

TIME CHASER

Also by Jesse Gordon:

The Knack

The Midnight Recollections

Stories from the Steel Garden

The Reformed Citizen

Heroes' Day

TIME CHASER

JESSE GORDON

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

TIME CHASER

Portions of this book first appeared as an online series in *ShadowKeep* and were later posted (and revised) at deviantART.com.

Copyright © 1998, 2000, 2004 by Jesse Gordon

Cover artwork copyright © 2008 by Hanumeldo

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Lulu, Inc.

<http://www.lulu.com/>

Visit the author's Web site at:

<http://www.jessture.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-4357-3879-9

Lulu trade paperback special edition published August, 2008

To the family,
for being ever so patient.

TIME CHASER

1. MOON 3

The beaches of Moon 3 were known to be some of the most beautiful in the galaxy. Crystal clear waters lapped at white sands faintly glittering in the violet light of the weather satellites orbiting above. Here and there, tall, spindly-looking palms and lulling goose-tongues swayed in a gentle breeze that tousled the shore during an utterly breathtaking (if man-made) evening.

When Storm arrived, he didn't notice anything other than the ground rushing at him violently. Just before he impacted, his body's descent slowed to almost nothing as it came into sync with the environment, and he gently tripped, sprawled—landed face-down on the sand. Of course, it was all merely mental inertia; he wasn't actually *thrown* onto the beach—but it sure felt like it.

This is how it always is, he thought, laying very still for a moment and imagining his body as a hunk of smoldering meat. *Nearly pissing myself for no reason . . . I must look like a jackass.*

He spit sand from his mouth, coughed and rolled into a sitting position to examine himself before anything else. He was naked, of course, since free-form streaming only worked with living DNA. One *could* put forth the extra effort and concentrate on clothes as well as body, but it

would be an extraneous effort, with no direct benefit other than to spare the streamer his own shame. Storm had been streaming for a long time, and had come to the conclusion long ago that modesty was the least of his worries. It was simply more efficient this way.

Physically, he was in pristine condition, retaining all the qualities of his original, athletically-inclined (and, yes, needlessly vain) template—with the added tweaks manifested by intense mental concentration.

Ordain it, and it shall come, he thought, remembering DK's favorite mantra, for even at this rather refined point in his life, he still had to work at it. Other chasers could appear and disappear, walk through walls, step between realities like graceful gymnasts performing on a podium; Storm could barely keep himself from throwing up each time he transcended the cosmos.

Quit your complaining—you're on a schedule, remember?

He looked around. The beach was devoid of people. He got to his feet and looked up into the sky, where he saw the appropriate satellite orbiting slowly, giving off its artificial light. Behind the beach, farther up the mainland, was the city, glowing brightly in the nighttime haze.

Looking good so far. Now . . . where's Chris?

Storm held himself, fighting off the residual disorientation, and started walking along the beach, counting in his head the passing minutes. Nude or clothed, it was a pleasant evening (Moon 3 was a tourist retreat, and as such had impeccable weather management). However, Storm still found himself shivering—not from physical cold, but from

TIME CHASER

the ominous fact that the longer it took Chris to find him, the more chance there was of a police officer catching him first.

He stopped beside one of the palm trees, pressed himself against the spindly trunk when he noticed a faint humming sound in the air, coming from the direction of the sea. The noise got steadily louder and it quickly became apparent a small shuttle was approaching. Storm watched as the craft, searchlights darting to and fro like reaching arms, skimmed across the lapping water. As the craft crept closer, he prayed that his friend (and not some Patrolman) was at the controls, for he was certainly in no position to face the latter.

After a brief moment of searching, the beams settled on Storm and his tree, and a menacing voice rang out across the beach:

"This is Moon 3 Time Patrol. Step out into the open with your hands behind your head."

The Patrolman's voice had a familiar ring to it (Chris?), yet Storm's instincts kept him from stepping forward. Out in the open, he would be defenseless against a potential capture. But then again, what else could he do? Obviously he'd been spotted—now it was only a matter of by *whom*.

"I repeat. This is Moon 3 Time Patrol. Step out into the open with your hands behind your head."

Storm sucked in a quick, chilled breath. He stepped out into the light. He had to keep his face tilted away from the shuttle as it landed in order to keep from being totally blinded.

"Get on your knees—keep those hands up!"

Storm did as he was told and began to seriously wonder why he'd trusted in chance to see him through. *Damned sloppy*, he thought. Too early to know if his plan had back-fired, too late to hope for an easy escape—

“Look down at the ground!”

Averting his gaze from the shuttle, he swore silently and reminded himself to kick his own ass when he had a free moment—if he had a free moment. Chances were when Moon 3's police force got through with him he wouldn't want much more than a nice prison cell in which to recover.

A door slid open and Storm heard the sound of the Patrolman hopping down onto the sand, his laser rifle clinking menacingly. A moment later and the man's boot tips were just beneath Storm's forehead. There was the feel of cold metal pressed against his bare back, and a single word from the patrolman's mouth:

“Zap.”

With knotted neck muscles giving way to shudders, and his heart pounding in his chest, Storm blinked and craned his head up to see none other than Christopher Squire standing over him and grinning devilishly.

“Fucking hell,” muttered Storm. He'd come so close to urinating all over himself.

Chris chuckled, slung his laser rifle over his shoulder and offered a hand to help him up. “Just keeping you on your feet. It was getting quite redundant just sitting out over the water for hours on end listening to the police scanner banter about whose wife has been blowing whose husband and so on. I'm glad you were on time for once!”

TIME CHASER

“It’s good to see you,” Storm said, “but you’re going to pay for this.”

With more chuckling Chris ushered him into the shuttle (a small two-man craft) and reclaimed the pilot’s seat. “I’ve got clothes back there for you,” he said, pointing at the rear compartment, “and food, if you’re hungry. Best we take our leave right away if we don’t want the *real* night watchmen to give us any trouble.”

The rear of the craft was somewhat cramped, as one would expect of a shuttle designed for short-range missions. However, the engineers had allowed for a little comfort. There was a shiny gray settee built into the side wall, upon which Storm found a black jumpsuit, boots, and an identification badge. With a small amount of amusement, he noticed that his badge designated him as “freelance merchant”—a humble but relatively sovereign position when it came to space travel. He wondered if Chris had gone the extra mile and acquired a decent set of galactic passports as well.

Storm hefted the jumpsuit, paused to check his appearance in the pull-down mirror that hung just beside the settee. He looked the same as always: age 18-30, beardless, blond hair, blue eyes, five-foot-ten, smooth, flawless skin, chiseled, muscular build, pubic hair genetically programmed into an aesthetically pleasing patch above his well-formed, oversized penis. He had vanity written all over him—his parents’ idea. *The supermodel who wasn’t so super after all. The Olympian who was never meant to be.* He attempted ineffectually to fix his hair, which was untidy and full of sand grains, so that whenever he turned

his head, his scalp glittered. A souvenir of his brief visit to Moon 3.

I have to admit, he thought, dressing, that I look good for a guy who's pushing 137. That is, if the leftists haven't finally gotten rid of Earth's old calendar by now.

He entered the shuttle's cockpit and seated himself beside Chris. "So, we're traders now, are we?"

Past the control panel, a network of flashing meters and digital read-outs, was the forward viewport. An overlay screen offered a splendid view of Moon 3 as the planet rapidly receded into the star-flecked ambiance of space.

"Yep," replied Chris with a broad grin. "We specialize in counterfeit clothing and imitation-jewelry, all at the lowest prices in the galaxy."

Storm cringed slightly, but kept his smile. "Why such meager items? Why not silver or *real* jewelry? The cheaper stuff, anyway. Make some money out of the deal."

"Hey, one man's treasure," Chris replied, easing the controls offhandedly as he looked over at his friend. "They're all quality knock-offs. The silver lining is that we probably won't attract the attention of bandits, so we shouldn't have much trouble keeping out of everyone's way until we get to where it is we're going."

Shrugging, Storm nodded. He would have made a wry comment, but his mind was still a bit sluggish from his recent transition. He was still thinking in pieces. "What's the date?"

"2416. You've been in flux for ten years, buddy."

Ten years. Enough time to explain Chris's appearance. He'd put on some weight, grown a faint beard, and ac-

TIME CHASER

quired some gray hairs around his temples, where the former blond ones were beginning to thin just a little bit—though otherwise he was still as stalwart as ever. *The result of staying in the standard time stream*, Storm thought. *It makes you count your breaths with the years.* In another decade or two, Chris really *would* be old. And after that . . . one more friend come and gone.

“You’re looking well,” he said, feeling as if he were inadvertently requesting that his friend answer for his own human failings. “How are the wife and kids doing?”

“Just fine. Claire had our fourth two years ago. A girl. Steve’s just begun his sophomore year at Mars Academy. Says he wants to be a terraformer.”

Storm listened, glanced out the window and watched the glittering spaceway markers whiz by. Ten years. He’d been floating around for ten years while the rest of the universe had moved on. Steve had been only a boy then, and now he was a man. In another ten or twenty years he would be an older man.

The price of being a chaser. The price of freedom.

“Storm?”

He blinked and turned away from the window. Chris had his hand on his shoulder. There was a concerned look in his eyes.

“I’m all right,” Storm muttered. He smiled somewhat dreamily, as if just coming out of a long sleep. “This always happens to me after a stream. When you spend ten years drifting around the cosmos without a body . . . it’s kind of overwhelming when suddenly you’re thrown back into the flesh.”

JESSE GORDON

Chris nodded and handed him a warm flask. “Here, drink up. *Real* coffee from *real* beans I picked up during my last Earth visit. Not a synthesized ingredient in there, I assure you.”

Storm took the flask and drank with enthusiasm.

2 . INTERCEPTION

“This is Trader Squire-1372, coming up behind the rusty Cadillac spewing out more space dust than a supernova. Get off the road—you’re crapping out the place.”

“I’ll be damned! Ol’ Chris is licking my ass a week early! What’s the problem? You need another piggyback to the nearest trailer park?”

“Not this time, buddy. Stopping off at The Pit to get the Cassini out of dry dock, then I’m taking a little trip to Port Carr. You know if Gregori is in town?”

“Ah, is there a more shameless trader this side of Orion? Yeah, he’s in. What could you possibly want with such a degenerate?”

“Business, my boy. Doesn’t matter what, so long as I get my cut, you know?”

“I hear you. Say, do you have some free time on your hands? Why not drop over for a while and we can have a game of pool together?”

“Sorry, bud. Not this time. Got to keep the clients happy, and that means I have a schedule to keep. I’ll be in touch, though.”

“Maybe next time, then. Stay out of trouble. End comm.”

* * *

“I’ve been making friends all over the Trader Ways,” Chris explained, leaning back against the settee and sipping coffee from his flask. “I got into this business just after you last left. Seemed a reasonable enough change considering the growing tensions over stream abuse. Claire, bless her heart, has stuck with it, raising the kids while I’m out here gallivanting around like some swashbuckling entrepreneur. Thankfully, the Time Patrol hasn’t laid a finger on me or my family—and that’s probably due to the fact that I haven’t mentioned you to anyone. I stop in at home twice a year . . . not enough, sometimes, but more than I could hope for, as long as the family’s okay. And, well, I’m making enough of the good stuff to keep clothes on the kids’ backs. Plus, I just had the Cassini re-outfitted, new navigators and all. Wait until you see her, Storm. She’s the most beautiful cruiser you’ll ever set your eyes on.”

“I can hardly wait,” said Storm with a half-smile, which faded promptly when he thought of the reasons behind his friend’s current arrangement. *From family man to man on the run . . . because of me.* “I never meant for any of this to happen to you.”

“So you owe me one. Done and done. I’m agreeable.”

Storm smiled again, found himself actually chuckling this time. “Just what I needed: one more life debt. I’ll add it to the collection.”

“Do I detect a bit of sarcasm?” Chris chuckled, a playful look on his face.

“Might I remind you,” said Storm, a bit of the gleam returning to his eyes, “that I’m old enough to be your great

TIME CHASER

grandfather?"

"Ah, now it's coming back to me. The last time we had a moment together. What was it we bet on that arm-wrestle?"

Hopping off his crate, Storm shoved it before the settee. "As I recall, we never finished that match before the feds came a'knockin'."

"Bloody hell, you're right!"

Chris downed the last of his drink and replaced the glass in the food dispenser. Then he rolled up his sleeves, revealing formidable muscles that slithered menacingly under his skin as he cracked his fingers. Storm, pleased to see that time hadn't yet taken away Chris's physical vitality, did the same and clasped his partner's hand.

