of it," Stone said flatly. "He needs to sleep it off. How about me and Max get him back to the Arial, bed him down?" He was moving as he spoke. He and Jarrat had Carnaby by the arms and had slung him between them when Sondheim growled,

"Take him upstairs. The door at the top, on your left. Dump him on the bed and get back down here where I can see you."

"If that's what you want," Max Tyler said easily. "We're only trying to do the decent thing here. If it bothers you, fine."

"Take him up," Vaughan sighed. "Leena, go help them."

"Help them yourself," Reineck said testily. "He's *your* bud, Damon, and he's drunk as a skunk, and he stinks. Move him, he'll be puking — and he *won't* be puking on me!"

"We got him," Stone told Vaughan. "It's no big deal, Damon. Let him sleep it off, he'll be fine in the morning. He just can't hold his booze. Like Tate, I guess," he added deliberately.

They were manhandling Carnaby to the stairs, which curved up

and away to the left. Rooms for rent were over the bar, at back and front of the tavern. Stone was uncomfortably aware of eyes following them, and halfway up the stairs he glanced back. Both Hawass and the shooter, Eric Groffe, were intent on them, and the woman was talking to the comm again, in a guttural whisper.

"We've been made, no doubt about it," he said softly as they hauled Carnaby on up. "You want to make the first move, while we still have something resembling an advantage?"

"Yeah." Jarrat's boot gave the door a kick, and it slid open. "I can tell you, Reineck's no use in the field. She's excess baggage, and Vaughan's going to dump her, soon as it starts." He let go of Carnaby, and the man fell in a boneless sprawl just inside the door. "Vaughan's good, and he's well armed. Better than we are. Sondheim looks like the traditional badass. He reminds me a lot of a minder called Earl Barnaby. But the one I'd put down first and fastest is Groffe. It has to be a kill shot, Stoney ... anything else will come back and bite us. The man's a shooter, don't underestimate him."

"Do it," Stone said tersely. "You take Groffe, and I'll put a couple of rounds in Sondheim, immobilize him while they're still trying to work out which way to dive. He's one Stacy's going to want alive."

"The one Stacy wants," Jarrat said with a wry humor, "is Valda Hawass! Goddamnit, Stoney, how did we miss that one?"

"Because there's never been a reason," Stone said pragmatically, "to take a data probe back three generations. And because the data wranglers at Central who assemble the background files are all twenty-somethings, still trying to get past the novelty of having their acne clear up. They don't consider anybody as old as Hawass a threat. Mistake." He reached over, hit the door release, and drew the .44 caliber Kovak from the holster at his left side. "Now?"

"While we have half a chance," Jarrat agreed, and was already moving back toward the stairs as he drew and primed his own weapon.

8

He was three steps down, with no good line-of-sight on Sondheim's shooter, when the whine of big engines rattled the windows. One stair behind and above him, Stone swore quietly and they froze, pressed back against the wall and keenly aware that their vantage point offered poor cover.

For a moment Jarrat hoped the engines would pass over — perhaps a local kid was taking an overblown buildup to the garage for tuning. But the downdraft of big Aragos continued, intensified, and the pitch of the engine shifted as it dropped into the parking lot where they had left the Arial. Its shadow cut the sun for several seconds, plunging the front bar into companionable dimness.

"It has to be Sondheim's backup, and they're not going to let us near the Arial. You notice we're outgunned," Stone observed.

His tone was level, but Jarrat felt the surge of his adrenaline, the heavy beat of his pulse. They could easily die here, in a nothing town buried in a toxic wasteland, and if Rethan ATC had bungled — never picked up the incoming Rand Arial — no one would ever know where two NARC captains ended their careers.

The repulsion generators shut down, and hatches were growling

open in the lot right outside the door. The Kovak pistol felt ridiculously feeble in Jarrat's palm. He would have traded a decade of his life for riot armor and the Colt, but the desire mocked him.

Careful, too slow to catch the attention of Groffe or Sondheim, he backed up the stairs. "*Out*," he said quietly. "There has to be a back way down. Let's see if we can get out with Carnaby, and call it good. Pete Stacy can take up the slack, if he ever gets his ass here."

"Give him time," Stone said tersely as he hit the door release again. "He could be halfway over from Chell. There's also the jurisdiction question. Tactical is choked in its own red tape, it's a tradition."

"We can cut right through it," Jarrat mused, "if we can make contact." The door had slid open, and he seized Carnaby by the collar to roll him over. The man was out cold, snoring lightly, and knew nothing as he was unceremoniously slung over Stone's left shoulder. Jarrat went ahead, away from the stairs and the bar. He had glimpsed a 'private, staff only' sign in the end corner, and as they drew closer his hunch proved out.

The storeroom, from which issued the caustic chemical smells of cleaning fluids, was right beside the fire stairs. He palmed open the door, held it open for Stone to go through, and blinked in the sudden gloom of a plain concrete stairwell. Old graffiti was painted over, cigarette butts and beer cans littered the stairs, and someone had been squatting here recently. A blanket, a flashlight, stale food and a battered magazine were underfoot as they made their way down.

The door at the bottom was heavy, almost wedged. He set his shoulder to it as Stone grunted under Carnaby's weight. The door opened a hand's span and he looked out into the publican's yard. Immediately to his right was a loading dock and, beyond, the trash-packs. To his left was the corner around which lay the parking lot. He glanced back at Stone, and with the tip of his tongue wet his lips.

"We're not going to get close to the Arial, but from here I can see the trunk of one of those fancy cars Vaughan was worried about. We have a clear shot at it ... nothing moving between us and it."

"It's a groundie," Stone warned. "I saw it on the way in."

"Beggars," Jarrat said succinctly, "can't be choosers. Two ways to go, Stoney. Out and run, while we can ... or hole up, shoot it out, wait for Tactical to get here. And this building's a little flimsy. Give me

the Colt, and I'll cut out walls and ceilings. We don't know what Groffe's carrying, much less Sond's backup, and we don't want to take the risk."

"And if Stacy doesn't get here *muy pronto*, we're screwed." Stone shifted the unconscious Carnaby across his shoulders. "Out. I'm right behind you."

Jarrat gave the Kovak a glare of disgust and slid the door open further, just wide enough for him to pass through. "Stay put while I recce," he murmured.

"Make it fast," Stone said in a harsh undertone.

The heat and bad air hit him like a body blow, reminding him strongly of Chell. The humidity would have made breathing hard enough, but the smog made his throat rasp and his lungs burn. He would have sworn a rimrunner was testing its launch engines just upwind of Bundaberg.

He heard voices as he slid along toward the corner of the building. Three men lounged in the open hatches of a Skyvan, a big, metallic-blue Marshall that inspired a tingle in his nerve endings. He would never see a Marshall without thinking of Eve Lang and scenes he wished he could forget.

The ground car parked at the corner was a rare beauty, and he wondered if luck might be about to smile on them for the first time since they arrived. It was a Volvo Eidolon, a sports roadster in soft matte bronze, a long, low aerodyne with twin half-teardrop gullwings. And the left-side canopy had been left cracked open. A doberman cross that was probably supposed to be in the car had hopped out and was watering one of the Marshall's rear struts, on the far side of the Arial.

Without a sound, Jarrat returned to the door and held it open. "Duck down, and you can use the Volvo for cover. Dump Carnaby in the back while I get this tricked up."

Even if Jarrat had not been hotwiring anything that drove or flew since his third week with the Army, NARC would have repaired the breach in his education. In fact, there was no real 'trick' to trick-starting a vehicle. Every one was factory-delivered with an emergency override common-code which was known to Tactical, Fire Control and most branches of the Forces, as well as NARC. Starfleet was probably

the only Service that had no requirement for the code, since they never stood duty on the street.

Like an eel, he slithered along the bottom of the wall and in under the gullwing on the left side. The roadster drove from the right, and he stretched across both seats to reach the keypad. The computer was always 'on' and idle, even when the repulsion and drive jets were shut down. He keyed in the code — 445566-321-987 — and the machine's tiny brain stirred awake in manual mode.

No automatics came on, but the dash display lit, showing 'ignition available,' and a summary of power systems, fluids, software subsystems coming online. He glanced once at the nav information and muttered a curse. He saw at a glance that getting out of Bundaberg would be easy, but with the town behind them, there was almost nowhere to go.

The car rocked gently on its parking field as Stone shoved Carnaby into the cramped rear, and Jarrat hauled himself into the driver's seat to make space in the front for him. If anyone had been looking at the roadster, they would have seen it rocking, but Dame Fortune had apparently chosen a side to play on. Only the dog looked along at the car, and when it began to bark a voice yelled out of O'Malley's for it to quiet down.

Still in the hatches of the big blue Marshall, the three men who had come in on Valda Hawass's orders were comm-conferencing. They might have been talking to Sondheim and Groffe, or to others who were still in the air or on the road. Jarrat could not even guess, and he and Stone were out of time.

Stone was in the left-side bucket seat, but he had not dropped the gullwing. It would lock down with a heavy sound which would betray them. And from the look on his face, Jarrat knew they shared similar thoughts as well as the mirrored sensations of an adrenaline surge which made the pulse race and sweat prickle.

"They'll be after us, as fast as they can get the Marshall in the air — and the Rand," Stone said baldly. "Let me fix that. Swing us around broadside."

"You'll get exactly two shots," Jarrat warned as he ran up the harness.

"I only want two shots." Stone was hunched down in the seat. He

looked up and back at Jarrat, and the blue eyes were glittering with some wicked humor.

He had already marked his targets, Jarrat knew. He hit the igniter and the jets whined up to a howl. The Arago in the deck growled, bass and resonant, as repulsion came up, and Jarrat dropped the shift into drive. "You ready?"

"Hit it," Stone told him.

The trick was in sheer speed. The three men who had arrived in the Marshall turned toward the roadster as the jets began to whine, but only the owner of the Volvo — who was still inside O'Malley's — knew for certain what was happening. The lag time of speculation and reaction bought Stone four clear seconds to make the two shots he had already set up in his mind's eye, and he was not about to miss either one. The Volvo spun on its repulsion to present the cracked-open gullwing to the two vehicles, and Jarrat's right foot was poised on the accelerator.

He had a clear shot into the tailpipes of the Marshall. Two .44 caliber rounds punched into the left side engine, and while Jarrat's eardrums *pinged* with the concussion, palm-sized shards of carbon fiber scattered out of the exhaust fairing. No pilot in his right mind would start that engine before it had been checked, fixed, tested. The shooters were diving for cover and clawing for weapons now, as Stone lined up his second shot. Jarrat held his breath.