"On three. One . . . two . . . three!"

Silence ensued as they engaged themselves in the match. Brows furrowed, veins bulged, but both of their arms remained upright, quivering. Chris's usual strategy was to expend only the necessary amount of energy keeping his arm straight up until his opponent began to weaken. Then he poured on the brawn. Storm, perhaps not well-acquainted with the art of arm-wrestling, or not yet fully adjusted to his newly fleshed body, tried too hard too fast, and knew as his arm started to get sore that he was going to lose. Nevertheless, he remained determined to go down with dignity, focusing all his attention on his labors until the flask at his feet caught his attention. It was trembling, sliding sideways. Since the artificial gravity generator was obviously still operating, the deck appeared perfectly level, but all around the rear compartment of the

shuttle, objects not fastened or restrained were shaking and rolling all over the place.

“Shit, gravity well!” Chris exclaimed, rising unsteadily to his feet, the wrestling match forgotten. “There must be a ship on top of us!”

Storm said nothing as he followed him into the cockpit, where he strapped himself into the co-pilot’s seat. There was only one reason any ship would come into such dangerously close range: interception.

“You remember how to handle the scanners?” Chris asked, taking the shuttle off autopilot.

“Yeah.”

“Good. What are we dealing with here?”

Instinct took over as Storm’s fingers flew about the glowing console before him. “Looks like a moderate-sized cargo vessel, military-grade navigators, no registry number . . . they’re armed.”

“Bandits. Damn it. Usually don’t have to deal with them this far out.”

There was a brief hum, and the deck buckled beneath Storm’s feet. Suddenly he was side-heavy, the bandit shuttle’s gravity well pulling him off to one side. It felt like there was an inches-thick layer of skin on the right side of his body.

“They’re pulling us in,” he murmured.

“Not without a fight. Hang on!” Chris pulled up on the yoke. The star field went into a spin as the shuttle performed a somersault and reoriented itself behind the attacking ship.

Storm frowned. “Please tell me these guys are just some

TIME CHASER

old gambling buddies.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Chris nervously, concern causing his face to crease. “Shit, and I don’t even have a squirt gun onboard.”

“What about the rifle you stuck up my ass back on the beach?”

“Empty.”

“Wonderful,” Storm sighed, unbuckling his safety belt. “I don’t suppose we can take out their entire crew through hand-to-hand combat?”

Chris shrugged. “We’ll think of something. We always do.”

3 . BANDIT CELL

Trying to sleep was an inconvenience in itself; trying to sleep with your ankles and wrists shackled to a cold metal wall was downright annoying.

There were seven men, including Storm and Chris, confined to the cylindrical, converted detention cell. All were human except for one, a Gecko with gray scaly skin. He spoke the least, left the human men to their own devices, though there wasn't much of anything to do but hang limply in desolation. The general morale was, as one would expect, quite low—particularly among those who had not been fed in days. No one bothered with pleasantries, no one offered up idle chat to pass the time.

Storm fidgeted in his shackles, a mixture of dried blood and sweat sticking to his face and making him wish for water. He looked over to where Chris had been strung up, found that his friend was dozing. He'd taken a rather nasty blow to the forehead, and the resulting wound had swelled into a morbid purple lump.

At least we're still in one piece, Storm thought, though that may not last long if our captors are in a bad mood. Glancing around the cell, he discerned a multitude of rather nasty cuts and bruises on his fellow captives' bodies. He attempted mentally to retrace his steps to the point

TIME CHASER

where he and Chris had still been aboard the shuttle, scrambling for some sort of plan, coming to the ultimate realization that they were in deep trouble as the bandits had boarded, overpowered them almost immediately.

“You’re a chaser, aren’t you?” Chris had whispered as they were being dragged along the gangway. “Can’t you . . . *do* something?”

Storm had simply rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’ll just wiggle my fingers and turn everyone into toads.”

Had he been raised as a circus performer, such a trick might not have gone unappreciated.

Storm turned his head and stared off to his left, studied the lines of the metallic floor, and, following one, then the other towards the opposite wall, found himself examining the lizard fellow. Most likely a brother of the Gecko Tree. The pure bloods all had the same ivory-colored stripe running down the center of their torsos.

The lizard-man’s eyes opened suddenly, narrowing, focusing on Storm. A forked tongue flicked. “Why do you seek time if it is your enemy?”

Storm blinked, a bit surprised (and embarrassed) that he’d been caught staring. “Excuse me?”

“Your ego, Storm Anderson, reveals your distaste for cosmic measurements, yet you have used those very measurements to achieve your present state.”

The Gecko’s speech was heavily accented (too many “h” sounds), but his words were clear and crisp. Storm decided not to respond directly. “So, you speak human, and English, at that. How do you know my name?”

“My people have heard of you, as have many others in

our galaxy. You may call me Sven. I must say you have done remarkably well in your fight against the Standard Stream. Most humans yield to the lure of time until it has ravaged their bodies, dulled their minds.”

Storm nodded as best he could. “I try.”

“You have broken free, you have ignored time’s call and denied its deadly hand—yet it has drawn you back, for you would not be here otherwise.”

“I *chose* to return to the standard stream,” Storm clarified. “Time is simply a tool I use to get where I want to be.”

“Ah,” murmured Sven with a sly smile. “The creed of any good time chaser, yes?”

“It’s not an occupation.”

Sven nodded. “But it must be, for while we may not escape this web of existence, we are allowed to crawl along its many threads, in any direction we please—only if we make it a priority to preserve our own freedom.”

Thinking briefly of a spider consuming its prey, Storm discarded the analogy and simply went silent, wondering how much longer it would be until he could get some food into his stomach.

However, Sven was still talkative. “What sort of consummation do you seek by shedding your mortal skin?”

Storm wasn’t sure he liked this fellow’s prodding, but he had to acknowledge it as better than the forlorn silence he’d endured for the dozen or so hours since his arrival. “I’m not sure I understand your question.”

The forked tongue flicked again. “Why are you a time chaser, Storm?”

“Because I hate putting good flesh to waste, be-

TIME CHASER

cause . . . I guess I never believed in getting old or dying as a way of life. Not once I learned the truth. Everyday life is too restricting. It's not for me."

"Ah. Freedom is a noble treasure, is it not?"

Not if you don't have anyone to spend it with, Storm thought. An image of Trudie popped unceremoniously into his mind, and for a moment, through a long-lost memory, she was with him again, holding him gently around the waist like she used to, whispering silly words into his ear as they walked along the San Francisco coast. Yes, there was more to his search, but he held it within himself, for it was his only sacred spot, his only gilded hope—untouchable by anyone or anything.

As long as he kept it to himself.

"Why are you in here, anyway?" he asked, looking at Sven once again. "You a chaser? These bandits, they go around picking up people like us for the ransom?"

Sven nodded. "Apparently, that is the case. But we each pay our own price, and we each *carry* our own price."

"Mine must be astronomical," Storm grumbled, and allowed his head to tilt forward somewhat. He stared contemplatively at the deck.

* * *

The sound of the prison cell door sliding open roused Storm from a peaceful, if vacuous, slumber. He blinked and groaned from the stiffness of his neck, experiencing the more difficult aspect of living in a flesh body: pain. In his wrists the sensation was more acute where the metal of

the shackles chafed against his skin, leaving unsightly marks.

“Dinnertime, boys.”

He watched in silence as four men entered the cell. The one who’d spoken was obviously a caretaker of sorts, for he carried a tray with several bowls on it. He immediately went to the prisoner hanging closest to the door and offered him a spoonful of some unidentifiable provision.

The remaining three bandits appeared to be of higher rank, for they wore black uniforms with red sashes. Red was traditionally the color of the bandit, and it was obvious here that these men enjoyed displaying their status as criminal travelers.

“Well, well, look at you,” crooned the middle bandit, a perennially-idiotic smile on his face. He strode forward until he was face to face with Storm. “Storm Anderson, in the flesh, and without a single wrinkle on that expensive, pretty-boy face of yours.”

Beside him, Storm heard Chris breathe a near-silent “jack-ass”, which was enough to attract Idiot’s attention.

“And who would this be?” Idiot cooed. “Your father, perhaps?” He raised his hand as if to strike Chris across the face, but Storm quickly spoke up:

“So, what exactly is the price on my head now? Ten thousand units? Twenty-five?”

Like a little boy who couldn’t keep his attention on one thing too long, Idiot, unaware that one of his own prisoners had just discovered a possible character flaw, lowered his hand and faced Storm again. “Enough to make all the trouble it’s going to take getting you to the appropriate au-

TIME CHASER

thorities worth the money. Now eat up, we wouldn't want you getting too stringy on us."

He exited then, leaving his companions behind to watch over things.

The caretaker had made his way to Chris, who was eating despite his apparent distaste for the menu.

Better than dying, Storm thought. Being treated like animals until we can find a way to escape. Or until we're sold off to our respective buyers. There's going to be a chain of purchases, each scoundrel commanding his own price until we've been traded around enough to make even Gregori sick. Then we get turned over to the feds. I'd better get this right.

When it came his turn at chow, he smiled politely and tightly clamped his mouth around the spoon thrust at him. The bandit looked up and caught his gaze, and a curious expression filled his face. Some of what Storm was doing was mere charisma, the leftovers from his runway model days, when he'd learned how to grab and hold anyone until he was finished with them. Over the years, the trick had been extended and enhanced by various mental concentration exercises (DK had been instrumental in this respect). Unblinking, both men exchanged nods as the chamber became exceedingly quiet and everyone else watched on in bewilderment. The other two bandits, noticing something was up, stepped forward simultaneously.

"What's going on?" asked one, placing a hand on the caretaker's shoulder and another on his weapon.

Slowly, all three bandits turned and looked question-

ingly at each other as if they were confused by something. They conversed in odd strangled sounds and twisted expressions before one finally turned again and produced a small palm-sized remote from his jumpsuit: the controller to the shackles. At the press of a button, all the prisoners were freed from their confinement. Chris and Sven took their cues well, immediately stepping around the bandits and removing their weapons while they watched on in a childish fashion. Storm spit out the spoon from his mouth, took a laser rifle and pointed it at the caretaker's head, then nodded to the others as he blinked for the first time since initiating the hypnosis.

"How the hell did he do that?" asked one of the freed men.

Chris shook his head and shrugged. "He's an immortal. They know things." He faced Storm and scowled slightly. "Though I don't understand why the hell he couldn't have done it *sooner*."

"It's a parlor trick, actually," said Storm. "It takes balance, patience. I'm not an expert just yet." He brought his elbow down on the back of Idiot's head. "But that's a conversation for another day. I trust the rest of you gentlemen would agree that commandeering the ship is our best course of action?"

Everyone nodded.

* * *

With more than a few aches and pains marring the experience, Storm and Chris made their way through the corri-

TIME CHASER

dors virtually unnoticed. They found the cockpit, which was unguarded. Two young pilots sat at the controls and looked rather frightened at the prospect of having guns held to their heads. Other than that, they were no trouble. Storm took out one, Chris the other.

“Real amateurs,” Storm whispered, lowering his pilot to the deck. “We lucked out; these guys could have been good at what they do.”

Chris nodded and took the pilot’s seat. “Yeah, but what does that say about *us*, letting ourselves get captured by such riffraff? Hey, do me a favor and hit the emergency-containment button, would you? That should stave off the ghouls for awhile.”

By chance, as he was searching the console for the correct keys, Storm spotted the navigational display, with a red cursor marking their present location.

“Damn it,” he breathed, annoyed. “We’re coming up on Sparrow.”

“So that’s what that blue ball over there is,” Chris replied, not without humor, as he peered through the viewport. “That means we’re three days away from Port Carr, four from New Babylon.”

Storm leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. The longer he remained in this time stream, the more chance there was of being caught by the Patrol. There was no guarantee that the bandits hadn’t already contacted their associates down on Sparrow with news of their impending arrival—and if the cops were listening in, if they knew Storm Anderson was making a pit stop

“We’re going to need another ship,” Chris murmured.

“If we want to get back to Port Carr on time, it’ll have to be under some other guise. Luckily for us, Sparrow is a pretty good place to blend in when you don’t want to be seen, if you get my drift.”

Storm retrieved some of his former ardor. “How would *you* know?”

“I’ve done some blending-in myself, for various reasons—but we can talk about that later. I hope these fellows have an escape pod somewhere onboard”

Indeed, Sparrow’s bright, Earth-like atmosphere was filling up most of the viewport by now, and soon the orbiting security ships, which navigated their way around all major planetary bodies, would be asking for proper identification, the nature of their cargo, and their purpose for visiting. They would also need to present their craft’s registration number, which would prove quite difficult since neither Storm nor Chris knew it.

“Well then,” Storm said, rising and slinging his laser rifle over his shoulder. “I believe it’s time for a little ride in the escape pod.”

“Agreed,” said Chris. “And the first thing we do when we get planetside is find a good Mexican restaurant.”

4 . GREAT HOPE

The city of Great Hope was the largest (and poorest) trading city on Sparrow. This part of the planet was almost completely technologically underdeveloped, most of the houses and buildings that sprawled along the intertwining, packed-dirt streets three or four stories high and made of stone, some wood. Instead of shuttles or skimmers rushing along the streets, there were old-fashioned carts and wagons—and people, of all shapes, sizes, and races. The men and women were sun-browned, with long, unkempt hair and patchwork clothes lost to dust and the elements; the children were naked and dirty and, more often than not, burdened with bushels of fabric, or crates filled with fruit or vegetables.

Chris shook his head. “The galaxy’s sweatshop. We’ve come so far in the last few centuries, and yet people still live like this. It’s a damn shame.”

Storm nodded, walking casually beside his friend amidst a sea of random bodies. It was a hot day, and since there was little shade, their clothes had the distinct smell of sweat and unwashed skin that seemed to eternally pollute the air of Great Hope’s streets. Even with his sleeves rolled up and the upper-portion of his suit unzipped, the heat was unbearable, and he could feel his head throb-

bing.

Despite the overcrowded condition of the streets today, there was no shortage of vendors trying to sell their respective goods to anyone who looked wealthy enough to spare a few units.

"I need something to drink," Storm muttered, and shielded his eyes from the sun long enough to spot a street vendor who was selling what appeared to be oranges. "Over there," he said, pointing. "He's got canteens. I hope you have some money on you."

"Yeah, right," replied Chris, wiping his forehead with his sleeve and taking care not to disturb his wound. "Looks like we're going to have to play on this guy's sympathy if we want a drink."

Storm shrugged. "Couldn't hurt."

Cutting a course through the masses of people, Storm and Chris approached the vendor, a short stocky man, bare to the waist. In muscle-knotted, sunburned arms he hoisted two canteens and shouted over the roar of the street. After repeating the same thing over and over in several different languages, he finally switched to something resembling English:

"Give him here, give him today, give him fresh: sweet water out of protection Sparrow well. Five unit each, but only today!"

Geez, thought Storm, eyeing the vendor shrewdly. *Five units is enough to buy a good meal back on Earth.* Nevertheless, the quarts of overpriced, sun-warmed water were looking pretty good right now.

"Come, come!" the vendor continued. "Buy now, buy

TIME CHASER

now! Wet water soften throat! Five unit!”

Storm considered his options, calculated the viability of a number of distractive tactics—but Chris suddenly grabbed his arm.

“Uh, oh,” he said. “Forget wetting our precious little tongues. We’ve got trouble.”

Storm looked out across the sea of people, at first seeing nothing more than face after face after face . . . and then he spotted them. Police officers—and not just the planetary patrol, but intergalactic officers, as anyone could tell from the glittering badges on their uniforms. They were armed with laser rifles.

“Someone’s tipped off the feds about us,” Storm muttered.

“I bet it was the tall bandit. Remind me to personally repay him for that next time we meet.”

“Wouldn’t want the pleasure,” Storm added, and thrust his hand into Chris’s, “but for now we should be saying goodbye. Try to find some place to stay tonight and I’ll meet you tomorrow at noon, back at that large fountain we passed on the way into town.”

“The one with the giant Xiao-Ping relief sitting on top?”

“Yeah . . . long live President Xiao-Ping, I give my life to serve, etcetera.”

“Right. Okay then. May God have humor on the souls of fools like us.”

“Exactly.”

The crowd swallowed them, then. Storm tried his best to act “native” as he walked back in the direction he and Chris had come and peered past the closely-cropped

buildings on either side of the street. It appeared there was another street, just as packed as this one, on the other side of a row of residential. The people and buildings seemed to stretch into infinity in every direction but up, where he glanced nervously when he heard a shuttle humming by. It's hull was gray, which meant it wasn't a police craft, but that didn't mean the next one wouldn't be.

I've got to get under a roof somewhere, he thought to himself, making his way towards the edge of the street. Between two triple-story buildings was a narrow alley cluttered with trash bins. He quickly ducked in and tried not to breathe too much of the stench of rotting garbage as he leaned against the warm stone wall and thought of what to do next. On any other civilized planet there would have been the regular trash compactors, the ones that converted all waste into a simpler form of matter that could be more easily disposed of. At least that way there wasn't the smell and waste of good space. It was also likely many unwanted microorganisms multiplied like crazy in a place like this; the smell was their calling card.

With the heat having at him like some giant invisible leech, it was easy for his mind to wander, but a sound coming from further down the alley caught his attention: a woman was trying to scream, but her noises were being muffled.

Not hesitating, Storm picked his way through the trash mounds and past an ill-placed overflowing bin to where he found the caller. She was being held against the wall by another human, a man dressed in ragged breeches and a torn shirt. His hand was searching the woman's clothing for

TIME CHASER

whatever valuables she possessed—no, he wasn't just trying to rob her of money, the way he was sticking his hand up her dress like *that*.

Storm immediately launched himself at the attacker. He grabbed the man by the shoulder, flung him around and punched him square in the face. Another fist planted in the man's stomach coupled with a kick in the groin sent the thief wobbling down onto his knees, his face turning bright red. As the man doubled over and curled into a ball, expecting another onslaught, a laminated card fell out of his hand. It was a food card, Storm discovered when he picked it up and turned to face the woman.

"This belong to you?" he asked, holding out the card with one hand and wiping the other on his jumpsuit. "Are you okay?"

The woman rearranged her clothes—and replied with a slap across the face. "You fool! I had him right where I wanted!" She yanked her card out of his hand and swore under her breath, something about not having to put up with pity just because she was a woman. With a mild yelp she kicked the injured assailant in the groin, though he was already unconscious and so probably didn't feel it anyway.

Eyes wide with surprise, Storm stumbled back a step or two and rubbed his offended cheek. His damsel in distress was young, probably in her twenties, judging by the smoothness of her face and rich blackness of her hair. Her skin wasn't toasted like everyone else's; it was naturally dark—a pleasant sight amidst a world of lower-class Earth transplants trying to survive in an unforgiving climate.

Realizing that he was staring, Storm blinked and looked around the alley. A few paces away were two cloth bags that had been dropped, their contents (groceries) spilling out onto the filthy ground.

“Why don’t I get those for you?” he offered, trying to salvage any chances of keeping this fiery woman on his side. Making a friend, rather than another enemy, was always beneficial.

The woman sighed and made to help as well. “Thank you, but I can take care of myself.”

“Fine.” Storm set down the bag he was holding. “Sorry to interrupt you and your”—he glanced down at the sleeping assailant—“friend. Good day.” He turned and started back the way he’d come, but halted when he heard the woman’s voice calling out again:

“Wait—hold it there, blondie. Since you *did* offer, I might as well free up my arms for a few minutes. Don’t squash the fruit.”

Storm turned to face her again and grinned despite the fact that the last remnants of his pride were smoldering. With her hands on her hips and long, powerful legs peeking out from underneath her dress, she was nothing short of breathtaking.

Probably an American export, he thought, judging by her accent. She may or may not have been a legal resident . . . but then, that didn’t matter much when they rounded all the supposed bottom-feeders up and shipped them off. White, black, Hispanic, Asian—none of it mattered anymore once you were stuffed into a freight compartment en route to your new life on Sparrow. She might

TIME CHASER

have been one of the unlucky economical blemishes, or she might have been a criminal; it didn't matter, as anything with good legs and firm breasts looked good after spending ten years alone with oneself.

And, if things go right, I'll have a place to stay for the night.

"My name's Storm, madam," he clarified, squatting to pick up some of the fallen groceries. "You know, you really shouldn't walk through these alleys alone."

"I usually don't," replied the woman, sliding a pineapple back into her bag. "Thought I'd slip by today, but wouldn't you know, this asshole happened to be in the mood." She spat. "My name's Annah, by the way."

Storm smiled. "Do you live around here?"

"My, you're a nosy fucker, aren't you?"

"Forget I asked." *Spicy tongue. Even hotter than the day itself.*

He waited.

"If you must know, yes. The next grid over. Are you finished yet?"

Dropping the last of the apples into the bag, Storm hefted it and nodded. "I live to serve."

She peered briefly into the bag, pretending to examine carefully the contents with a displeased look on her face (while she was really examining him—perhaps for hidden weapons, or perhaps simply to get an eyeful of his sleek template). "Well, I guess it could be worse. Don't you know to put the heavy things on bottom?"

"It's hot. I don't think well when I'm dehydrated."

"You look like you could use a drink."

Storm caught himself staring again, diverted his eyes from her legs and shrugged, trying to act like this was all a surprise to him when really he'd known by the second flash of her piercing eyes that she was taking more than a passing interest in him. He was certain she wasn't dating anyone—she was holding out, holding on. Not that he had any intention of sharing her bed; it was merely his male instinct reactivated after laying dormant for so long that had him appreciating the evident attraction. Normally he didn't care that he looked scandalously good under even the worst conditions, but if it would get him food, lodging for the night, he would play the game.

"I wouldn't want to be an annoyance," he said.

"Nonsense," Annah said. "You've already been much more than that. The least I can do is have you help make lunch and explain why it is you spend your time hanging out in alleyways and rescuing helpless maidens."

Storm laughed and stepped forward. "Maybe I'm just a nice guy who's got nothing better to do."

"I doubt it." She turned and started walking. "Come. This way—and try not to squash the fruit."

5 . ANNAAH'S ABODE

Annah's apartment was simple, built from the same dusty stone limbs that every other building was, though hers seemed to be a bit tidier. There was a single low-ceilinged room, with various rugs arranged on the bare floor; several pieces of furniture had been placed around a central table that had throw pillows gathered along its perimeter. The sleeping area was offset by a pair of rice paper screens. Towards the rear of the room was the stove and cooler. There was no toilet (Storm assumed the building had a communal washroom).

"Sit," Annah instructed, gesturing at one of the wicker armchairs.

Storm complied and, once he was off his feet, the ache in his muscles revealed itself. He let out a barely audible sigh—a moment's relief stifled since the Moon 3 rendezvous—though outwardly he disguised his fatigue by not leaning back in his chair, however much he wanted to (it was seductively cool in Annah's home). *Always important to present a tireless demeanor at all times, especially around strangers—even fetchingly-beautiful women—if I want to keep the upper hand.*

"I have water, some beer, orange juice," said Annah as she was putting things away.

"Water's fine," Storm said.

She brought him a glass, which he downed all at once.

"Can I trust you to sit tight while I get out of this mess?" she said, brushing a hand over her torn dress.

Storm nodded, and she left him, then, disappearing into the faux-cherry blossom orchard depicted by one of the rice screens.

She spoke as she changed her clothes:

"So, *Storm* . . . what kind of name is that?"

"My dad's idea," he answered. "He always said it was because I was born during a thunderstorm, but I checked the weather records when I was nine, just out of curiosity."

"Ulterior motive?"

Storm cleared his throat. "Well . . . yeah."

"Ah. What did your mother have to say about it?"

"She was never around much . . ." *Ahem!* "'Storm' was the name chosen by the man my father married."

A swish of cloth, a deft movement of painted rice paper, and Annah stood before him again. She was wearing a blue summer dress that left arms and legs bare.

He wondered why she was readily comfortable enough in his presence to strut around her home barefoot and carefree. Maybe it was simply too hot an afternoon to wear anything *but* the bare essentials. She had a lean, sturdy build—no doubt she could do some damage if he decided to run amok and ransack the place, or force himself upon her. Perhaps traversing the city via dark crevices was her means of drawing shifty men near for . . . what, exactly? Companionship? Confirmation of her own defensive skills? Storm himself was quite destitute at the moment;

TIME CHASER

picking him up as a possible dinnertime beau would provide her with nothing more than a temporary guest.

Maybe, he thought, she's a dominatrix . . . or maybe, like all the rest of us, she's simply lonely.