The second shot was more exacting, but Stone had always been as good with small arms as Jarrat himself. His target was the Marshall's ramp hydraulics, which were fed from a cylinder the length of a man's arm and as thick as his wrist. Three rounds, Jarrat calculated, dead on the same spot, would rupture the tank; and the Kovak cycled five per second when Stone took the trigger to 'third pressure' and held it down.

He indulged himself in six rounds, and a stream of viscous, cherry-red hydraulic fluid splattered into the parking lot's gravel. The ramp could not be retracted before the damage was repaired, and while it was open, the flight computer would never allow the Arial to take off. It was grounded as effectively as if he had put the rounds into an engine.

"Go!" Stone was squirming back into the bucket seat as he yelled

into the mess of Jarrat's overridden hearing. The gullwing slammed down hard, and before it locked, Jarrat had spun the Volvo on its repulsion and stamped the throttle to the firewall.

It took off like a startled deer, and Jarrat gave a thought to the owner. This roadster was in near race trim. It was the best chance he and Stone had, and NARC would be glad to reimburse the owner — or replace the vehicle if it was totaled. The chances of which, Jarrat admitted as the Volvo sideswiped the trashpacks on its way through the back lot, were significant.

They had the building for cover until the roadster bucketed through the publican's yard and shot out into Bundaberg's main drag, and then they were a target. Jarrat floored the accelerator and headed down the slope into the ramshackle tangle of shacks and sheds. Shots *whanged* off the rear of the Volvo, a constellation of stars appeared in the tails of both gullwing canopies, but they were away.

The harness ran up about Stone's torso as the car stabilized, and he turned his attention to the dash display. "You know where you're going?"

"Nope," Jarrat admitted. "Just putting some distance between us before they get on the road. We're just lucky to have this baby. She's quite the rocket."

"You're heading the wrong way." Stone was frowning at the display. "South is going to take us right into the mines. It's a thousand square K's of nothing dead ahead of us, and we need some cover — and some backup."

"Eldorado?" Jarrat flicked a glance at the display, but he was fully occupied avoiding the chaos of parked cars, recycle bins, stray dogs and goggle-eyed kids who had dumped their bikes to watch the street racer hurtle through. "Get me onto the highway, Stoney. We saw it on the way in, but I didn't bother to check out the feeder road. I didn't think we'd be grounded."

"It runs north of the town," Stone told him, and clenched both hands into the harness as Jarrat threw the car over in a rocking repulsion turn.

The highway ran north-south, more or less following the maglev line which cut an arrow-straight track to Eldorado South Field. If they were looking for cover and backup, the cargo port was the first place

they might find it, but Jarrat was far from optimistic. The spaceport was more likely to be the domain of industrial robots, with viddrones providing telepresence for humans who worked in the city.

The windscreen was chameleon tinted, and darkened as they turned into the sun. Jarrat's eyes relaxed and he gave the desolate landscape a hard look. Once, this environment had been very similar to the highlands around Ballyntyre, and he could have mourned the ruin the first generation of colonists had made. The reterraforming job in this region would be so major that in a few decades more, when the mines were worked out and environmental repairs were due, perhaps the new generation of politicians would deem the work too costly. They might put it so firmly on the back burner that 'the dead zone' would merely be abandoned.

It was said locally that all roads led to Eldorado, and after a glance at the map he could believe it. Stone had scrolled around the whole region and brought the display back to Bundaberg. Now he zoomed it out to give an overview of the zone between the mines and the city. The mountains reared, snow-capped and smog-hazed, on their left as they came up on the arrow-straight ribbon of bitumen. Jarrat had just thrown the roadster into a long left-hand drift to mount the highway when the computer chimed a soft warning.

Stone had activated every sensor the car possessed, and was exploring its comm options. He gave the display a glare as he turned up the audio and flicked through a number of marginally illegal frequencies. It came as no surprise that the kid who had race-tricked this roadster liked to eavesdrop on Tactical. The warning chime told them they had company.

"They're after us," Stone said quietly. "Stand on it. Eldorado in 300 K's."

"Let's see what this thing can do," Jarrat suggested. "You just better hope they don't have more backup to call in — the flying variety."

"Maybe we can score a little topcover of our own." Stone was readjusting the comm, looking for a frequency on which he could transmit and not be readable to any eavesdropper with an illegal scanner such as the instrument dash-mounted right before him.

"Can you reach Tactical?" Jarrat glanced at him and returned his eyes to the road.

“Eldorado Tac,” Stone mused. “Maybe they can lend us a squad.” He looked over at the speedometer, which read 340kph, just under the redline. The road was straight as a rule, and Jarrat’s hands were like feathers on the wheel. “Maybe they can meet us halfway ... which is about where you’d have to expect Sondheim and Hawass’s backup to start showing up, if they’re going to.”

“Oh, they’re going to,” Jarrat said with grim certainty. “And I can’t get any more speed out of her, Stoney.”

“There’s only an autoresponder answering out of Eldorado South Field, as you’d expect.” Stone changed up to specific frequencies which were the same on every world. “Let me see if I can raise Tactical.”

He was listening to the highband, above the public frequencies, but his transmission options were more limited. He could only call on the civvy bands, and as Jarrat had expected, he reached the office AI, where Tactical interfaced with the public. A synthetic voice invited him to state his business briefly.

“This is Captain R.J. Stone, NARC Raven 7.1,” he identified. “I need to reach Colonel Pete Stacy, and make it fast. I don’t have much time.”

The AI would transfer him to a human. As they waited, Jarrat looked at the aftscan video, and then at his mirror. “They’re about a klick back,” he said under the grinding roar of the Aragos and the jet howl. “They’re a tad-bit faster than we are, Stoney, and I’ll redline this if I try to get any more speed out of it.”

Meaning, Sondheim or Eric Groffe, or even Damon Vaughan — whoever was behind them — would be in range to take a shot in a scant few minutes. Jarrat’s eyes searched the forbidding terrain to left and right of the road, looking for cover. To their right was the maglev track, an endless series of gleaming crescent moons, spaced thirty meters apart, from which was suspended the magnetic web of the ‘rail’ itself. It afforded scant cover, but all else was scrubland, nothing taller than a meter. Creeks flowed toward a river, which offered a narrow verge of green in the baked wasteland, but he saw no buildings. The cargo fields had lapped plascrete over much of the native landscape, and this region had never been much more than a vast open pit mine. Agriculture was never developed south of Eldorado.

A human voice spoke from the comm with a rasp of skepticism

and a thick local accent: "Civilian roadster, please identify."

"I already did," Stone said tersely. "NARC Raven 7.1, Captain R.J. Stone, looking for Coloney Stacy. He should be inbound from Chell by now, and he'll brief you. Get me a patch through to him."

The Tactical dispatcher hesitated for long seconds. "Hold, please."

"You know he's squealing for his superior," Jarrat warned.

"So would I," Stone admitted. "Any idiot can make a prank call. Doesn't alter the fact that Stacy's *got* to be on his way in by now, with the data McKinnen bumped through to him."

The young man's voice was replaced by an older, deeper female voice, and Stone turned his attention back to the comm. "This is Lieutenant K.M. Feynman. You say you're from NARC? Then you won't mind transmitting your clearance code, *Captain*. I'm standing by."

"You'd bloody better be," Stone muttered under the range of the audio pickup. He tapped out the nine-digit code and raised his voice. "You got it?"

"I also have to check it out," Feynman said sharply.

"Do that. And while the system's telling you, you're talking to a NARC, you can also scramble me a squad flyer." Stone's tone was flint hard. "You got a fix on my position?"

Feynman was still waiting for the system to confirm the code, but she had dropped her previous bantering tone. "You're on Highway 5, just northwest of Olympia Dam, heading for Eldorado like your tail feathers are alight. What's your problem, Captain?"

"Captain?" Stone echoed.

"I'm trusting you, buster," Feynman snapped. "You make a monkey out of me, and your bloody feet won't touch the ground."

"Fair enough." Stone gave Jarrat a crooked grin. "We're about a klick ahead of a pack of syndicate shooters. They're faster than we are, but we had a small head start. Get something out here to fly topcover for us. Did you get hold of Stacy yet?"

A five second pause in Feynman's transmission seemed like a decade, and Stone had barked her name before she was back. "Colonel Stacy just responded. Your ID is confirmed, Captain, and your squad will be in the air in three minutes. Stay on Highway 5 and make best speed."

"Damnit, why don't these things occur to me?" Jarrat muttered. "Stoney, get something else in the air, lock down that tavern before the rats vanish."

"You can hope," Stone said grimly. "Feynman, can Eldorado vector a squad to Bundaberg? We need you to lock down a target location."

"If I route a squad out of El," Feynman warned, it'll be fifteen or twenty minutes getting to Bundaberg, and that'll do you no good. Let me see what I can find, you might get lucky. Something might be in the air already."

"Fast as you can, Lieutenant." Stone shared a sidelong glance with Jarrat. "If I were Sondheim or Vaughan, I'd be out and running right now."

"Yeah, but running where?" Jarrat mused. "We did the two flyers a lot of damage, and when we were on approach I didn't see anything else in the town that's flight-capable. Which puts Sondheim and his crew on the ground."

"With no place to go," Stone finished. "South takes you into the mines, refineries, the dead zone. North puts you on the road right behind us."

"There's no road east out of Bundaberg," Jarrat went on, "and running west would be worse than following us north. You head straight into the mountains. There's nothing out there but highlands, snowfields, glaciers."

"So they'll try to go to ground in Bundaberg," Stone agreed.

"And it's a small town." Jarrat was looking at the aftscan. "They're making up distance on us."

Stone twisted to look over his shoulder. "We still have a few minutes." And then, to the comm, "Feynman, any joy?"

Her tone was cautious. "Maybe. I can vector you a squad from over in Mackay, but you're still looking at ten minutes."

"Better than nothing," Stone decided. "Do it, Lieutenant. Have your people set roadblocks. Don't let anything get out of Bundaberg."

"Call it done," Feynman said crisply. "Hold, Captain, while I get them in the air right now."

"Time," Jarrat observed, "is of the essence. I'll give you one chance in ten of taking them, Stoney."

"I've won money on longer odds." Stone's fingers drummed on the comm panel as he waited for Feynman to return, and when she confirmed the launch of a squad out of Mackay, on the west side of the Altair Mountains, he said, "Thank you, ma'am. We owe you a beer. Can you give me a patch to Stacy?"

Feynman seemed mildly amused. "Standby, Captain."