"San Francisco, right?"

Storm snapped out of his momentary mental tangent. "What?"

"Your parents," Annah said, seating herself across from him, "were both male."

"I had *one* father . . . the other was just his lover. I never called him 'dad' or anything like that. And yeah . . . San Francisco's correct."

"Sorry, if I picked the first cliché that popped into my mind."

"That's all right."

Annah poured him another glass of water, then one for herself. As he was sipping, she said, "So, let's talk about you and how you've come to visit one of Great Hope's many fine ghettos."

"Who says I'm visiting?"

"Well, you're certainly not one of Sparrow's aborigines, what with that blond hair and fair skin—and your teeth are too white and straight to make you an export."

Storm heard himself laughing dismissively. "My parents were vain as well as gay. They wanted their son to be aesthetically pleasing—an athlete or an entertainer. My template is a mixture of their favorite Olympic heroes and runway models."

"It sounds like you don't share their affinity for pretty packaging."

Storm shrugged. His father, and Uncle Damien, had been all about decadence. Storm had been their networking tool. As a model, he'd posed for commercial spreads, done a few immensely popular art photo books (nothing illegal, though nudity was often preferred). As a gymnast, he'd earned a handful of medals and certificates at a variety of local and statewide competitions. As a son, he'd grown up surrounded by his parents' appreciation for their child-investment, which they showcased every chance they got. Hence the weekly penthouse pool parties, the nude beach barbecues—he'd been expected to market his body as a product, and he'd been expected to do it 24/7. It had not been uncommon for Damien and his guests, drinks in hand, to stand quietly over his bed and appreciate his unclad form while he slept. Which was why, once puberty hit, he'd stopped sleeping naked, had requested a lock on his bedroom door. Not that he felt Damien or his friends would have actually abused him; theirs was more wistful appreciation from middle-aged men wishing for marvelous templates of their own rather than genuine desire to make love to an underage Adonis. Still, it *had* been unnerving to hear them talk:

"He'll be able to get any girl he likes. Hell, any *man*."

"With a face like that, I wouldn't be surprised if he already has."

"Look at those abs. Even when he isn't training his template's keeping him in top condition—I'd kill for that!"

"You'd kill for another cruller."

"The things I could do if my cock was half as big as his."

Sensing a personal reverie in his silence, Annah soft-

TIME CHASER

ened her expression somewhat. "Hey . . . we're just passing the time, right? Stuck in the same boat and all that. I didn't mean to pry."

Storm sighed, focused on the present once again as he set his glass on the table. "That's all right."

"Still, why *are* you visiting Great Hope?"

"I'm not visiting. In fact, I'm not supposed to be here at all, but I am . . . so I should make the best of it, right?"

"Let me guess," Annah said, rolling her eyes. "You're on the run from the police?"

Storm grinned and shrugged. *Strike one.*

"You came here to lay low for a while and now you're wondering if you can get help from me."

Strike two.

"Would it scare you if I said you were mostly right?" Storm asked, keeping his face serene.

Annah shrugged. "That depends on what you did."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Besides, I don't like to dump my problems on others."

"I've been surviving on this dank, corrupted rock since I was sixteen . . . I think I can handle a bit of absurdity from you."

Strike three. Put out or get out.

Storm squirmed. Annah waited (with every bit of confidence that he would open up to her without further prodding). It was insane, it was ridiculous—

—it was working.

She had not spoken obstinately. She was sincerely interested, firm in her persuasion, and probably able to handle any flaky yarn he could have thrown at her. He always

hated it when anyone tried to gain insight into what he was thinking, but now, in this room, on this planet—in this time stream—there was no doubt that he'd stumbled upon quite an interesting situation. No one else he'd ever met (recently, at least) had said to him, in complete silence, without speech, "You can trust me, as long as I can trust you." And she didn't just ask for trust . . . she *demand*ed it.

His tongue loosened a bit and he cleared his throat. "I'll start with a hint, then." Why not, right? She'd never believe him anyway. "I was born on Earth, in 2279. November 10th, if I can remember correctly."

He expected a twitch of surprise, a straightening of Annah's spine, a skeptical glance, but certainly not what he got now: a mere shrug—as if chasers trotted past her doorstep on a regular basis.

"So you're a chaser, a streamer, a time-bitch," she said, "and a Scorpio, too. That still doesn't explain why you're here."

"You're not the least bit surprised?"

"Meeting one of you fellows isn't as uncommon as you would have me believe."

Storm thought for a moment, bit his lip. "How do you know I'm telling the truth?"

At this, Annah leaned forward and bore her eagle's gaze upon him full force. "Look me directly in the eyes and tell me you're lying."

Immediately, he felt all his control slip away, and he was both outraged and exulted. It seemed everything he threw in her direction she threw back with equal force—never-

theless, he kept a straight face. "I'm not lying."

"I know." Annah let up slightly, gazed past Storm and out the window. "You *do* know you're not safe here. The police have been patrolling the city more frequently as of late. You're most likely on their list."

Storm nodded. "I'm sure of it. I probably should have died forty-something years ago. The government doesn't like when people find out how to cheat."

"So . . . is that what you're doing? Cheating? Playing hookey from your birth stream?"

"No. And I'm not out to screw around with the Standards either. It's all temporary—I hope—until I can get back."

"Back where?"

"Where, or actually, *when* I belong."

A look of confusion crossed Annah's face. "But if you went through all the trouble of escaping from your birth stream, why do you want to go back?"

Storm snorted. "First off, I didn't *escape* my stream. That's for reincarnates and New-Agers who want to become immortal and rule their own little planet or something. Immortality has its perks, but I got kicked out on accident. Something to do with two temporal layers becoming misaligned at the very instant I was doing some leisure streaming at a time mall."

"I remember those," Annah said, half-smiling.

Nodding, Storm continued: "I got screwed. Could have wound up deader than dead, but the failsafe dumped me back into Standard—a couple years offtrack. Everyone thought I did it on purpose. I mean, no one survives a

glitch like that except, maybe, one in a million. One in a hundred million. I did, and so it was obvious that I was an ornery chaser bent on unraveling the galactic commerce. Failing that, I was just an unlucky bastard who'd accidentally stumbled on mankind's clever little secret. The Time Patrol wants us to believe that we're made for the typical 70-120 year lifespan, so the majority of us live and die quietly, while the elite choose their incarnations at their own leisure. It's like . . . a highway. You've got all these cars crammed in one direction, but it's not the only road to wherever you're going. Get yourself a good map and you can go anywhere, but if you don't know anywhere else to go, you're just stuck. Birth, life, death."

"Conspiracy theory's the game, huh?" Annah murmured.

"Who doesn't have a conspiracy theory? Look at all the wealthy aristocrats who spend millions to have their birth certificates secluded. The politicians who hire astrologers as bodyguards. Everyone's afraid that if the government doesn't like something they're doing, their stream will be deleted from the galaxy. 'Stardom kills,' don't you know?"

"Unless you escape your birth stream."

Storm nodded. "They can only tamper with your past when you're in Standard. Once you jump off it, you're untouchable until you return at the exact point you left."

"That's fine and dandy," Annah persisted, "but if being 'stuck' in Standard's such a bad thing, why do you want to go back?"

"Unfinished business," sighed Storm. Trudie's face flashed in his mind once again. "I left before I wanted to,

TIME CHASER

and stayed away out of necessity. There are people I really care about.”

“But you’ll get caught.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s still a matter of tracking me down. And maybe, if I can teach my friends the truth, take them off Standard . . . who knows?”

Storm became quiet for a moment, contemplating. *I’m not there yet, and it’s going to be awhile before I am. Even then, there’s no guarantee any of my old pals will want to see me . . . not with a bounty hanging over my head. And who’s to say if they’ll want to leave Standard?*

“Naturally,” said Annah, standing, “you’ll need a place to stay for the night, and a bath, and possibly directions around the city.”

“Are you offering?”

“I’m a sucker for really good storytellers.”

“As long as it’s not any trouble . . .”

Annah waved him down. “Shush. You’ll make me change my mind.”

“Okay, then,” said Storm.

6 . EXIT

White, windowless walls, bright lights, and a distinctly metallic odor comprised what was informally known as the “Grilling Room.” In the center, a large featureless chair with a high back was occupied by a newly-acquired prisoner, who sat slumped, his arms, wrists, and legs bound by heavy straps. He’d already been searched thoroughly, and the entirety of his belongings had been examined by a tall, well-built man apparently in his late forties.

“Christopher Squire, born February 26, 2366, Human Standard Calendar. Aries Minor transplant, 26X-3. Has held a number of odd jobs, though nothing on record for at least the last decade. Current status: independent trader, unmarried, identification number IT-1372-447819.” The foreman turned to face the three Patrol officers who stood at attention beside the chair. He held up the ID tag. “This was all he was carrying on him?”

“Yes, sir. He was unarmed when we brought him in.”

“He was alone?”

“Yes, sir. However, additional units have been deployed and are still searching the surrounding area.”

The foreman nodded. “Keep all gates to the city under heavy guard, and begin a door-to-door search of every home in the lower-class. Now, please, send in the good

TIME CHASER

doctor—and turn off the cameras.”

The first thing Chris felt when he opened his eyes was the tingling numbness in his right arm. He focused his gaze, found himself staring into the hawkish face of Foreman Daniel Ketch.

I'll be damned, he thought, taking in the foreman's features. *Hasn't aged a day in ten years*. Ketch still had a mane of brilliantly white hair tied back in a tail, still had the powerful bone structure to his face and jaw that gave him the appearance of a subtle beast. The warm, hospitable smile on his face was in stark contrast to the rest of him.

Chris groaned inside, feeling an age-old distaste rear its head.

“Ah,” murmured Ketch, signaling for the medic to step back and allow him space. “Mr. Squire has decided to join us.”

“Danny, my boy,” Chris muttered groggily, rolling his head back and forth in an attempt to examine his bound arms. “Just the . . . way I like them: tight and confining.” He was having trouble forming his words, for the drug was keeping his brain from interacting correctly with the rest of his body. “You still know how to treat your . . . guests.”

From the medic: “Foreman Ketch, shall I administer more stimulant?”

“No, that won't be necessary. Please, leave us now. I'll call for you if any further assistance is required.”

“Yes, sir.” The doctor quickly replaced his collection of needles in his bag and left the room.

As Chris tried, rather uselessly, to regain his composure (he was unable to keep his head level, his eyes going in and out of focus—yet his brain was running a mile a minute), the foreman strode placidly around the chair with his hands clasped behind his back. “One of the benefits of being immortal is that those who are still unenlightened give you respect. After all, no one wants a rival who will remain alive and in perfect health indefinitely, someone who will always be vital and alert while you, on the other hand, gradually become weak and brittle with time. From the looks of you, my friend, time has been ever-vigilant, planting more and more gray hairs every year, chiseling the wrinkles deeper and deeper. You see, you haven’t learned, Chris. You haven’t learned.”

“Look who’s talking,” Chris scoffed. “Looks to me like . . . you haven’t learned a thing either. Not after ten years, not after a hundred. Still have to . . . face your victims while they’re tied up. Helpless.”

Ketch stopped pacing and leaned over Chris’s bridled form. “You should have come clean the last time we met, Mr. Squire. Maybe then you could have regained your life, lived out your final years with your family instead of out in the cold loneliness of space. Yes, Christopher. I’ve been keeping tabs on your little family life. Claire, the children, tucked away for safekeeping from the big, bad Patrol.”

“You leave them . . . alone,” mumbled Chris. “A self-absorbed bureaucrat like you has no business pushing around . . . innocents like chess pieces. Your beef is with me.”

Standing again, Ketch shook his head and sighed. “You

TIME CHASER

really don't have a clue, do you? You think my sole purpose of being, the existence of the Patrol, the discovery of time streaming is to keep the galaxy muzzled—but you couldn't be further from the truth."

"Bah," grumbled Chris, wishing he could spit right about now. "We both know you're full of . . . crap."

"Tsk-tsk. Good old Mr. Squire, sharp-tongued until the very end. And this *will* be the end, you know, for you have just about outlived your usefulness. I will be patient with you no more. It's people like you who have kept the Patrol's efforts from affecting the kind of change the galaxy needs to flourish—"

"—into a . . . universal zoo . . ."

"Not quite," Ketch shot back, facing his prisoner again. "A universal *humanity*. It's been nearly three centuries since humans built the first space vessels capable of faster-than-light travel and settled our overpopulated billions onto the precious few terrestrial bodies able to support life. Even then, it's been an uphill battle, as there is not an alien presence nor savage microbe that does not want to see our race dwindle and perish. So we've fought the odds, sacrificed our brethren in the name of colonization and order. For three hundred years we've worked to make a place for ourselves amongst the stars, and what do we have to show for it? Entire planets reeking of famine, war with the Centaurians, human pestilence still rampaging unconquered. Millions of lives are born while even more millions die needlessly. There is waste, so much *waste*, and the rest of the galaxy isn't going to wait much longer for us to mature before they take matters into their own hands.

“You don’t need to be reminded, though. You’ve seen the brutality of the Outer Wars, the leagues of human soldiers lined up along the perimeters of every star base, fighting with their lives to protect the civilian lives within. Every year our defensive borders recede just a bit. A few casualties here, a lost fighter ship there, but over time, it builds up, Chris. Slowly, but surely, the human race is being evaporated.

“Even here on Sparrow, anti-human factions are growing by the minute. It’s only a matter of time before they start ridding themselves of the ‘human infestation.’ The aborigines are taking our young and turning them against us with promises of fortune and glory—promises that are not in the least intended to be fulfilled. The only way to regain any sort of footing amongst these countless other species who’ve supposedly evolved past us is to begin an evolution of our own. The first step is to make ourselves stronger. ‘Let the mightiest tribe be victorious.’ For us that means discipline: control over our species, control over our science, control over our own destinies.”

Ketch spoke with such passion, such conviction that, had he not been previously introduced, Chris would have handed over the keys to his cruiser and the deed to his home that very minute. Here was a man who believed in every decision he’d ever made; he truly knew that his point of view was unbreakable. It was simultaneously inspiring and terrifying.

“Control,” Chris said, after a time. “You mean . . . make those who catch your fancy immortal and those who don’t . . . obsolete. Nourish the healthy, pull out the weeds.

TIME CHASER

You think I haven't heard the stories of . . . peasant families suddenly disappearing, children never being born because . . . the government deems them expendable? Each and every person you kill, they each have a soul . . . they each have a life, maybe not up to your standards . . . but it's *theirs*, not yours. You're playing God."

Ketch's face darkened somewhat, and he straightened again, putting clenched fists behind his back. "Every tribe needs a chief, Mr. Squire. But it is obvious my explanations are being wasted on you. I thought somehow you, a man who's managed to evade my forces for ten years, might have come to realize his purpose, *our* purpose in this galaxy. I can see now I was wrong. You are nothing more than an insignificant speck, shuttling back and forth through space and selling your little trinkets until death comes to rob you of even that. But perhaps there is one final way to redeem yourself."

"Get to . . . the point, Ketch. If I'm going to die, I sure as hell don't want it to be during a lecture from *you*."

The foreman stood before him and, with both hands, took hold of Chris's drooping head, making him face forward. "Where is Storm Anderson?"

Chris tried to snicker, but managed only a mild snort. "Luckily for . . . him, I don't know."

Ketch's expression turned frigid. He tightened his grip on Chris's head, moving his thumbs down to the temples and squeezing hard. "*Where is he?*"

"Fuck . . . you," Chris replied, stifling a yelp of pain as he suddenly went cross-eyed.

"Indeed," Ketch replied, not letting go of Chris's head

until his fingers had broken the skin. “No matter, though. I can always get what I need out of you through the use of our mind probes and drugs. After that, it’s only a matter of time.”

Chris slouched, his vision gone, his head throbbing with excruciating pain. He heard Ketch’s exit—no doubt he was going to get the doctor for further probing—and he knew he would never see the light of day again. However, he was not frightened, for he knew the truth. He was not a chaser, he’d never taken the final, definitive step into freedom, but through Storm he’d gotten a glimpse of the other side, a taste of what lay in wait, and that was enough . . . to know that he would never truly be dead, even if his body was.

He manifested an image of Claire and the children in his mind, and their smiling faces were all the comfort in the universe.

7 . SPARROW MOON

Sparrow's artificial moon shimmered high above the city of Great Hope. With the curtains pulled open slightly, Storm lay in his makeshift bed beside the window and watched the sky. Even though he was exhausted from the labors of the day (he'd spent the waning hours of the afternoon doing household chores for Annah—payback for dinner, a shower, a place to sleep), he couldn't find sleep, so he simply allowed his gaze to wander here and there, eventually settling on Annah, sleeping on her cot against the rear wall. Every so often he would squirm underneath his blanket, pulling at the pants she'd given him to wear, for they were a bit too small (his jumpsuit had been washed and was hanging to dry)—but he couldn't complain. He had shelter for the night, and company on a planet full of strangers. That was always the hard part of interplanetary travel, especially if you were alone: the culture shock was terrible. In some places, no human languages were spoken whatsoever—

“Are you still awake?”

Storm blinked. Annah was now leaning on one arm and facing in his direction.

“Yeah,” he responded.

“I'd have thought you would be dog-tired after all the

work you did today. Unless you immortal types don't need sleep?"

"Nervous energy."

A pause from Annah, then a soft murmur as she sat up and swung her legs over the side of her cot. "We can go for a walk. It's much cooler outside during the night . . . and I know a place, if you're up to it."

"Why not?" Storm replied, reaching for his boots.

"No," Annah instructed. "Leave them here. You'll make less noise without them."

A moment of consideration, then a shrug as he realized she was probably right. "Lead the way," he said, spreading his palms.

* * *

The night air was blessedly cool as Storm and Annah traversed the narrow alley that perforated a seemingly infinite stretch of multi-story residential buildings. There was just enough moonlight to illuminate their path, which rose and fell with the underlying terrain as if uncertain whether to lead up or down.

Annah had been right, Storm soon realized, about leaving his boots behind. Navigating the intricate alleyway proved simple and efficient when one's unclad feet could touch the stone directly, and without making a sound. In this manner they walked side by side, Storm barefoot and bare-chested, Annah in her nightgown, with her arm around his waist, until they came to a tall wall overgrown with vines.

TIME CHASER

“See?” she whispered, pointing to the base of the wall, where an evident stain marked the presence of subterranean moisture. “A gardener’s shop, on the other side.” She started up.

“What about security?” Storm asked, following suit.

“He can’t afford any.”

Storm took her word for it, scaling the wall and dropping down silently onto the grass on the other side. He paused momentarily, adjusting to the sight of patchwork flower beds and meticulously trimmed hedges, all laid out across a large yard—a tea garden. Polished stone fountains, connected by a network of miniature ravines, presided throughout, while sentinel palms stood watch along the perimeter.

“Come,” Annah said, and led him to a spot near the center, where a quartet of fig trees shaded a shallow hill. Annah lay on her back so that she could gaze at the sky. Storm, feeling not quite as comfortable being in a stranger’s yard, sat with one knee lifted, the other tucked against the grass. It didn’t look like anyone was up and about, but he was prepared to make a quick exit nonetheless.

After a few minutes of shared silence, Annah rolled onto her side. “What are you thinking about?” she asked softly.

Storm looked at her. With the moonlight falling over her face and hair, she took on the appearance of a golden-skinned angel and not a blunt-mouthed woman trying to keep her head up amidst Great Hope’s peasantry. There was something else too, an elusive familiarity that hovered

about her like an avatar.

“Nothing . . . everything,” he replied after a moment.

“Contradiction—another habit of the immortals?”

Storm smiled. “No, just mine. Too restless for my own good, I guess.”

Annah moved beside him now, putting her arms around him and leaning her head against his shoulder. He resisted the temptation to return the embrace, for he could feel the heat from her body, feel her quickened pulse. She was responding, consciously or otherwise, to the exaggerated masculinity of his template. Or perhaps she’d simply been without a man for too long. He’d certainly been without a woman—but now wasn’t the time. Trudie was his, and she was waiting for him. Besides, experience had taught him not to accept affection for the sake of accepting affection.

“So?”

Storm blinked, met Annah’s inquisitive gaze. “Pardon?”

“So, how does Storm Anderson go from being an everyday guy to being a time chaser on the run?”

“A little time and motion . . .” He trailed off, the myriad memories taking him across multiple lifetimes. “Biologically, you become a chaser the moment you leave your birth stream. Without that signature force of gravity, your DNA no longer knows which ‘direction’ to unwind, and so it simply resets itself to the default setting.”

“Just like that? You’re joking.”

“Well, the scientific explanation is much more eloquent, I’m sure, but I always liked the clock analogy. All our cells are like pre-wound analog clocks, slowly winding

TIME CHASER

down in sync with the pull of our birth stream—but if you *leave* your stream, your ‘clock’ is no longer able to keep the proper time. I don’t think you actually become infinite, but the aging process is much, much slower.”

Annah flexed her fingers, gazed at the back of her hand. “I used to wonder what it would be like, you know, to live forever. Like a chaser.” She looked up at Storm once again. “I could never do it. Living in constant limbo, never knowing where I’ll end up. I mean, even with death, there’s a certainty. You know you’ll be taken care of by God after you die. But to know that you’ll never die, that you’ll never have the chance to ascend . . .”

Storm felt her hand slip into his own. *Less physical affection, now. More the type of thing you get from someone who wants to believe in someone like me. Am I supposed to preach to her now? Lecture her? Comfort her?* “Look at that,” he said, and tilted her face upward, towards the star-filled sky. “So much space, still expanding, never-ending. An eternity.”

Annah snickered. “Did you memorize that from some random advertisement?”

“Nothing gets past you,” Storm replied, watching the sky, listening to the subdued sounds of crickets chirping, water trickling. Farther off: sirens wailing.

“Yeah . . .” Annah breathed. Then, in a whisper that was almost inaudible: “Except you.”

Storm looked at her. “What?”

“Nothing—”

“No, I heard you say—”

“Storm, it’s nothing.”

He shifted slightly away, held her by the shoulders. When she refused to meet his gaze, he said, "I thought when we first met there was a familiarity."

Eyes still downcast, Annah murmured, "Coincidence."

"No . . . we've met before—or we're *going* to meet, is that it?"

She fell silent for a moment, then rose to her feet, holding herself with both arms. "I'm so bad at this. I mean, here I am acting like a lovesick teenager when I should be sticking to the plan."

"What plan?" Storm asked, suddenly alarmed. He stood as well, legs tensed.

Annah smiled reassuringly. "Calm down. I'm not an undercover agent or a fundamentalist or anything like that." She looked up at the sky. "You came to me once before asking for help. You told me to wait in the alley on a specific date at a specific time . . . you said when I met you again that I should pretend I don't know you."

Despite his apprehension, Storm found himself intrigued. "How do I know you're telling the truth?" he asked.

"Because," she answered, "I know your story."

8 . FLASHBACK

Same body, previous life: The taxi dropped Storm off in front of the East Cedar Time Mall at a quarter after seven in the evening. He paid the driver and then strode inside, where high, arched ceilings with ornate patterns carved into them helped disguise the dozens of security cameras watching silently for any signs of trouble. Patronage was abundant, with dozens and dozens of people about, either finishing with their own streams or preparing to embark on a new one. Most were youngish, for time streaming was (perhaps ironically) a fairly “hip” trend that appealed mostly to teenagers or people without demanding jobs or families to look after. The over-40’s were few and far between.

Maybe, thought Storm, when I turn old and gray I too will understand the futility of rehashing spent memories. Until then

He found his regular booth at the heart of the mall. People sat together in small groups around an ornately-decorated lily pond; they chatted and drank coffee as they exchanged stories concerning previous trips into the past (nobody that Storm knew, since he tended to keep his own chronological excursions to himself).

He entered the booth, pulled the curtain closed. He in-

serted his bank card into the payment slot and punched in the code for a stream that ran about a month before, a night on which Trudie, Jason, and himself had been playing poker. After a moment's pause, the information screen flickered at him and the usual message flashed:

Thank you for your purchase of East Cedar time. East Cedar: giving you quality streams for over twenty years. You may now take the helm.

For those who were new to streaming, there were diagrams posted all over the interior of the booth that showed you how you were supposed to sit in the chair, operate the controls, and so forth. Storm had been streaming ever since the third grade, and took the helm without concern. Once the seat had adjusted itself around him, the lights dimmed and a soft hum filled the booth as the brilliant colors and swirling patterns (a popular pyrotechnics trick) of the time stream transported him from now to then.