The comm was dead for almost a half minute, while the highway arrowed through the stained off-white plascrete of Bartusiak Number 2 Field. A clutch of cargo pods stood like monstrous eggs, serviced by a bevy of drone loaders which transferred igloo-ized freight from an Arago transport the size of a gunship. The unmistakable logo of Vincent Morello Aerospace was stenciled down the side of the transport. Short odds, Jarrat thought, those cargo pods were being loaded with a shipment of VM-104 Corsairs on a NARC contract. In a week they might be aboard the *Diana* or the *Virago*, any carrier, NARC or Starfleet.

Then Colonel Pete Stacy's voice issued from the comm, and Jarrat and Stone shared a grimace. It was the first time they had heard him since the Death's Head job finished, and he sounded no more pleasant for having NARC officially out of his territory. "What the fucking *hell* are you doing, Stone? I got your data squirt, and it didn't say *squat* about NARC screwing around in the industrial zone on another goddamn' continent. I suppose Jarrat's with you? Jesus Christ, this had better be good!"

"Give it a rest, Stacy." Stone was stressed enough to snarl at the man. "You saw the data? Then you bloody know what's going down. We never made you any promises about where we'd be coming in. You hoped to score a nice, neat job in Chell? Tough. You want to bust the Buran syndicate that's been growing like fungus right under your nose? And incidentally, you want to trash the offshoots of Death's Head before they can settle themselves in and come gunning for *you*? They probably figure you owe them what the syndicates call a 'debt of blood', Stacy."

The Tactical commander skipped a beat. "Death's Head? You're shitting me. NARC swore up and down, you'd busted the syndicate clean into the fourth dimension. You missed something?"

"We all missed something, Stacy," Stone said cynically, "and this

rodent will come back and bite you if you don't trap it right now. Do you have a fix on my position? Where are you?"

"Yeah, sure, I've got a mark on your transmission source," Stacy said shortly. "We're maybe forty minutes out, over the ocean."

"That's too long." Jarrat heard the razor edge in his own words, and lifted his voice. "Stacy, this is Jarrat. We'll be dogmeat before you get close enough to be any use to us. We're headed toward Eldorado, looking for cover and backup ... but I don't think we'll see the city before they're on us. Just *get here*, will you?"

Stacy snorted. "What's your trouble, Jarrat? Same old same old to you, isn't it? Easy stuff. Why don't I just send you a meat wagon, and I'll pick over the carcasses in the hospital."

He was enjoying this, Jarrat thought — and Stone's anger had begun to simmer. He was slower to annoy, but when the inevitable explosion came, it burned longer than Jarrat's own anger. He felt the acid-hot surge of fury as Stone took a breath in some vain effort to find the calm of the peacemaker.

"Listen to me, Colonel." Stone used the man's rank deliberately. "We're outnumbered, outgunned, underpowered, and we're doing your damned job for you. You don't want to cooperate? Fine. But you'll be making your excuses to GlobalNet as well as NARC if you let this bust get away from you, just so you can score points over us, maybe see us bleed. You have a bone to pick with Jarrat and me? Pick it *after* the scum is rotting in a hole in the ground, Stacy, not now."

"I hear you," Stacy said grudgingly. "All right, *Captain*, what's your position?"

"Crappy," Stone informed him.

The roundup of the hardware they were carrying, the civvy vehicle they had borrowed and the comatose prisoner in the back seat took a few terse moments, but Jarrat did not have time to listen. He was watching the aftscan, and the road racer behind them was close enough by now for him to recognize the make. It was a scarlet Rand Sunrunner, bigger than the Volvo Eidolon, heavier, with a monstrous powerplant to match. It was the biggest vehicle Rand manufactured for the road; all else was flight capable. This one, he guessed, was modified. She was faster than the barely street-legal Eidolon, and he could only wonder what other tricks had been installed.

As Stone gave Stacy the bare bones of their situation, the Sunrunner closed the gap between them, and with another glance at the aftscan, Jarrat found he could read the license plates. Moments later he looked back at the mirror and he could make out the face of the driver, and the shooter sitting beside him.

He swore lividly as he recognized Eric Groffe. As he waited for Stone to finish he saw a blister-like port pop open in the Sunrunner's left front wing, and his heart jumped into his throat. "Hold on!" he barked at Stone, and threw the Volvo across the road, this way and that, fishtailing in an unpredictable line that was impossible to target. The downside was that he was giving away a great deal of speed, and in the moment he found the Sunrunner on the opposite side of the road from the Rand, he crammed his foot onto the brakes.

Arago generators howled as they killed forward momentum, and then Jarrat was back on the gas, coming up hard on the Sunrunner's tail. In the back, Spencer Carnaby rolled bonelessly from side to side, like the drunk who could tumble down a flight of stairs and not even suffer a bruise. He was blissfully unaware as Jarrat rode the Sunrunner's tail, close enough for the jetwash to scorch the soft bronze paint off the Volvo's nose.

"It's a good bet," he said to Stone when he had the chance to breathe again, "they don't have cannons in the tail. Give the bastards one chance, Stoney, and put a heavy-cal round up one of our jets, and it's goodnight, sweetheart."

Stone's voice was a rasp as he addressed the com. "You hear that, Stacy? Get here! Pass me back to Eldorado Tac — we don't have time to wait for you."

"Jesus freakin' God, Stone," Stacy growled, "you buggers never do anything by halves. Twenty-five minutes, *minimum*, understand? Here's Feynman."

Before Stone could begin to brief her she said, "I was listening in, Captain, and am aware of your situation. Your squad is in the air. You'll have topcover in approximately eight minutes. Can you quit the road, find a position to defend?"

Eight minutes? Jarrat was aware of a light sweat breaking across his brow and ribs as he jockeyed the Eidolon to keep it glued to the tail of the Sunrunner, and both he and Stone knew the tactic would

not last much longer. Groffe's driver was flinging the vehicle left and right, trying to shake Jarrat off, and sooner or later he would do it.

Brake lights flared red and the Volvo slammed into the Sunrunner. Repulsion cushioned the impact but it was still enough to rattle Jarrat's teeth, and Stone cursed. Jarrat's eyes narrowed against the sunglare as he hunted for some defensible position.

They were on the north boundary of Bartusiak Number 2 Field now, crossing over into Number 1 Field. To both sides of the road, the plascrete baked in the afternoon heat. A haze shimmered before the towering, skeletal bodies of gantries and fueling booms, beyond which cargo drones were herding together a clutch of freight pods, ready for transfer to orbit. Their heavy lifter was on approach from the east, and the air was about to become toxic indeed.

A kilometer north was another gray steel gantry, and this one was idle. Stone picked the exoskeletal shape out of the shimmer of heat haze in the same moment Jarrat saw it. They shared the adrenaline jolt, and Stone said hoarsely to the comm, "Standby, Feynman. Nail this position."

"You're on Bartusiak 1," she said crisply. "Watch yourselves, Captain. Be aware, those gantries are automated, they can reconfigure at a moment's notice and they don't have the brains to know humans are anywhere around. They're deathtraps. There's no safety shelters, *none*, because it's a fully robotized field. Humans shouldn't be there. Understand? And dumb kids get killed every week, playing chicken up there."

"Call the company," Jarrat said tersely. "Tell them to shut down everything not already in operation. Find out if a lifter's coming in. Turn it back if you can."

"And if I can't?" Feynman demanded.

"Give us all the warning you can manage," Stone said grimly as his hands clenched into the harness.

The Volvo left the road much faster, on a tighter angle, than it was designed for. It listed dangerously on overstressed repulsion and before it was fully stable Jarrat floored the accelerator again. They were so far out of time, risks which might have been insane appeared quite reasonable.

A three-meter security fence reared along the edge of the plas-

crete, just off the shoulder of the road. The upper meter was charged, and the Eidolon smashed through in a shower of blue-white sparks and twisted steel links. Security cameras panned toward the incursion, and in under a minute drones would be in the air, deploying from some central depot. Jarrat could hope they would be well armed, but this was a civilian field. Military drones would completely immobilize all insurgents, but local government regulated how civvy drones were armed, and he was not about to put much faith in them. With a lot of ground to cover from their depot, they would be comparatively slow responding. The Volvo would be stationery by the time they cleared weapons, and it would be ignored in favor of the Rand, which was coming in hot and fast.

"Can you see the Sunrunner?" he asked of Stone as he swung wide around a mountain of igloo-ized freight.

"Still on the road, coming around fast." Stone was intent on the view over his left shoulder. "They overshot by most of a K, but they know where we are."

"Buys us a minute or so," Jarrat rasped. "Hold on."

In the back, Carnaby seemed to be coming to. He groaned passionately as consciousness filtered back, and almost at once he knew something was badly wrong. Jarrat heard cursing, and a rat-like scrabbling at the rear-seat harness, before Carnaby bellowed, slurred and confused,

"What in the holy crap are you guys *doing*?"

"Saving your useless ass," Jarrat said aridly as he braked down in the scant shade of the gantry hard enough for the Eidolon to slither sideways to a stop.

"We were made?" Carnaby wailed. "Tac showed?"

"Not quite Tac," Stone said with grim humor. "Can you run, Carnaby?"

"Can I what?" Carnaby gulped his words. "Uh, I gotta get out."

"Christ," Stone muttered, "he's going to heave."

The Volvo had rocked to a halt and Jarrat hit the canopy release. The right-side gullwing whined up and he barked at Carnaby, "*Out*. If you're going to puke, do it quick."

"Can't leave him behind," Stone warned. "Sondheim's people won't let him live. They'll probably figure he sold them out to Tac, or

worse, NARC. And even if they didn't, they'd kill him before they left him in our hands, because he can nail the whole company."

Their passenger had tumbled out onto the hot plascrete and was on flat palms and knees in the shade of the car, retching pitifully. Jarrat swung his legs out, filled his right hand with the Kovak .44, and his lips compressed as he watched the Sunrunner coming up fast on the wide break in the security fence. He gave the pistol a bitter look and primed it. "You realize, we might as well spit at them."

"I know it," Stone said pragmatically. "What bothers me is, *they* might know the same thing. You saw who's in the Sunrunner?"

"Groffe's the shooter, but I didn't know the face of his driver. It's probably one of the guys who just got in on the Marshall. I saw one, maybe two guys riding in the back. One of them might have been Vaughan, but I couldn't swear to it And we," Jarrat added darkly, "are out of time."

The Sunrunner had just launched itself through the break in the fence, and if not for the flurry of security drones, it would have been on top of them already. A dozen drones, some the size of oil drums, others only as big as watermelons, were harassing it, sniping from every angle, and the driver braked so hard he almost rolled the car on its repulsion cushion. The Aragos screamed in protest as they overran to right it, and the windscreen broke up into a mess of spiderweb shatter lines, making visibility difficult.