Even without the eye candy, the process was quite exhilarating. As such, Storm wasn't paying attention when his peripheral vision started to warp and become distorted. Only when he felt himself lurch violently did he let loose a terrified scream. Vertigo washed over him with tidal strength. He was falling forward, through the curtain, the floor, the ground beneath; everything was immaterial, vaporous—

—loose atoms scattered across time and space.

At least, that's what it felt like. He lost all sense of physicality, his arms, his legs, his entire body now nothing

TIME CHASER

more than a mental fragment—and yet his mind was still somehow going a mile a minute: *You're fucked. Oh, boy are you fucked! This shouldn't even be possible! Of course it's not! It's all in your mind, your steaming, bubbling brain matter splattered all over the time booth walls because some lazy-ass East Cedar employee forgot to check the equipment—*

—and then as quickly as he'd been torn apart, Storm was reassembled, stuffed haphazardly back into flesh, muscle, bone, teeth, hair as he was assaulted by concrete—a sidewalk. For a few seconds, he felt as if static electricity were prickling him all over, then it was over and he was left alone with his breath coming in ragged gasps and his heart pumping madly. It took him several minutes to regain proper control of himself. He lifted his head from the ground to see he was lying on a street corner in the residential section of town.

This was, of course, impossible.

He staggered to his feet and found that he was naked, as well as scratched up somewhat from falling onto the hard concrete, but none the worse for wear. Extremely lucky, actually, that he wasn't dead and only a few blocks off the mark, considering some of the theoretical errors that could occur during a time stream. He tried to think back to when he'd first entered the booth at the mall and entered his code . . . he hadn't put in the wrong number, had he? Even if he had, normally, whenever you entered a stream code, there were security measures set up to make sure no mistakes were made. Otherwise, you could end up a hundred years behind and a million miles away.

So what had gone wrong? He'd heard stories on the news and in magazines that not all time codes were protected by the security function and sometimes different streams got crossed, but it was all rumor and gossip. At least, that's what he wanted to believe despite the fact that he was standing all alone on an empty city street at night, without clothing, money, or identification.

In any case, it was a chilly evening, and he was in no condition to be standing around waiting for a quantum physicist to waltz by with the answers. Holding himself, he stooped to pick up a discarded piece of newspaper, wrapped as much of it around his waist as he could, and started walking quickly along the streets. There was no way to tell what time it was; thankfully there weren't many people out to point and gawk. Those who were passed in shuttles and probably considered him a hardcore naturist or a really, really unfortunate vagrant.

A ten minute walk brought him to his apartment building, where the majority of the windows were darkened. He crept up the stairs and entered as quietly as he could, only half-noticing in the back of his mind that the walls of the hallway were painted light blue instead of white. He found his door and tried the knob, but of course he'd locked it before he'd left, and now he had no key.

Damn. I'll have to go wake up Jason and try to explain to him why the hell I'm roaming around at God-knows-when in my birthday suit.

Jason, a good friend of his, lived up on the second floor of the apartment complex. Storm made it to his door without incident and rang the buzzer impatiently, glancing up

TIME CHASER

and down the hall and hoping nobody came along until he was safely inside. There came a click from the small intercom screen beside the door and Jason's voice, thick with sleep, rasped through.

"Who is it?"

Storm noted that Jason wasn't using the screen, only audio (perhaps because he was unclothed, or because he just couldn't find the right button in the dark). "Jason, it's me! Let me in before I freeze!"

"Me who?"

"It's Storm! Get your butt out of bed and let me in!"

"Jesus Christ . . . okay, hold on—I mean, don't go anywhere. Geez . . ."

From the sound of things, Jason simply left the intercom without even turning it off and was at the door within seconds. Immediately, Storm rushed in.

"Close the door, it's fucking cold out there!" he said, rubbing his bare shoulders with his hands and suddenly becoming silent as he looked around his friend's apartment. "You've redecorated."

Jason didn't answer. He simply stood by the doorway and stared in what was evidently total disbelief. "Storm . . . I can't believe it's you. Where have you *been*?"

Storm turned, faced his friend—and really saw him, saw how he'd changed. The only light was from the kitchen, where the dim, blue-hued overhead that ran around the cooking range shone into the living room. It looked like Jason had cut his hair really short and dyed it blond, and he had a goatee. His normally fair skin appeared tanned, and he was considerably more muscular than before, as if he'd

been vigilantly working out for months to get a shape he didn't have yesterday.

"Where are your clothes?" Jason asked, stepping forward (and more into the light).

Storm swallowed and furrowed his brow. "I . . . I don't know. I was at the mall, at one of the booths. During the stream something happened and I found myself out on the street, a few blocks from here. Everything I had on me was gone."

"The time mall . . ." echoed Jason, sudden realization coming over his face. "East Cedar, right? The accident—my God, do you know what the date is?"

"The date?"

"March 16, 2306."

"March 16 . . . 2306 . . ." Storm trailed off, suddenly overwhelmed. He felt his gut tighten. "That's nuts . . . I mean . . . holy shit . . ."

Jason shook his head and put a hand on Storm's shoulder. "You've been gone for almost two years. There was a piece on the news about you, and the mall got in serious trouble for letting an accident like that happen. It's been closed ever since, and you haven't been seen alive . . . well, until now. I thought . . . we all thought you were dead."

With a shiver running through him (and despite his nudity), Storm allowed his friend a brief hug. *This can't be happening*, he thought. *It's part of the stream. In about forty-five minutes my time will be up and I'll be back in the mall.* It was a naïve fake-out, he knew it—especially since he'd never lived anything like this before. The only explanation was that he'd somehow traveled forward in time

TIME CHASER

during his visit to the mall.

“What’s going on?” came a feminine voice from the direction of the bedroom doorway. Storm let go of Jason and turned to see a woman he didn’t recognize entering the living room. She tied her robe and fussed with her bedraggled hair. Storm ducked into the kitchen, concealing his lower half behind the counter.

“I’m not sure yet,” Jason replied. “Wait for a moment while I find some clothes.”

“Baby, who . . . ?” began the woman with a curious glance in Storm’s direction.

“He’s a friend,” Jason explained, and went quickly into the bedroom.

The woman yawned, took a few steps towards Storm, who blanched and moved further into the kitchen. “I’m Shianne. You, um, want a drink?”

He shook his head. “No thanks.”

“Well, I’m parched.”

Still half asleep, and unenlightened to the situation, Shianne seemed amused by Storm’s condition as she moved beside him and rummaged in the cooler.

“Nice,” she said, grinning momentarily at his crotch. “You lose a bet?”

“I’m not sure” He sighed, long and slow, his attention now divided between his overall situation and his modesty.

“Okay,” Jason said, exiting the bedroom with T-shirt, sweats, and socks. “These should fit. Um, we can get shoes and underwear in the morning. Are you hungry?”

Storm took the clothes and shook his head. “No, I’m

fine . . . just a little . . . disoriented.”

“Well?” murmured Shianne, folding her arms. “Is there a story behind this or what?”

Jason blinked, hardly able to take his eyes off Storm—as if his friend might suddenly vanish again at any moment. “Storm, this is my wife, Shianne. Shianne, this is Storm.”

“Wife?” Storm blurted out, halting in the middle of pulling on his shirt. He’d been speculating about a possible girlfriend, but a wife? The obvious question came next: “You’re married?”

Glancing over at Shianne, Jason half smiled, half blushed. “Yeah. I met her a few months after you, er, left. We got married six months ago.”

Storm finished dressing himself and glanced around the living room again, seeing that almost everything was different. Even the furniture was new. “I suppose my place has been rented out to someone else by now?”

“Uh, yeah . . .” responded Jason, a nervous look coming over his face.

“And all my things? What happened to them?”

Jason sat at the table, beckoning for Shianne to do the same. When he spoke, he leaned in a bit close to Storm, as if there might be someone listening to the conversation. “The police found your clothes and ID at the mall. They came down here and turned your place upside down looking for . . . I don’t know what. The Time Patrol came and did the same thing. The guy in charge—real creepy dude, looks like a humanoid hawk—he came and questioned all of us. And not just the basics. He had me talking about when you and I were kids—he wanted to know it all.

TIME CHASER

When he left, he and the Patrol took everything in your apartment with them. Said they had to analyze it or something, supposedly to search for clues to your disappearance. They even contacted your mom and all your friends to question them as well. It was a really big deal, you know, and it will be again once they hear you've suddenly returned."

"I'll say," said Storm. "The whole thing took maybe thirty seconds for me, and during that time two *years* flew past."

Jason nodded, his tone becoming more subdued. "You know, they haven't ruled out the possibility of stream-breaking. A fair amount of people I know think you did it on purpose to escape your birth stream. You know, time chaser stuff."

Storm scowled. "That's bullshit. How could I have . . . one minute I was sitting in the chair, minding my own business, and the next I was being dropped onto a sidewalk!"

"Yeah, but . . ." Jason trailed off, looked at Shianne (who was quite bug-eyed by now), then back at Storm again. He shrugged helplessly. "When things like this happen, people don't come back, Storm. They just don't. But you did."

"So you're saying I somehow planned this? I somehow managed to pull together two years of community college for public shuttle repair and turned it into cutting-edge streaming know-how?"

"Hey, I didn't say that was what *I* thought," replied Jason, holding up his hands. "I totally believe you were involved in an accident. Those time booths aren't infallible,

you know. Trouble is, when something like this happens, it's always sudden death for the person involved. The only way to survive something like that is to know what you're doing . . . like, um, a chaser or whatever."

Storm folded his hands and peered out through the kitchen window to stare at the streetlights below. "So I'm a chaser now, huh? Is that what they all think? They want to throw me in prison for having a fucking *accident*?"

"Maybe," said Jason, sighing. "The Patrol's real tough. They have heavy punishments for people who break the law. Illegally romping off for a joy ride into the future is worse than going on one into the past. I suppose they're afraid of people predicting the future, messing with probability. In the past, it's already happened and can't be changed, so they don't mind as much. Well, they still *mind*, but I guess you get a shorter prison sentence or something."

Storm's gaze returned to the kitchen and to his friend. Briefly, he glanced at Jason's hand and saw a ring glittering; Shianne had a similar one on hers. "What about Trudie?"

Jason's face paled somewhat as he nodded. "She's fine. Lives over near the college now. We can go and see her in the morning, if you like."

"No, I want to go now," Storm insisted. "You still drive, right?"

"Uh, yeah . . . guess that would be okay. Hang on a second while I get dressed and give Jamie a kiss."

As everyone rose from the table, Storm looked toward the bedroom doorway. "Who's Jamie?" he asked.

TIME CHASER

“Oh. He’s our son,” Jason responded.

His son! “Oh. Is there anything else I should know?”

The uncomfortable look returned to his friend’s face.

“Uh, well, maybe you should speak with Trudie first. Wait here, I’ll only be a minute.”

9 . REALITY GLITCH

They reached Trudie's place, a single-story duplex fenced off by well-trimmed hedges, thirty minutes later. Storm approached the house confidently enough, though every step he took towards the darkened home brought an increasing sense of dread. He knew he needed to see Trudie, to make sure she was all right, to tell her *he* was all right . . . and yet, there was something he was afraid of finding out, something he'd seen in his friend's eyes.

"The door to the left," Jason hissed when Storm paused for a moment on the stoop. He rang the intercom and waited. Counting to fifteen, he reached out to ring again when the speaker clicked.

"Yes? *Who's there?*" came an unfamiliar voice.

"It's Storm . . . I'm here to see Trudie."

"*Who?*"

Jason stepped forward and spoke into the intercom. "Jane, it's me, Jason. I'm with . . . a friend."

A slender woman in her early twenties, wearing a long night gown and bunny slippers, opened the door and ushered them inside. It was obvious a plant-lover lived here; arranged in a row along the hall walls were tiny bowls holding a variety of ferns that served as an extension of the flowery wallpaper.

TIME CHASER

Jane locked the front door again and turned to face her guests. "So, what's so important that I had to wake up from my wonderful little dream about *finally* winning the lottery?"

"Do you remember," began Jason, with an analytical look on his face, "about two years ago when East Cedar had that accident and lost a customer? Jane, this is *him*. This is Storm Anderson."

Jane's eyes went wide as recognition dawned. "Oh my God! Storm! *Trudie's* Storm! Everyone thought you were dead!"

"So I've heard," muttered Storm, crossing his arms. "One minute it's 2304, the next it's . . . now."