"Move," Stone growled, and he stooped to seize Carnaby by the shoulders. The man groaned as he was set back onto his feet, and Stone propelled him toward the base of the gantry.

High overhead, the booms whistled in the angry wind which never stilled over the cargo fields, and Jarrat looked up. Far beyond the gantry, he caught a glimpse of the heavy lifter on approach to pick up the cargo pods. The guttural roar of its engine noise rolled back from the hills like a grumble of distant thunder, but it was already too close to be turned back, no matter if Tactical got a call through to Bartusiak. As it grew closer, its noise and exhaust draft would make life unpleasant for anything alive in this region. The cranes and booms right above them were idle, however, and he gave a thought to Feynman's warning. "If the company doesn't answer, or can't shut this down —"

"Can't afford to think about it," Stone said bleakly as he manhandled Carnaby onto the three-meter, open-sided platform of a maintenance lift and hit the control to take it up.

"Can't afford — think about what?" Carnaby bleated. "Think about what, Johnny? Christ, whasse talkin' about? Maxie, *please!*"

"Shut it, and get down out of sight," Stone barked.

Jarrat was flat on his belly on the battered yellow mesh with the Kovak aimed over the edge. Stone went to one knee beside him, hunched down into the scant cover afforded by the bed of the lift, and as it went up with grinding slowness, the elevation gave them a clear shot.

Thirty meters off the plascrete, Stone stopped the lift and the tip of Jarrat's tongue dampened lips which had begun to chafe in this air. A hot wind seared in from the deserts, and the vast plascrete cauldron of the cargo port was a heat sink, catching every erg from the sun and bouncing it back. Bartusiak's logo was stenciled on the gantry in red and gold, top to bottom, and up close one saw that the paint was peeling in sheets. Flecks littered the platform like autumn leaves.

"Are they — are they after us?" Carnaby demanded. "Who are they, for godsakes? We didn't do nothing!"

"Yes, they're after us," Jarrat told him, preoccupied with the Sunrunner, which had skittered to a stop twenty meters from the gantry, "and we did plenty. If you want to walk away from this, Carnaby, keep your head down and your mouth shut, understand?"

"Yes, but —"

As the Sunrunner halted, Eric Groffe could begin to target the drones. The first detonated in a tight, yellow fireball, another was side-swiped by a round from the hood-mounted cannon and slammed into the foot of the gantry. Its case split wide open, showering sparks and belching fumes, and Stone took the lift up to fifty meters. The smaller drones were quickly out of ammunition. The Sunrunner was mutilated but the cab was sound, nestled in its roll cage, protected by the same firewalls which buffered it against repulsion and generator mishaps.

The smallest drones fled to avoid damage, and Stone muttered a blistering curse as Groffe pot-shotted at the two remaining large machines. Carnaby had pressed himself against the roasting frame of the lift and crammed both hands over his ears, but he roared at Jarrat,

“Shoot them! For chrissakes, why don’t you just *shoot* them?”

He might have meant the drones or the men in the car. Jarrat was not about to disable the machines, and nor was he about to waste ammunition on the wreck of the Sunrunner. Until Groffe and his cohorts actually stepped out, they were safe. They could hole up in the cab and wait for their own backup to get in from Eldorado — but they must surely be aware, Jarrat thought, that Tactical would be coming in fast. If they waited long enough, with their quarry cornered like cats chased up a tree, they would be easy targets for a Tactical squad.

Another drone erupted into a cartwheel of blue-white and a storm of hot shrapnel, and the last machine caught enough of the windmilling wreckage to be damaged in the same blast. Groffe did not have to destroy it; the drone dropped to the ground like a dead ball and its hazard lights blinked out.

“Well, damnit,” Stone whispered into the hot wind. “This is where it gets interesting, kiddo.” He flattened out on the steel mesh beside Jarrat and primed his own Kovak.

“This is where we find out how dumb the bastards are.”

“Or how smart,” Stone allowed.

Jarrat answered only with a grunt, under the growing crescendo from the incoming heavy lifter. The engine noise was already vibrating through the massive skeleton of the gantry. He felt it in every bone, and especially in his ribcage. His eyes were narrowed on the shattered windscreen fifty meters below, and he had begun to search his pockets for anything to wad into his ears when the driver’s gullwing on the right of the wrecked Sunrunner cracked open.

The right side of the car was in cover, so long as Groffe and his crew stayed low — and they knew this. From the car to the foot of the gantry was a twenty meter sprint, and Jarrat measured it with his eyes for the tenth time. “All we have to do is pin ’em down till Tac gets here,” he said against Stone’s ear, under the roar of the lifter. “If they’re dumb enough.”

One of the biggest mistakes they could make was to underestimate the opposition. This was drilled into the NARC candidate’s brain over and over: take nothing for granted, accept nothing at face value. Jarrat would have liked to run the name of Eric Groffe through Stacy’s computer, find out who the man was, where he came from, put

together his pedigree, so he knew what they were up against. He considered calling Feynman by R/T before he had to wad anything he could find into his ears to protect them, but Groffe made the first move.

If the man was local, he was among the new talent which was just now dragging itself up out of the street. Groffe was no Death's Head reject, Jarrat thought. He was good. He had three assorted shooters and minders and, unlike the NARC men, he was well armed. A riff of full-auto, medium caliber, played across the edge of the lift platform, and both Jarrat and Stone wriggled back into cover. Before they dared duck out again and return fire, the company of four must surely have crossed the twenty meter no-man's-land.

"Shit," Stone shouted over the rolling din, "they're on the gantry."

"Take us up!" Jarrat yelled, and could not even hear his own voice.

The heavy lifter was still several kilometers from its apron, and he prayed it was headed for Eldorado South Field, or at least Bartusiak Number 2. He was stuffing his ears with cotton, ripped from the hem of his shirt and hastily salvia-soaked. It would be enough to save his hearing, and Stone was doing the same. Carnaby was down, writhing with both hands clamped over his ears, and Jarrat pushed the last of the cotton at him. Carnaby was too panicked to react, and Jarrat slapped him, open-handed, to jolt him back to reality. Somewhere far below, Valda Hawass's syndicate shooters must be doing the same, or they would be in line at a biocyber prosthetics clinic — stone-deaf with ruptured eardrums.

As the platform ground further up the side of the gantry, they had an uninterrupted view of the field. They were looking down on the cargo pods and industrial drones, with the Altair Mountains like a fortress of the gods in the west, and the big, slab-shape of the heavy lifter approaching fast from the east. It was gray-green and battered, hunch-backed and ugly, and as the platform passed the hundred meter mark, close to the top of the gantry, Jarrat caught a breath of its exhaust.

Vintage Chell, he decided — groundside by the docking bays, in the early hours of a day that would be blisteringly hot and soupy with humidity. When the trade winds quit, the exhaust of lifters like this one, and the bigger ships, the rimrunners themselves, puddled over

the city's lowlands, Dock Row and places like Moorfield, where the clans of Mavvik, Targ and Hawass somehow survived.

The repulsion ran up to a last earsplitting crescendo, and the cargo lifter flopped onto the plascrete. Systems shut down for loading, engines purged in billows of white vapor, and Jarrat dared take the wadding out of his ringing ears. The air stank but he could hear again, after a fashion, and like Stone, he had one concern.

This was not the only maintenance elevator on the gantry. There were quick-lift modules on the other side, and a caged car. None of them had been as accessible as the platform, and the modules carried two grown men at maximum. They were designed for technicians servicing the gantry itself, rather than the big ships which used it.

Stone's hand fell on Jarrat's arm as their ears cleared. The blue eyes were slitted against the glare as he listened. "You hear that?"

He was listening to the steady whine of something coming up the gantry, and it could only be one of the modules. Jarrat followed the sound and came up against the steel of the gantry's main body. "There's no clear shot," he said over his shoulder.

"Cuts both ways," Stone reasoned. "They don't have a good shot at us either, and we should have a Tactical squad right here in four minutes, maybe three." He plucked the R/T from his pocket and set the frequency to bands higher than normal civilian cells could access. "Lieutenant Feynman, you still with us? Feynman, this is Stone, do you read?"

She was on the air a moment later. "Still with you, Captain. Apologies about the lifter that just landed ... there was no way to stop it. But it won't be taking off again, and you won't get another incoming till we get a resolution here."

"Where's your squad?" Stone pressed.

"Just under four minutes out from your position. Are you safe?"

"Relatively," Stone allowed. "We're on one the gantries. Tell your people there's a mess of dead drones and a wrecked car right at the bottom. Four shooters on the gantry below us ... one or two are heading up in a tech's module, we can hear it coming, but we can defend this position. Have your squad prioritize the shooters, repeat, take the shooters *first*. We should be secure here."

"Acknowledged, Captain. Am relaying your instructions. Hold."

9

The wind from the desert had the saving grace of carrying away the exhaust smog, and though Stone's lungs were burning he took a grateful breath. Jarrat was lying flat on the platform, watching the technician's module come up, and the Kovak was primed.

Ten meters below, level with some catwalk, the module stopped. The lift motors whined down and for several moments they heard only the wind in the cables and booms around them, and the distant buzz of the drones loading the cargo hauler. Stone was still waiting for Feynman to return, and before she did a hatch whirred open on the tech's module and a man's voice called up, against the wind.

It was thick with the long vowels and dull consonants of the Eldorado accent. "You bastards want to live? Get down here. You got a fair-to-middling chance of walking out of here alive ... you being who you are."

"Well, shit," Jarrat murmured. "We've been made." He angled a glance up and back at Stone. "Thirty-two months at command rank, and it never happened before."

"Technically, it's not supposed to." Stone went down beside him on the sun-hot steel mesh. "When we bust a syndicate, it's supposed

to stay busted. And,” he added ruefully, “you and I were never supposed to be anywhere remotely near the Rethan underworld.”

“We’re battling a thousand.” Jarrat drew his sleeve across his face to wipe away the film of perspiration and raised his voice. “Is that Eric Groffe?”

“You want to make something of it?” The Eldorado accent was hardly musical to the ears. “Lemme guess, now ... would that be Jarrat? We know you, pretty boy.”

“Jesus, that used to get under my skin,” Jarrat muttered, aside to Stone.

“Take it as a compliment,” Stone suggested. “The longer we keep the bastard talking, the closer our Tactical squad’s going to be.”

“Point.” Jarrat inched forward and peeked over the side. “I see a second figure in the lift. I think I can get a shot at Groffe.”

Eric Groffe was shouting again before he could take it. “I asked you if you wanted to stay alive, Jarrat. It *has* to be you. The old lady’s never wrong.” He cackled a raucous laugh. “She watched the house videos. You didn’t know you were vidbugged? How half-assed can a NARC get?”

“I knew we were bugged,” Jarrat admitted, for Stone’s benefit. “You expect to be under surveillance, it’s a fact of life. You *don’t* expect some geriatric voyeur to be drooling over the footage!”

“Drooling over your bum, I’d say. And we’ll expect it in future,” Stone said with tart humor. “This isn’t a class they teach at the academy ... but they should. Soon as we debrief with Bill Dupre, you know they will.” He fetched the R/T to his lips. “Lieutenant Feynman?”

Her voice was thin over the tiny speaker. “Your squad is just under three minutes out, and they’re tracking a civvy transport closing fast on their position. It could be armed. They could have a fight of their own on their hands.” She hesitated for a moment. “Don’t wait for them, Captain. If there’s any way you can secure your own position — do it. I’m scrambling backup for your backup.”

“And the squad from Mackay—?” Stone prompted.

“Is a few minutes out of Bundaberg,” she told him. “We’ll blockade the town. If your people are still inside the city limits, they’re yours.”

“If,” Jarrat rasped on a scorched-dry throat.

“Jarrat, goddamn it!” Groffe’s temper was stretched taut. “You want to live or not? It’s your call, but call it quick, or the deal’s off!”

Stone bobbed up for a glimpse over the side. “You have a shot?”

“Not a good one.” Jarrat eased his palm on the gun. “Talk him out?”

“Try,” Stone agreed.

“*Jarrat!*”

“All right,” Jarrat shouted. “Jesus, you people should learn a little patience. Okay, so the old lady gets off on watching raunchy security vids. What else is new? You know me. Good for you. What’s the deal, Groffe?”

The shooter cleared his throat. “You’re a NARC. That makes you valuable. You throw down the cannon and come down, right bloody *now*, and you live.”

“Ransom?” Jarrat demanded.

“What d’you reckon you’re worth?” Groffe wondered darkly. “You bastards put away Death’s Head. There’s people in this colony who’d pay big bucks to skin you alive with a blunt knife, and against that you’ve got the price NARC’s willing to meet, to get you back alive and more or less healthy.”

“And who sets the price?” Jarrat rasped.

Groffe barked a laugh. “Not your concern, Jarrat. You just haul your ass down off that freakin’ platform, and maybe—”

The Kovak had a dull, high-pitched report. It kicked lightly against Jarrat’s wrist with three rounds, and Groffe’s words fused into a gulped moan. Stone had just worked his elbows under himself to chance a look over the side, and he was in time to see Groffe twist in the hatch of the lift module. Hands clawed to catch him, but two more rounds out of Stone’s pistol finished Groffe, and as he became dead weight, the clawing hands let him fall. The body spun away in freefall, but Groffe was oblivious.

With a soft oath, Stone emptied the rest of the clip into the hotcore powerpack right on top of the lift. He would never rupture it, but he could sever the cable couplers, leave it dead where it had docked on by the catwalk. “Who else is in the lift car?” he yelled over the side. “You want to come out? Get rid of the hardware and get down on the catwalk, stay put, and you’ll walk away.”

A tirade of invective answered him, and both Jarrat and Stone hauled themselves back into cover, fully expecting the hail of full-auto they received. Shots ricocheted off the underside of the platform, and Stone heard heavy footsteps rushing out of the lift module and away around the gantry. The man did not have a shot at them from the lower level, and Stone guessed he was trying to make it to the docking clamps for the other tech's module. He could summon the second car from there.

On his back, eyes slitted against the sky, he switched out magazines and reprimed the Kovak. "One down, one running. Four in the Rand, you said?"

"I'd say so." Jarrat pulled himself into the grudging shade of the gantry's body. "Damnit, Stoney, this shouldn't be happening."

Stone did not have to lower the empathic shield by much to feel the blaze of Jarrat's fury. He glanced at his chrono and spoke to the comm. "Feynman?"

She was there at once, with the sharp edge of dread in her voice. "I heard gunfire. Are you secure, Captain?"

"For the moment. We have one man dead," Stone told her, "name of Eric Groffe." He spelled out the name. "New talent, a shooter out of Eldorado. Run the name, then file it. He's history. Where's our squad?"

"You should see them in under a minute," Feynman said from the tiny R/T, "but you might want to get your heads down. They're coming in white-hot, Captain, under fire, holding their own, but they're not going to take down the civvy transport so easily. It's armored, more than a match for a Tac squad."

"Thanks for the warning," Stone said bleakly. "Keep us posted." He slipped the R/T back into his pocket and lifted a brow at Jarrat. "We're a little bit exposed on this platform."

"We're as good as bare-ass naked," Jarrat growled, "and you know they'll target us, soon as they see us. Even if they don't put priority on our blood, they'll take Carnaby because he can nail the whole company. We have to get into cover, or we're not going to make it to Tarataga."

Cover? Stone had already visually searched the gantry, both down and up, and the only available cover was *down*, onto the catwalk

between the two lift modules, where Groffe's associate was both loose and well armed. And the shooter did not have to worry about keeping safe a trembling, retching, bleating lump of goo. Carnaby was on his knees, arms over his head, and he had been babbling gibberish for several minutes.

"The way's *down*, Kevin," Stone said tersely.

"I know." Jarrat pulled both hands over his face and knuckled his eyes, which had begun to feel salt-burned in the heat, wind and smog. "You take care of Carnaby. I'll go ahead and decoy the shooter. Cover me."

Stone hated it. "There's not one part of that plan I like."

"Then, you tell me a better one." The gray eyes glittered with anger. The scorching wind was in Jarrat's hair, giving him the look of a wild thing. "Cover me," he repeated harshly, "while we still have half a chance."

"Kevin, *no*, for chrissakes." Stone caught his arm. "We don't have the hardware. We're — bollock-naked up here, like you just said."

For several moments Jarrat stopped dead, pressed against the gantry, and Stone could almost hear his brain turning over as he considered every option, and at last he gave Stone a haunted look. "I have one idea," he said huskily. "One ... and you're probably thinking what I'm thinking. It's a long shot, depending on just how dumb Groffe's man is. I wouldn't put money on it."

"One chance to get out of this," Stone said, little above a whisper.

Jarrat gave his right hand to Stone, laced their fingers tightly, and for just a second he let down the empathic shield which made living, working, together possible at all. Stone sucked in a breath as the maelstrom of Jarrat's emotions hit him broadside. Healthy fear was laced with white-hot determination, and stitched through with the electric blue arcs of love, lust, and every synergy of them both.

With a livid curse Stone dragged him into an embrace that punished the ribs, and then let him go. "Remind me to let Tactical do its own job next time."

Jarrat might not have heard. He was flat on the platform, looking directly down the emergency ladder which climbed the side of the whole gantry, from the pilings in the plascrete to the lightning conduc-

tors on the crown. As Stone dragged Carnaby to his feet, he watched Jarrat work a hand into the hip pocket of his jeans. He drew out a crushed pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

The lighter balanced delicately on the edge of the platform, where he could reach it with his left fingertips. Stone knew what he was doing, and swallowed on a dust-dry throat. Carnaby was whimpering, but at least he had stopped retching, and Stone said grimly, "You'll have to climb down."

"Climb? I can't climb anywhere," Carnaby began.

"If you don't, you're dead," Stone told him flatly. "You heard the R/T? There's a Tactical squad coming in, under fire. *Madame's* set the dogs on us. They won't leave you alive because you can hand 'em to Tac. Understand?"

"Jesus," Carnaby wailed, and he might actually have been praying.

"Climb down," Stone repeated. "It's ten meters to the catwalk right below, and there's two technicians' modules, enough cover to give us a chance."

"Ten meters," Carnaby echoed, as if his tongue were numb.

Just then Jarrat gave a low, feral whistle, and Stone's heart double-thudded. *Showtime*. He felt the race of Jarrat's pulse as he flicked the lighter off the edge of the platform, and counted one, two, three seconds before he leaned out with the Kovak at his arm's full stretch. The lighter hit the catwalk with a clatter Stone heard clearly on the wind, and it would buy Jarrat a full second, possibly two, as the shooter spun toward it, unable to make out what it was.

The Kovak coughed four times, and Stone knew Jarrat was on target. Elation rushed through him, and then he was on his feet at once, scrambling over onto the ladder. "*Move!*"

Carnaby chose that moment to freeze. With a blistering oath, Stone holstered his own pistol and swung the man over his shoulder. Jarrat was already gone, hurrying down, and on the fringe of their hearing they had picked up the sound of big engines, the insect-like drone of chain guns, approaching fast. The Tactical squad was still under fire, and too soon both aircraft were so close, if the Tac pilot had not been using the body of his craft for cover, the gantry would already be taking fire.

The weight on his shoulders made it difficult to find the corroded steel rungs, but Stone fell back on years-old training. Every first-year rookie at the Academy was cross-trained in Fire Control as well as Tactical procedures. The instincts were still there, and they served him again as he followed Jarrat and let his feet find their own way.

Ten meters seemed closer to a kilometer. His palms were blistered before he felt Jarrat's hands catch him around the hips and swing him in onto the catwalk, and his ears were full of the thunder of engines. He dumped Carnaby back onto his feet and spun toward Jarrat. Beyond, sprawled on the catwalk, was the body of the shooter, but Jarrat had already snatched up his weapons and reloads, and Stone found the solid weight of an assault rifle slapped into his hands.

The damaged lift module was locked in the clamps at one side of the catwalk, but at the other end the lift was missing. Jarrat looked over the side as Stone propelled Carnaby into cover, and shouted into the wind. "The lift's going down. The other two'll be on their way up in one minute, last chance they'll get!"

One minute was about all they had — or less, Stone decided as he and Jarrat knelt on the catwalk to watch the Tactical squad come lumbering around the gantry. It had taken a pounding, and to Stone's eyes it looked uneven in the air. The pilot had plenty of repulsion, but one of his three jets was out of commission, and a second was shut back to not much over idling. The flyer was crabbing sideways toward the gantry, and half of its guns never came to bear on the civvy transport.

And the transport itself was damaged, Stone saw. One of the Tactical gunners had scored a shot into its belly, and at least one of its repulsion generators was gone. While the Tac flyer was buoyant and inclined to drift, the transport's pilot was using his jets to supplement lift. The remaining repulsion generator was overloading as it struggled to keep the mass of heavy armor maneuverable, and the jets were running high and hot. The engine voices were screaming, and the exhaust smelt *wrong*.