"That's so freaky!" Jane hissed, reaching out and touching his arm, just to be sure he was real and not a dream. "Wait until everyone hears about this. There'll be reporters, video-interviews, maybe even . . ."

Storm cringed, looking off towards the front door.

"Apparently it was a streaming accident," Jason offered, crossing his arms. "Nobody knows about this but us, and I'm not sure if coming right out with it is the best thing. You know the laws for breaking a stream."

"Oh, that's right. But he didn't do it on purpose . . . did he?"

Jason sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "No, he didn't. Tell her what happened, Storm."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore, I—" Storm paused, gaze caught in the doorway to the adjoining room. "—Trudie."

"Hello, Storm." Trudie, in her wheelchair, approached

Storm with an oddly tranquil expression on her face. As he took in the sight of her crippled, emaciated legs, a bitter wonderment came over him. She was exactly the same as she'd been two days—two *years*—ago, with the same delicate, oval face and tender features that had won him over in high school. The differences now were subtle but evident: a figure more skinny than petite, a slouch to the posture, slight dark spots under the eyes.

She was like a shadow, a ghost frozen in time; it was immensely relieving to see her arms move when she stopped her chair before him and craned her neck upward to face him. “Storm, is it really you?”

He didn't say anything as he dropped to his knees beside the chair, placing his hand over hers. “What's happened to you?”

Trudie turned away, swallowing. “An accident. Fate, chance—whatever you want to call it. On the day after you disappeared I was called down to police headquarters for questioning. The shuttle I was in . . . it didn't quite make it there. The doctors said there was really nothing they could do for me since most of the nerves were damaged beyond repair. It could have been worse, though.”

Storm looked up, disbelief reflected in his eyes—along with the threat of tears, though he kept them hidden well. He could not, however, hide the shock and alienation his face was no doubt betraying, and so he abruptly stood and headed for the door.

“Storm . . .” Jason began.

Storm wasn't listening.

TIME CHASER

* * *

He was leaning against the side of the shuttle when Jason found him. Storm never showed his feelings in public when he could help it, especially not if he was upset, but now was unlike anything Jason had seen: Storm, in a moment of weakness, his face tear-stained, his shoulders slouched.

“Storm, it’s not as bad as it seems . . .”

Jason reached out to comfort his friend, but Storm pushed him away. “Leave me alone.”

“You’re still alive . . .”

Storm turned to face his friend, wiping his arm across his cheek. He had the look of a frightened animal, cornered, caught.

Jason reached out again. “Storm, you’re alive, you’re safe home again. We can work out what happens next together.”

“No,” replied Storm, glancing around as if he were only noticing the rest of the world now. “This isn’t home. I don’t belong here. It’s not supposed to be like this. I can’t stay.”

“What do you mean?”

“I need to get back. Somehow . . . I have to get back to the right time, and you have to help me.”

Shaking his head, Jason folded his arms. “*This* is the right time. This is the *only* time. Things are the way they are, and you can’t just change them on a whim. It’s illegal.”

“Things have already been changed. I wasn’t supposed to miss out on two years of my life just to end up here where I find out my disappearance has caused the handi-

capping of my girlfriend.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jason said. “It’s no one’s *fault*. Even if you had stayed she could have gotten hurt some other way. Or maybe not at all. Or maybe *you* would have been the one to end up in a wheelchair.” He paused a moment, glanced back towards the duplex. “During the entire time you were gone, she never stopped talking about you. She never got with anyone else. I think she was still waiting for the day you’d come back. I can’t imagine that changing now, just . . . *because*.”

Storm bit his lip and looked down the street, away from Jason. “I could have prevented it.”

“You had no way of knowing. None of us did. I mean, what if we were all super-powerful? We’d be changing every little thing every minute of our lives, trying to get it right. That’s not how it works. You have to take what comes and make the best of it. Now, come back inside and let’s see if we can’t work things out before you make your big jump off the deep-end, okay?”

Storm sighed, shivered. It took a moment, but eventually he nodded and followed Jason back inside the duplex, though he knew nothing his friends said would prevent him from finding a way back.

* * *

Even though Storm kept telling himself he was supposed to be exhausted, sleep didn’t come easily.

Once Jason had left, he’d been invited to spend the rest of the night at Jane and Trudie’s. The sofa bed was quite

TIME CHASER

comfortable except for the inevitable bar that ran down the middle. He'd given Trudie a kiss and then lay down, listening to the sounds of Jane helping her into bed and whispering good night to her. Then, when everything was quiet, he tried to lay still and keep his eyes closed until finally he breathed a sigh and sat up, knowing that he couldn't sleep until he did that one last thing.

Trudie slept alone in her room with a small night-light glowing beside the bed. Storm stood in the doorway for several minutes watching her sleeping form . . . at least, he assumed she was sleeping until she sat up and beckoned to him.

"You don't have to stand there forever you know. We *do* know each other, after all."

Storm went in and sat beside Trudie, clasping her hand in his. "I couldn't sleep. Too much excitement. All this is just so . . . weird."

"That's understandable," Trudie said, taking hold of Storm's shoulders and pulling him closer with a surprisingly firm grasp, "but you're here now. *We're* here. You don't need to worry about anything."

"You don't need to . . ."

"Shh!"

Her fingers worked against his neck and shoulders like they'd done countless times before, easing pressure, bringing back familiar memories of what she would do next, once he was massaged into relaxation. She started with his back, moved around to lift off his shirt, all the time using her hands to unlock his hidden places of tension.

Out of Jason's clothes, he lay with her afterward, drift-

ing between fitful dreams and elusive memories. In one, Trudie and himself were making love. She was on her hands and knees on the bed; he was kneeling behind, using one arm to prop himself up, the other to caress her hair and breasts as he thrust tenderly. The orgasm took them both by surprise, and for a moment there was only the indescribable elation of oneness, a simple science that worked for Storm and Trudie as it had not worked with anyone else.

He awoke in a sweat, his erection tenting the bedsheets. Disgusted with himself, he slipped out of bed, moved slowly and silently in the pre-dawn light as he pulled on his clothes and crept unnoticed from Trudie's bedroom. He found the front door of her apartment easily enough and let himself out.

Without any sort of specific plan, he started walking southward, past campus housing, past public tennis courts, and into the residentials, where folks were just starting to get up and out for the day. Schoolchildren laughed and giggled in packs as they waited for their shuttles; sleepy-eyed husbands, half-dressed for work, watered their lawns and listened to the newsfeeds on their headsets . . . all warm, familiar scenery—except now Storm felt as if he were a wisp of smoke, a thin cloud drifting unnoticed along the sidewalks.

I don't belong, he thought, though it wasn't a matter of *where* he was supposed to be.

It was *when*.

10 . THE LEAVING TIME

Storm convulsed suddenly, opened his eyes and took in a deep breath as he instinctively flung his arms over his head, guarding himself against—

—light. Sun. Cloudless, wheat field sky peeking through the glimmering mesh of a behemoth bio-dome.

Mars.

He sat up, focusing his senses. There was tallgrass all around him, poking and scratching his bare torso, which tingled from head to toe, but which was otherwise undamaged. The sounds of the city could be heard in the distance. He shook off a nagging wave of dizziness and shifted onto his knees.

“God damn,” he thought out loud with a nervous chuckle. “It worked.” *It worked!*

Slowly, and with a slight trembling in his limbs, he stood up straight and flexed his arms, watching the sleek muscles writhe beneath the skin of his newly-materialized body. His appearance was still the same—same face, hair, eye color, muscle build—but it was also enhanced, optimized, any subtle signs of aging now long gone. He was a young man, a fully-matured teenager who’d left behind his eighteenth birthday in year only. “The body resets itself,” DK had once said. During a stream shift, when you were

nothing more than a collection of molecules, an intention of the soul, the default setting didn't include any of the chronological stresses of your birth stream. You were simply you.

And when you make yourself physical again, Storm thought, starting slowly through the grass with his eyes fixed intently on the ground, using your basic template as a guide, there's no link to dictate how old you are.

In short: he was now immortal.

Various bits of memory flashed through his mind as he continued to scan the ground. Images of himself, of his previous stream: days spent at the docks earning whatever he could off the books (an opportunity set up by a friend of Jason's); evenings spent at Trudie's, catching up, talking, trying to laugh and play like the college kid he'd once been; nights and early morning learning how to make love all over again (though his own pleasure had become purely sexual and not the cosmic explosion it had once been). Later: his first attempted (and ill-fated) stream; the bland interiors of various prison cells; uninspired baseball games on the vids, unappetizing cafeteria meals, monotonous drudgery in the mines. Through it all, there were familiar faces like vague shadows. DK, of course. And Jennie, Gregori . . . Camie.

A human snake, a silent sleuth, Storm slithered through the reeds for several more minutes before finding his prize: a dung-colored pack wrapped in a dusty cloth. He knelt on the ground and undid the straps, found a change of clothes inside, food pellets, some money. Keeping an eye out for strangers, he quickly dressed himself and noted

TIME CHASER

that not everything fit correctly. It was a good start, though.

Nice to be thought of.

A half-hour trek brought him to the Martian monorail station: three stories of overcrowded lobbies, poorly-maintained public restrooms, and understaffed transport terminals crammed into a hodgepodge of steel girders and transparent aluminum. The security here would be conservative, if not outright lax, which would make it easier to slip onto a transport and out of the immediate area.

Never good to stay in one place too long, he thought as he scaled a dusty brick wall and alighted on a flight of steps leading to the station's ground floor. A handful of commuters who happened to be nearby paid him curious glances, but otherwise left him alone as he brushed himself off and tried to look calm and collected. *Just an ordinary guy coming back from taking a piss in the Martian outback.*

There was a steady stream of people on the platform. Most were too busy to pay him any attention. He kept a fairly brisk pace, scanning the schedule consoles and forming a mental itinerary. A transport headed for Mars Central was disembarking in ten minutes.

That would do nicely.

He found an automatic teller, fumbled in his pocket for the credit card, paused unintentionally as he caught site of a ruddy-faced, red-haired security guard who had apparently just exited the men's restroom. He dried his hands on his pants, gave Storm a look.

Fuck. Look away, Storm thought viciously. It was a sub-

tle command, more than a personal wish. He stepped in closer to the teller, as if he and the machine were conspiring to perform some ludicrous feat. He pretended to be interested in his credit card's details while he watched the security guard in his peripheral vision. *Mars Federal Credit Union, pre-paid credit card, hundred unit limit . . . cop tapping on his comm-band, no doubt requesting confirmation on a familiar-looking Caucasian male, five-ten, blond hair, blue eyes, late teens or early twenties.*

Fuck.

Leaving the teller, he began walking away from the restroom area. The crowd was a blessing and a curse, since the notion of blending in was also what was keeping him from putting a decent amount of distance between himself and the security guard. Every so often he would jostle someone the wrong way, mutter a quick apology, and glance nervously over his shoulder as the cop did much the same, becoming increasingly urgent as they neared one of the terminals.

"Hey, you! Hold it!"

Storm flinched, spotted two more security guards now approaching him from up ahead. They'd drawn their weapons.

A collective howl filled the terminal as people became aware of what was happening and either ducked for cover or ran for their lives. This created a certain amount of disorder, which Storm used to his advantage as he bolted. Throwing good manners to the wind, he navigated a peripheral path back to the main platform, pushing and shoving whomever he came into contact with. At the very

least, he knew, his pursuers were having just as much difficulty keeping up, their harried voices alternating between firm demands for him to give himself up at once and forceful suggestions to commuters to get out of the way.

They won't fire on me, Storm thought, turning a corner, peering over his shoulder, slowing his pace so as to delay any unwanted attention. *Place is full of people. To fire on an unarmed man, risking civilian casualties . . . not unless the price on my head has tripled in the last ten years.*

"Mr. Anderson!"

He faced forward again, and stumbled as he was hit by a particularly potent anti-climax: eight security guards—no, eight *Patrol* officers—suddenly swarming around him on the platform. Their thick, armored bodysuits and opaque headgear gave them the appearance of amphibious predators, and they were armed to the teeth.

Storm sighed inwardly, raised his hands over his head as it became all too obvious: he wasn't going anywhere.

Not today.

He surrendered, and was immediately assimilated: pockets emptied, retinas scanned, motion inhibitors placed on his wrists and ankles to make anything more than a light stroll feel like the home stretch of a triathlon.

"Mr. Anderson," continued the same Patrolman who'd initially called his name. "The Foreman would like to have a word with you."