"They're both in trouble," he yelled across the din at Jarrat. "You see what the Tac pilot's trying to do?"

Three times since Stone had begun to watch, the pilot had lost altitude fast, falling through twenty meters in an attempt to get

another shot at the transport's belly. The trick had obviously worked once, but the Tac flyer was hard to handle now, and though the transport was wallowing like a pig in mud, the civvy pilot was too good to let himself suffer the same injury twice.

"We might get a shot," Jarrat shouted, gesturing with the Chiyoda machine pistol he had taken for himself. "I've got plenty of fifty-cal. You?"

Stone turned the rifle to squint at the LED display. "Half a clip of sixty-cal, and the moron loaded with incendiary." He gave the sprawled body a glare.

"Careful what you shoot at." Jarrat's teeth bared in a grin bereft of humor, and they turned their attention to the aircraft.

Like a heavyweight, cumbersome ballet, the squad flyer and the transport twisted, cavorted around each other as each pilot tried to outmaneuver the other into presenting an engine exhaust or coolant vent, a repulsion projector, an unarmored flank. Tracer scorched the irises, the air was sharp with the stink of ammunition. Both pilots were damned good, Stone saw, and the element of luck was massive.

A pulse drummed in his temple as he and Jarrat waited more than a minute for any chance to get a shot; and when it came, they pounced on it like starving cats. Fifty- and sixty-caliber streamed from the two weapons, and Stone's incendiaries painted the belly of the transport in lurid gasoline yellow. The hull temperature would climb so fast, the pilot had to know he was under fire, and not from the Tactical flyer.

The transport jinked around as he tried to protect his belly from the fire coming up from the catwalk, and the gunners targeted Jarrat and Stone as she came about. But the Tactical pilot was equally aware of the NARC men's work, and he was only waiting for the civvy transport to maneuver. He had his window of opportunity, a full three seconds, and he wasted none.

Stone would never know if he and Jarrat had disabled the second repulsion generator in the belly of the transport, or if the Tactical gunners took it out in the critical seconds when the squad flyer dropped like a stone, came up under the transport, and the gunners opened up.

It might have been the .60 caliber incendiary rounds which did the

damage, getting into a weakness opened up by the .50. Stone let up on the trigger as the belly of the transport became wreathed in fire, and the Arago modules blew out of the craft in an explosion which deafened him for several moments. The shockwave went over fast, scorching his face and hands, and when he could open his eyes again the transport was going down.

He was dimly aware of a vibration through the catwalk which told him the lift car was getting close, but before it reached its lock-on station the transport smashed into the gantry, just above the pilings that secured it into the bedrock. The explosion rolled upward, outward, engulfing the whole gantry. A wave of furnace heat billowed over Stone, survivable only because it was gone in moments, and the concussion of the shockwave left him numb, deaf, though he had pulled his head into his chest and covered his ears. He felt the shock even in his eyeballs, where bright sparks played at fireflies in the blood-red ocean that commanded his vision for long, dangerous seconds.

Before he could see properly, he felt Jarrat pressed hard against his right side, and he half-heard the bellow of the Tac flyer's public address: "Captain Stone, Captain Jarrat, you are in grave danger. Can you move?" Then he felt the heat searing up the gantry, and he realized the transport must have smeared itself over half the structure. It was burning, the Arago generators were pulverized, and the catwalk was already painfully hot. He forced open his eyes, and his hands clenched into Jarrat's sleeves.

"I'm okay," Jarrat yelled hoarsely. He had dropped the machine pistol and seized Stone bodily now, searching him for injury while the Tac squad wallowed in closer and the public address blared over the roar of the fire.

"We're dropping a net. Grab on and hold tight!" The pilot had switched gears from pursuit and combat to search and rescue, in a squad flyer that was damaged and fighting him.

Stone was impressed. He had known a good many Tactical pilots, and this one was among the best. Without a word, he and Jarrat seized Carnaby, dragged him out of the lift module where he was cowering, and manhandled him to the edge of the catwalk. Carnaby was too numb to scream as he looked over the side into a storm of multicol-

ored chemical fire. Instead, he went limp at the knees, and if Stone had not caught him, he would have fallen.

He was out in a dead faint as the flyer dropped in so close, Stone could read the instructions on the beacon-yellow emergency labels mounted by the open side hatch. The big kevlex net burst out of the cannon and swathed him and Jarrat, and they dumped Carnaby into its folds. Stone's raw fingers clawed into the loose, palm-sized mesh, and just as he felt his skin began to roast, the pilot pulled away, out of the heat cone, and drifted into the southwest.

The whole gantry had become an inferno, and the smoke was toxic. Stone's lungs were burning, his ears ringing, as the winch took up the net. Hands grabbed him, hauled him aboard, and a helmeted, flak-jacketed medic slapped a breathmask onto his face. Jarrat was aboard seconds later, and they rolled together at the edge of the cargo bed, content just to breathe and look out at the chemical pyre where they had been stranded.

Light-headed on the fumes, Stone leaned his back against the nearest support. While the medic worked on Carnaby, he beckoned one of the two gunners who doubled as search and rescue jumpers. He patted his own ears and pointed at the big earpads the woman was wearing, and she nodded, understanding. She unhooked two spare headsets from the bulkhead behind the copilot and tossed them into his lap.

The ringing in his ears was like the howl of a power tool. It cut right across voices, making words difficult to make out, but he and Jarrat were in the loop and he shouted, "How badly are you damaged, Pilot? Can you make Bundaberg?"

The helmeted head in the right-side cockpit seat turned toward him. "That's where we're headed, Cap. Can't make it back to El, not in this condition, and we've got wounded aboard."

"Wounded?" Jarrat echoed. "Carnaby bloody fainted!"

"Not him," the medic yelled into the loop, "you two! I want you scanned, and blood work, before I take my fuckin' eyes off you, or NARC'll have my balls! You have no idea what you just inhaled, and your ears are full of blood. *Captain.*"

For the first time, Stone looked down at his palms, which had been protecting his ears, and he saw the red smears. His vision was

beginning to clear, though his eyes were hot, gritty, and if he squinted at Jarrat he saw a smear of blood on his neck. “You can’t do the work aboard?” he called into the loop, surprised.

“A lot of my gear got knocked out when the shooting started. Settle back for the ride,” the medic told him tersely. “I’m calling it in to the medical center in Bundy. You’ll jump the queue.”

“What queue?” Jarrat wanted to know.

Still working on Carnaby, the medic gestured over his shoulder into the south. “There’s been a big accident. You’ll see the smoke in a minute or two ... they told me it’s been a hotel fire, worst there ever was in these parts. O’Malley’s went up.”

O’Malley’s? “Now, there’s a coincidence.” Stone reached across and used his sleeve to blot at the blood flecking Jarrat’s neck. “If you believe in coincidence.”

“I don’t,” Jarrat said darkly. He caught Stone’s hand and held onto it. “You don’t look so hot.”

“Neither do you,” Stone informed him, and said into the loop, “how long till you set down in Bundaberg?”

“Three minutes.” The pilot glanced back down the body of his aircraft. “You need a patch through to the squad that’s locking down the town?”

“You read our minds.” Jarrat hauled Stone down beside him, made him sit in the draft of air from the open hatch. At altitude it was cooler, and fresh.

The idea was good, but the Tactical unit out of Mackay was not answering, and as the flyer dropped in over the town, Stone saw why. The tavern had gone up fast and was already burned down to its steel skeleton. The local Fire Control — volunteers from the town using equipment and drones called in from the nearer mines and the refinery — had smothered it in blankets of scarlet and purple retardant foam, but not soon enough to save even part of the building. Still in the parking lot, the Arial and the Marshall skyvan were scorched down to bare metal, but someone had secured their hatches. They would be back in the air, after Tactical released them from impound and a local crash shop fixed them up.

Not a hundred meters from the tavern, on the southwest side of the slope, the medical center was busy. The ambulance bays had

become a crowded triage where two doctors and four nurses were struggling with more work than they might have seen in a year. Bundaberg was a flyspeck on the map, but it was the closest settlement to the industrial zone. In the event of an accident, the wounded came here.

Five bodies lay under sheets, waiting for body bags. Four gurneys were ranked in the shade along the edge of the ambulance bay, and three volunteer fire fighters sat in the open tail of their own vehicle, breathing medical air and waiting for a nurse to treat a variety of injuries.

"They say there's more bodies in the wreckage," the medic told Stone as the flyer set down just outside the ambulance access lane. "They'll dig 'em out tonight or tomorrow, when the rubble cools off. It's way too hot to even touch it right now." He tapped his earpad. "I was listening in on their loop. The thing nobody can guess is how it started."

"They had a bunch of syndicate shooters in, from Eldorado," Jarrat said hoarsely. The flyer had settled on its repulsion cushion, and as the jets whined down he swung his legs out. "Four of the bastards came after us, and at least one of them was loaded with incendiaries." He looked back at Stone, who was still in the cargo bed. "Groffe's idiot friends come to town with half the armory, we hit the road, Tactical shows up right here, because we vectored them in ... Vaughan grabs somebody else's cannon, he doesn't have time to check how it's loaded, or doesn't even *think* to check, and wham, O'Malley's goes up like a bomb."

"Sounds about right." Stone lifted himself out of the squad flyer and stretched his shoulders and spine. He was sore, head to foot, and he knew Jarrat felt the same, but they were among the least of the action's casualties. "Pilot," he called into the loop, "can you get me a patch to Lieutenant Feynman?" He worked his neck around to ease it. His lungs were still burning, but when he took a breath of normal air he found he could breathe well enough, and discarded the mask. "Let me put in a preliminary report, get the red tape squared away," he said to Jarrat as they watched Spencer Carnaby transferred to a gurney and rushed inside. "You know how Tac works."

"Not as well as you do." Jarrat had handed his own breathmask

back to the medic, and was rubbing his eyes, which were bloodshot and puffy. “These are good people, Stoney. I’m impressed. Any of these guys wants a NARC transfer, I’d be happy to rubber-stamp it.”

The clinic’s senior doctor — a man of Kip Reardon’s age, tall and thickset, with skin the color of ebony and gold chameleon contact lenses — called their names from the door to the ambulance bay. Right inside was Emergency, and a hazmat technician was waiting for them.

“You go ahead,” Stone told Jarrat. “A clinic this size won’t be able to handle two at a time. Let me go and get the report in, and I’ll follow you.”

Jarrat coughed on a sore throat and rasping lungs, and looked Stone up and down critically. He dropped the empathic shield and reached out with senses Harry Del had taught them to direct, control, refine. Stone dropped his own shield and let him in, and for several moments there was a sharing which they would never be able to describe to one who knew nothing of it. Harry, and the other ‘Rethan mutants’ like him knew, but people like Yvette McKinnen could only ever guess.

“You’re okay,” Jarrat rasped, “aren’t you?”

“*We* are,” Stone corrected. “Or, we will be.” Over the loop, Feynman called his name. He gave Jarrat a push. “I’m right here, Lieutenant. You’re going to want a field report to get this mess cleaned up fast. Let me help you there ... and thanks. It was close.”

“Now, there’s a goddamn’ understatement ... Captain,” Feynman said dryly.

The double doors closed over behind Jarrat, but the shields were down and Stone could follow him so easily. He felt the sudden coolness of a/c, a needle tagging into his arm to take blood, the ice-cold spray of plastiskin sealing several abrasions and minor burns; then Jarrat breathed in a deep lungful of something as heavily moist as steam, but this too was cold. His lungs eased at once.

While he followed Jarrat with one part of his mind, Stone was talking, giving Feynman the full report, back as far as Sheckley. Names, dates, ships, cargo, everything from Tate Buchanan to Valda Hawass. As he finished, he had strolled up to the squad’s cockpit hatch, and he signed off on the report from the keypad there. “Bump

it on to Colonel Stacy,” he told Feynman. “He’s going to want it, about five minutes from now.”

“Less,” she said, amused. “He’s two minutes to your northeast, with a full-on riot squad. They missed the party. But we didn’t, Captain. We got the town locked down tight, and we’re fairly sure nobody got out. You disabled both the civvy air transports that would have been available to Sondheim’s group, and nothing, repeat *nothing*, got out on the highway.”

“So Vaughan and Reineck have to be here somewhere,” Stone mused, surveying the town critically. “Not to mention Sondheim and Valda Hawass.”

Feynman did not sound so sure. “I’ve been liaising with Sergeant Martells, who’s gaffing the Mackay squad. They haven’t found anyone fitting those descriptions. A very senior female, and an ex-Companion built like Ms Reineck would be damned difficult to miss in a town like Bundaberg. It’s possible your people, Vaughan and Sondheim, might be among the dead or injured, but I do know for certain, none of the casualties is female.”

“Damn,” Stone whispered.

As he spoke, he heard engines from the north. He shaded his eyes to watch the big, brutish squad from Chell drop in over the clinic’s forecourt. It dwarfed the flyers from Eldorado and Mackay, and landed out on the road, effectively blocking it. The riot squad had been stood down, but when Colonel Pete Stacy stepped out of the body of the aircraft he was flanked by two armed, helmeted and flack-jacketed troopers.

The look on his face was thunderous. He stood, fists on his hips, thick through the body in his own flak jacket, which curved oddly about his large belly, and surveyed the town. With a muttered curse Stone walked out to meet him.

“I don’t believe this,” Stacy barked by way of greeting. “NARC shows up, *even without* the fucking carrier and the riot armor and the gunships and the rest of it, and within one freakin’ hour I’ve got acres of burning wreckage, about eight *million* credits’ worth of damage on the Bartusiak Field, a body count in double figures, vehicle insurance claims up the ass —”

“And the Buran syndicate you didn’t even know you had is

busted,” Stone rasped, “right back to its roots.” Stacy glared at him. “Look at the report I just gave Feynman.” Stone turned away toward to the clinic. “And why don’t you give your people something useful to do? Find Vaughan and Reineck, and Sondheim and Hawass. They’re in town somewhere, even if you have to ID the bodies, and the triage patients.”

He was stalking away toward the ambulance bay, from which a nurse had just called his name. Stacy had not yet moved. He would take his time, fret and curse with frustration as his authority and jurisdiction were usurped. But he would go through Bundaberg room by room, and every triage patient, dead or alive, would be identified.

Satisfied, Stone headed into the stream of cool air and followed the nurse to the treatment cubicle where Jarrat was sitting with his feet on a second chair, drinking a soda and trying not to cough.

10

Tac 101 was set up in the clinic's wide, dusty forecourt. From the windows of their second-floor room Jarrat could look down on it, watch the troops come and go, and Stacy himself holding court for the local Tactical personnel. They had combed Bundaberg, and Jarrat and Stone were even then waiting for a call.

They were ordered to remain under observation overnight, and Jarrat had no objection. The room was private, with a pair of king-size singles, either of which would easily accommodate two. Their baggage had been transferred from the *Arial*, and in any case they could not get a shuttle flight out of Bundaberg till tomorrow morning at earliest.

By Jarrat's chrono, the clipper *Pacifica* would dock at dawn, Eldorado time. A commercial shuttle from Bundaberg to Eldorado and a car hired at the spaceport there would still get them to Tarataga on time. Green water, white sands, vast blue skies and trade winds made for a siren song he was unlikely to resist. No kid from Sheckley could possibly be immune. The scene needed only the addition of a lover ... someone tall and broad, stacked, hung, and eager. Jarrat allowed himself a rare smirk. They had it covered.

Sunset light was flooding the room. The sky over the Altair

Ranges was the color of blood. The town lights were starting to come on, but the room lights were still off and the dimness was companionable. The bathroom door was wide open, emitting a fog bank of steam, and Stone had just stepped out of the shower. Comfortably naked, he rummaged through his bag for his razor, and gave Jarrat a conspiratorial wink.

He was scorched, Jarrat observed. Cheeks, neck, forearms, hands, any exposed skin had been subjected to heat and chemicals. Jarrat was no different, and they both wore several layers of plastiskin. Their lungs felt comfortable again, but Bundaberg's clinic administrators were paranoidly aware that they had two NARC captains under their roof. A splinter, Jarrat thought wryly, would have warranted major surgery.

Like himself, Stone was largely unhurt; the injuries were so minor, even the lung tissues would be repaired in a day. They had inhaled a moist, cold nano mist and he was sure he could feel the microscopic 'bots at work. By the time he and Stone checked into the small hotel on the beach above Umaroa Bay on the north shore of Tarataga, they would both be ready for sea and sand, good food, rare wine, and enough action between the sheets to bridge the inevitable and impending drought.

From there, it was back to Central, another assignment, a life spent on call for weeks or months which might be fraught with high pressure or spiked with danger. Romance was a pleasure snatched in a lucky hour; sex was hurried, with a sense of being hunted both by time and the job.

A chime from the door intruded into his thoughts a moment before Jarrat could reach over the foot of the bed and draw a caress down Stone's spine. He swore softly and threw a terrycloth robe at his partner as he called, "Who is it?"

"Stacy. You gonna let me in, or do we yell through the door?"

The robe belted about Stone's waist and Jarrat thumbed the remote to release the door. "Any joy?"

The Tactical man looked disgusted. "Some. I tracked down your man, Damon Vaughan. He's right here in this hospital."

"Talking?" Stone wondered.

"Critical," Stacy corrected tersely. "He's busted up bad. The

surgeon who patched him up enough to get him stable describes his injuries as 'horrific.' They're moving him to Eldorado County tomorrow, but if he walks out of there at all, he'll do it on a pair of biocyber legs, and he'll wave for a cab with a biocyber right arm. They took off three out of four limbs to keep him alive, and the fourth doesn't look too great ... I wouldn't call it 'alive.' He's comatose, and damn' lucky to be." Stacy looked away. "He was caught in the fire. The other one, Leena Reineck, is in the morgue. She was on the street, smart enough to get out when Tactical showed, and run. She was trying to get into a car. She pulled a gun on the Tac man who ID'd her, one of the Mackay crew. God knows, Reineck was easy to recognize! She took a bullet, dead before she hit the ground. Fuck, some of the Mackay Tac sharpshooters are good. I oughtta be recruiting."

"Reineck was always slippery," Jarrat said shrewdly. "If anyone was going to get out, I'd have bet it would be her. What about Sondheim?"

"Nope. He's nowhere in town, not even in the morgue. And the old lady's gone, Jarrat. All we got was a fistful of smoke."

"Damn," Stone breathed. "It was the old lady who ID'd us. Sondheim doesn't have enough brains to give himself a headache, but Valda Hawass was pulling strings before Death's Head existed." He studied Stacy with a frown. "You'll get the whole story out of Carnaby."

"The little shit already offered," Stacy said with fat satisfaction. "He's getting medical obbo, same as you bastards, then they're releasing him to me tomorrow. He'll be debriefing for months, and then ..." He shrugged. "He's trading for a new name, new face. He gives me what I want, I'll keep my side of the deal."

"How magnanimous," Stone observed. Stacy gave him a glare, but Stone had already turned his back on the man. "You need anything else from us?"

"Nope. I have Doc McKinnen's package, and the report you gave Feynman. I've got Carnaby, and a line back to Sheckley Tactical. Good enough." He was on his way back to the door. "You want me to message you, if I get my hands on Sondheim and Hawass?"

"Do that," Jarrat said thoughtfully. "I don't expect any repercussions. Your Buran syndicate's dead and buried, and if surviving elements of Death's Head had any idea of reforming, they're scat-

tered. But ... you never can tell," he finished. "I don't know where we'll be, Stacy, but you can reach us via Colonel Dupre's office on Darwin's."

"All right." Stacy retreated to the door and frowned at them. "You bastards were just dumb-ass lucky. You could have been roasted alive on that gantry."

He was gone then, leaving Jarrat meditating on the words while Stone let him think, and waited for him to speak. "He's right," he said at last. "We're pushing it, Stoney."

"That's the job," Stone said quietly. He was behind Jarrat, hands on his shoulders, and when Jarrat turned toward him, he cupped one hand about Kevin's face. "Stacy thinks we do it for the power trip, or maybe the thrill."

"Do we?" Jarrat was less than certain. He was also aware of an ambivalence he knew he would not have felt a year ago. He turned his face to Stone's hand, pressed a kiss to the palm, and let Stone share the turbulent emotions which troubled him. "It's not so easy now," he admitted quietly, as if it were a confession. "When they kicked me up to captain and assigned me to the field, I had nothing to lose and a lot of ghosts to exorcise. People to avenge. Like Barry Ingram."

"I was the same." Stone pulled him closer, held him. "I had nothing I cared *enough* about to make me find a home, put down roots, make plans for some future I expected to be around long enough to see. I left a lover on Darwin's when I was assigned to carrier duty ... and he's never forgiven me for applying for the duty. NARC didn't shanghai me! I asked for this, the way I walked away from my family back on Earth and signed my name to a Tactical enlistment. They never forgave me either."

Jarrat leaned back to look at him. "They call it a vocation. Something you do because you have to. I *had* to transfer into NARC, *had* to apply for carrier duty, and when they assigned me to field work I went out and celebrated." He gave Stone a crooked, rueful smile. "The truth is, if we both hadn't wanted the work, we would never have met. We wouldn't be here. Like this." His fingers combed through Stone's dark hair, drew his head toward a kiss. "Don't knock it."

"I never do," Stone said against his mouth, "but just lately I'm starting to count the cost, weigh the risks, measure them against what

I have to lose now.” He seized Jarrat’s mouth again, and they were both breathless when they slid apart. “Put it this way,” Stone said huskily. “Next time, Tactical can do its own dirty work. This one was way too close.”

“And the next assignment we draw?” Jarrat sat on the side of the nearest bed and deliberately stripped the robe from Stone’s broad, hard body.

“We’ll be careful.” Stone dropped the robe, gave Jarrat a shove onto the mattress and covered him, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. Jarrat went down readily and dragged a pillow under his head as Stone settled, heavy and hot on him. “We’ll be even more careful than before,” Stone added against the skin of Jarrat’s shoulder, and bite-branded him there. “We still have the luck, Kevin, and you heard Stacy. Luck’s what makes the difference, and we were always dumb-ass lucky.”

“Good enough,” Jarrat decided. “I was born lucky, or I’d have been on the *Lombard Explorer*.”

And then Stone’s mouth effectively silenced him, and it was a long time before coherent sounds resumed. The empathic shields were down and the shared sensations were so overwhelming, they banished rational thought. In Jarrat’s mind was a melange of images and impressions. Blue-green oceans, the vast, burnished skies of the tropics, the electric sensation of a storm coming in, white coral sands in the bay above the lagoons and the reef. And Stone — naked, growing bronze under a sheen of coconut oil, the blue eyes filled with the wicked invitation of a one-way ticket to paradise.

Not too bad for a kid from Sheckley, he told himself, and he relaxed every bone, joint and muscle in hedonistic surrender as Stone laid claim to him.

AFTERWORD

This story appeared out of the blue, or at least to readers it would have seemed to; and it carries the extremely odd volume number of 3.5, which begs an explanation!

‘Oh, Magoo, you’ve done it again.’ Or, ‘This is another fine mess you have gotten us into, Keegan.’

I know, I admit it, I keep doing this: I’ve been over-plotting novels since the original *Death’s Head*, which had to be so far amputated by GMP sixteen years ago, the product was hardly the book I’d set out to write. Well ... I did it again.

I wound up with an *Aphelion* which was around 40,000 words too long to fit into anything like a normal book. It would have been way longer than *Dangerous Moonlight and Nocturne*, which puts it in the ‘epic’ category, the downside to which is that printing and shipping costs can easily blow out.

It was time to back off and take a look at *Aphelion* before I finalized the novel; and what do you know? There was a 38,000 word ‘pilot segment’ sitting right there, ready to be whacked off at the roots and redeveloped, expanded, to stand on its own. It wound up at around 44,500 words, which is the absolutely perfect length for one of our ‘slim’ books. (There was a time, way back in the 1960s, when the average SF novel was right in this bracket; is anyone old enough to remember those books?! I still have a few.)

In fact, *Stopover* was only marginally part of the plot of *Aphelion*. It has a great deal more to do with *Death’s Head*, as you discovered when you read the book! I don’t want to say too much more at this

time, because to expand on what you've seen here will involve plot spoilers up to the eyeballs. But I can give you a couple of hints.

Ever wondered what went on in the Chell underground when Death's Head was destroyed, leaving behind a vacuum? Ever wondered where Hal Mavvik came from? Or what might happen when a couple of NARC guys try to take a simple vacation? Did you ever want to take a close up look at the place where Jarrat grew up — perhaps find out a little bit about what makes him tick?

Jarrat has been called 'mean, moody and magnificent.' I love that description; it's from a reader review which appears on my website (www.melkeegan.com), and many thanks to 'Ranger' for coining it. Jarrat is by far the more difficult character to write, because his background has always been so sketchy. Stone is easy to write by comparison. I've always wanted to explore the history, the early years, behind the Jarrat character: Sheckley, hospice, Army carrier, field ops, NARC. There have to be rafts of stories to tell.

So, I lifted out the pilot segment, cut a little, added a lot, and called it *Stopover*. The title refers, actually, to the brief time Jarrat and Stone spend on Sheckley, because it's there where 'the whole vacation plan goes south' for them.

This story begins about two or three days after the end of *Scorpio*. At one point, Stone makes reference to the fact that Michiko is on the carrier, Harry's working to get Marcus's brain back into functioning order, and after their downtime our heroes are headed back to Darwin's for debriefing and another assignment. This places the story firmly into the context of its own timeframe.

The other attractive thing about doing *Stopover* as an extra to *Aphelion* was that I was able to take it in slightly different directions, and at a slightly different pace, than you've come to expect in one of the main novels. I could afford to 'interrupt the action' here and let them explore Sheckley ... I didn't have to worry about such peripheral material slowing down the main plot. If I injected this material into the main novels, in a worst case scenario, someone somewhere was going to say, 'The novel is padded out, which makes it a slow read.'

[Retching sound] Well ... I suppose such a critic *would* be making a valid point, because I already admitted that *Stopover* doesn't have a great deal to do with the core plot of *Aphelion*. But remember, one

reader's 'padding' is another reader's 'character development' —

And I'll be honest again: I have been longing to find somewhere, some way, to get in there and do some character development. In 180,000 words of *Scorpio*, I couldn't find a place to jam any character development in edge-wise. *Stopover* was my opportunity, which also means it's a rare treat for those readers who might have been waiting and hoping to have these characters just *stop* for the occasional ten pages (good gods, what a concept), sit down and talk, or examine their motivations, feelings, whatever.

I've forged a reputation for myself as a writer of thrillers, and this is terrific; but there is a downside. It's very hard to develop complex characters inside a plot like *Scorpio* or *Equinox*, and there are times when I actually find myself longing to do some old fashioned character development.

The other thing I often long to do is the occasional hint of comedy. There's no place for humor in the regular NARC book. The issues at stake are vastly too important and the stress is on for all concerned. No one has time to sleep a great deal, much less find space for humor. But with *Stopover* I was able to slow down the pace and let humor happen.

I enjoyed the process of writing this a great deal ... in fact, I'd like to do it again soon. There is actually another NARC story which falls into the 'SlimBook' bracket. I've had it in the back of my mind for several years, and it would be a lot of fun to write. More about this one later, on my webpage. Log on for news and updates; in fact, sign on for the newsletter, and they'll come to you: www.melkeegan.com.

Mel Keegan

Adelaide

January, 2008

The cult classic is back — as you've never seen it before!

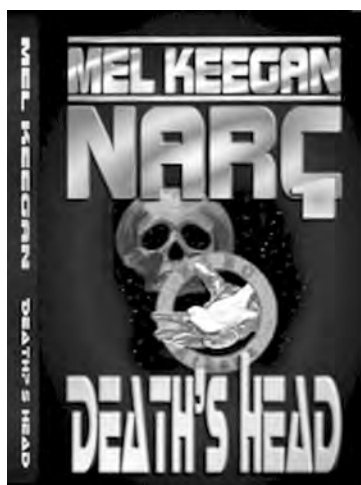
Four centuries from now, humans have colonized scores of worlds, terraforming them and populating them with the untold, unwanted millions of earth's people. The colony worlds opened up new vistas of opportunity ... for the criminal cartels as well as the law-abiding.

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?

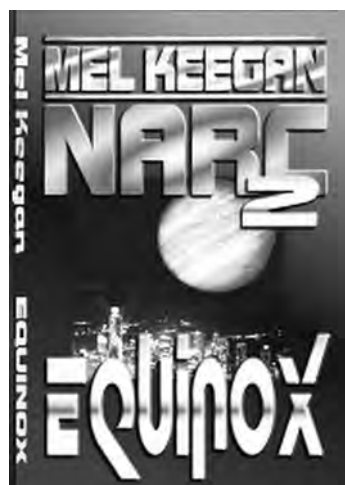


NARC #1 - Death's Head
ISBN 0-9750884-5-49
Cover by Jade

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

All roads lead to the homeworlds...

The Scorpio data-trail ... the Michiko dossier. Earth. Mars. The timeless cities of ancient worlds ... dark. Wicked. Corrupt. For the outsider — the stranger, the colonial, the mutoid — it's a mean arena, alien and dangerous. For the 'Earther' headed back in after many years ... it's not what you expected, nor where you want to be.



Chicago ... Marsport ... Sequoia. The incredible skycities of the Jupiter system. These are the new-old worlds on the old high frontier ... new battlefields where Death wears the same old face.

Aerosports and Angel packwar — politics gone mad — the launch of a supercarrier — the death of a friend.

Nothing is as it seems, and enemies and allies trade places. Trust only those you know — believe only what you see.

The NARC series continues in the same dazzling form as SCORPIO. Jarrat and Stone are back with a vengeance in this pivotal novel which takes the carrier *Athena* to the heart of humanity's old homeworlds. It's a thrill-a-page ride, rich with action, intrigue and sensuality, set against an astonishing background of real worlds, real places.

Mel Keegan's name is a byword for thrilling gay adventure
in the past, present and future
— MILLIVRES on *Aquamarine*.

NARC #4: Aphelion
Cover art: Jade

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 fiction to 'try before you buy,' rafts of artwork, interviews, 'behind the scenes' non-fiction, free eBooks, screensavers, desktops ... video on demand featuring NARC and HELLGATE; regular competitions for Members, and a lot more. Short fiction. Epic and series fiction. The *fifth* entry in the NARC (Jarrat and Stone) series, the two vampyre series novels ...!

Feeling out of touch? If you knew and loved Mel Keegan way back when the novels were appearing from GMP, you'll have wondered where MK has been all these years. You might know that Millivres closed its paperback line around 2001. You might not have been aware that MK promptly hooked up with DreamCraft, and new novels have been appearing the whole time.

Our readers say MK is writing better than ever, and the new editions (you have one in your hands) are more beautiful than the old. The new titles are so numerous and varied, we can't begin to describe them here. You'll have to meet us on the web ... and help yourself to your free eBooks, screensavers and desktops while you're there. Get into the competition to win a collector's item such as a calendar, a set of bookmarks or mousepad. We'll see you online!