The Foreman. No proper name was necessary, for if you were ever summoned by the Foreman, you already knew who he was, and you already knew what you were in for.

"Yes," said Storm. "I bet he would."

* * *

Time Patrol HQ was a secret among Patrolmen, a mystery to the average citizens of the human sector. Storm, though designated as a “criminal” chaser—and therefore stereotypically enlightened to such matters—had no more insight as to its whereabouts than did the next person. He was taken from the monorail station, escorted onto a shuttle and sedated for the duration of the trip. When he awoke, he found himself strapped into a chair in a bare room, devoid of windows, with smooth, featureless walls. No furnishings, save for a stool placed at the opposite end, near the elusive outline of a door.

Motion caught his attention, and he turned slightly to see a familiar, specter-like form, hands clasped behind his back, strolling along the periphery of the room.

Foreman Daniel Ketch.

Storm waited patiently, recovering from the drugs, half-expecting Ketch to initiate a conversation. Of course he knew Storm was awake, but he was the kind of man who preferred to have his catches ask the questions rather than ask them himself. On the plus side, the foreman had a reputation for being able to control himself in extreme situations; to perform senseless beatings during interrogations was not his style—though his officers were often more than happy to pick up the slack.

After a time, when Storm felt confident enough to speak coherently, he cleared his throat and said, “I’ve missed our little get-togethers.”

TIME CHASER

Ketch stopped beside the stool at the opposite end of the room. He pretended to study some minute detail of the furnishing as he spoke. "As have I. Especially during this last hiatus. Many chasers have proved to be worthy adversaries throughout my career, but none have made the game so interesting."

"I'm happy to have obliged you, then."

"Indeed." Turning to face Storm, Ketch pulled up the stool and seated himself before his opponent. "The Patrol thought that they'd lost you there for a while, that perhaps you'd misstepped between streams and gotten lost in the Void. I was never uncertain, however, that you would stick to your original game plan . . . that you would ultimately return to Standard and carry out your plans."

Storm sighed. "Money? Power? Immortality? Things a chaser such as myself should be interested in?"

Ketch held a prolonged silence.

Is he merely trying to get me to give an audio confession, Storm thought, or is it that he really doesn't know?

"Come now, Mr. Anderson. Are we to continue the game indefinitely, or is it possible to finally settle the score, to reach a mutual agreement?"

"With you holding the trophy, no doubt."

"In this game, there can only be one winner—else we find ourselves competing for nothing. We both know what you're after. It's simply a matter of when you will go after it."

"You have it all mapped out, then, eh?"

Ketch glowered, straightened. His patience seemed to have suddenly worn thin. "You could have gone anywhere,

Mr. Anderson. Forwards, backwards—so far off course that not even *I* could find you. Yet you’ve come *here*, you’ve come to *me*. Why?”

“Why not?”

“I will ask you again, Mr. Anderson. Why have you returned?”

Storm went silent, for Ketch was requesting the answers to questions that he did not quite understand. Yes, Storm had returned to the Standard stream, synced his own birth stream up with humanity’s, but he had the feeling he and his opponent were looking at the situation from opposite ends.

After several minutes of unproductive silence, Ketch finally withdrew, walked slowly towards the exit. Before he left the chamber, he turned slightly, almost apologetically, and said, “It doesn’t have to be this way. When is your temporal destination?”

“This is the *only* way,” Storm replied. “You’ve failed me, the system has failed me.”

“You did *not* have to run, Storm. You could have chosen another alternative. Instead you’ve set a chain of events into motion that cannot be stopped. You were given the opportunity to turn yourself in at the onset, but you chose to run instead. That tells me you have every intention of following through with your mission. I cannot allow that.”

“What mission would that be?”

Ketch faced Storm; the look in his eyes was so deep and distant as to be the source of all mystery in the galaxy. “You and I have met before—or perhaps I should say we were *going* to meet, in a future stream.”

TIME CHASER

“Same ol’ same ol’, eh?”

That intense, long-lost gaze once again. “Not quite. People change. Passing fancies become ideals that become blood oaths.”

Storm didn’t answer, but merely waited patiently until, at last, Ketch left the room, muttering something into his comm about “fetching the good doctor.” There was conviction in the foreman’s voice, an air of command—and yet it was equally evident (and somewhat surprising) that there was also a weariness tugging at the man’s soul. A weariness that Storm himself shared.

Too old, too young, too long. He wants it to be over, yet he finds himself slipping towards the inevitable sleep that comes afterward. It’s the same for me . . . and yet I still struggle. Oh, geez . . . I sound just like DK.

* * *

Storm receded from his body.

He was submerged in a viscous, half-tangible liquid, distorted figures dancing all around. It was difficult to discern the difference between his saturnine prison cell and the interrogation chamber. Strange faces came and went, some talking or yelling at him in unintelligible languages, others simply watching and frowning as he was tortured. This went on for an eternity, until Storm lost all sense of time, lost all sense of waking and sleeping—until he found himself simply existing as a series of random thoughts and subtle feelings.

He hardly felt the pain at all.

* * *

Storm, at age ten, standing at the edge of the small patch of grass and Big Toys that comprised the central courtyard of the urban complex where he and his parents lived. At the center of the courtyard: Jason Dang, surrounded by three Hispanic boys several years his senior who each took turns shoving him around, repeating the same words over and over:

“Say it! Say it! Say it, gook!”

Jason refused to give in. With each shove that sent him wobbling on his legs into the arms of another ego-inflated bully came his firm response: “Eat me!”

His voice held all the power of an arrogant teenager—or rather, a nine-year-old child trying to emulate the mannerisms of a rough-and-tumble adolescent—but to see him being tossed around like a rag doll, it was almost hilarious.

Storm was seething, biting his lip, clenching and unclenching his fists, his exaggerated muscles flexing without effort, an oversized bulge stretching the crotch of his “fashionable,” too-tight jeans—Damien’s idea, not Storm’s. He was a monster child, a freak boy. The others found him strangely compelling, but overall something they didn’t want to understand (the neighborhood girls never shunned him—but he was tired of their “let us see you, let us touch you” games). So they kept away, shouting insults from afar, vocalizing their distaste and jealousy regarding his excessive template, for they’d heard stories about what

went on at Damien's place—the women and men, the liberal nakedness. They wanted nothing and everything to do with him, knowing that when puberty hit, his voice would deepen gracefully, his face would remain blemish-free, his body would achieve its adult bodybuilder shape in a balanced fashion, his underarm and pubic hair would grow in predefined “stylish” patches. He was a gay man's version of perfection, a pretty-boy stealing winks and kisses from all the neighborhood girls and women, young and old, single or married. It wasn't fair.

“Leave him alone!” he shouted.

“Piss off, fag!” shouted the biggest of the boys.

“I'm not a fag!”

“Well, you dress like one!”

“Go back home to your daddies before you get dirt on your pretty little template!”

Jason struggled in the boys' grip, obviously sharing some of their prejudice, but looking like he was ready to be saved by anybody at this point. Even a freak boy.

It was worth a shot.

Storm launched himself in the direction of the head bully, who didn't notice his approach until it was too late. The two of them went tumbling down onto the grass, where Storm used a combination of bodyweight and raw arm strength to slam the bully's head into the edge of the slide. Without pausing to assess the damage, he rolled off and stood up, glaring at the others. They simply gawked, awestruck, with their mouths hanging open. Nobody moved or said a word as the bully whom Storm had attacked got unsteadily to his feet. There was a stream of

blood flowing from his forehead, trickling down his cheek, staining his T-shirt.

“Shit, man, you’re bleeding!” one of the bullies observed, and started backing away.

“The white boy’s fucking crazy! Let’s go!” exclaimed the other and tugged at the injured boy’s sleeve. They scurried off like frightened animals, leaving Storm and Jason alone in the courtyard.

Jason looked at Storm.

Storm looked at Jason.

Neither spoke for a while.

Finally, Jason stuffed his hands in his pockets, cleared his throat, and said, “Um . . . thanks. I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Storm. “Those guys are jerks. They think they can act like the people you see in the movies.”

“Yeah.” Jason cleared his throat again, glanced quickly up and down Storm’s torso. “So . . . why are you dressed like that?”

Rather than explain his whole back-story, Storm simply offered, “It’s one of my sponsors’ clothing lines. I’m a model.”

“Then it’s true . . . ?”

“Then *what’s* true?”

“They say you have *posing* parties up in that penthouse of yours.”

“Who says that?”

“People.”

“What else do they say?”

Jason blushed. “They say you give blowjobs under the

TIME CHASER

bleachers at school.”

“No, never,” Storm replied.

“But your parents are both guys, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then how can you not . . . be *that way*?”

Storm shrugged. “They made my template, but they didn’t make *me*.”

This seemed to allay Jason’s fears somewhat, and he smiled. “That was nuts what you did to that guy.” His expression oscillated between scared shitless and amazed beyond belief. For a moment Storm thought he would run away like the others, but then he flashed a grin and put his arm around Storm’s shoulders. “You’ve *got* to teach me that!”

Storm smiled, too. Later, he would be scolded by Uncle Damien for behaving in such a reckless fashion, but he wouldn’t care, because he’d taken the chance and acted like a real boy for a change—and he’d made a friend along the way.

* * *

Good old Jason . . . wonder what he’s up to.

* * *

Another face came at Storm from out of the darkness. This time it was Trudie’s, and she looked concerned. She mumbled something at him, put her hand against his forehead and told him she’d been brought here because the doctors

JESSE GORDON

were concerned. They needed him to come back, if they were to treat him properly.

Come back . . .

Not real, Storm told himself, regrettably. *Ketch's doctors have fabricated her from my memories. Keep away.*

He retreated once again into the meadowland of his mind . . .

* * *

He was supposed to pop naked out of a cake.

The whole thing had been planned as a surprise for Trudie's twenty-second birthday, but instead Storm showed up at her place four hours late, with a somber face and a headache. Needless to say, he wasn't in party mode.

"What happened to you?" Trudie asked as she let him in. She was half asleep, her oversized T-shirt rumpled. He went straight for the love seat.

"Bad day at work," Storm murmured, leaning back and unzipping the upper portion of his coveralls. He closed his eyes. "Boss is being a bitch about the new calibration systems. He's acting like we've never seen under the hood of a shuttle before."

"Oh, I'm sorry, baby," Trudie breathed, brushing her hair out of her face as she came to him. "You're here now. It's okay."

"I want to blow his fucking head off."

Both fell silent for a moment, Trudie leaning against Storm and gently running her hands through his hair. She started massaging his temples. "So does his caseworker."

TIME CHASER

He sighed, smiled. “Happy birthday,” he said, “even though the day’s pretty much shot.”

“Inverted romantic,” Trudie replied, tapping his bare chest and leaning in close for a kiss. She called him that whenever he shifted moods suddenly—like now. It was his way of dealing with turmoil: change the subject. He returned her kisses, ran his hands down her sides to the base of her T-shirt . . . found she wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“You know,” Storm whispered into her ear as he helped her pull the shirt off, “there was supposed to be a cake.”

Trudie was tugging at his coveralls now, brushing her lips over his abdomen as she helped him undress. “I know. Jason told me last week.”

“That dumbass. It figures—I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

“Make it up to me.”

Already the incident at work was forgotten. Storm stood, cupped her buttocks with his hands, and led her towards the bathroom. It was cramped, but there was just enough room in the shower stall for two, if you used your imagination.

“High steam,” Trudie instructed, nibbling at Storm’s chest. As he complied, punching in the temperature pre-set, she slid down onto her knees.

“Hey,” he said. “This is supposed to be *your* birthday.”

“Oh, quiet,” she replied, and took his penis into her mouth.

He fell silent, leaned against the wall of the stall and closed his eyes. It was their way. Trudie was the only person with whom he could have meaningless sex for the sake

of having meaningless sex—and it somehow seemed all right, despite his secret wish to one day get married, to actually “do it right.” Not that he was breaking any personal rules; he’d been monogamous with Trudie since the beginning. It was merely the informality of it all that had him blushing at times, enduring his own shame in not having made a commitment on paper. Of course, in order for that to work, Trudie had to have an interest as well, and she was blissfully ignorant to the idea of marriage, children, and the like.

Trudie’s relentless tongue caused him to tremble. He looked down to watch her performance. Her slim, athletic body writhed beneath the shower’s spray as she coaxed him to an eventual completion—at which point she mumbled something from between his legs and started humming deep in her throat. It was a trick he usually relished, but now it only served to sharpen a twinge of alienation he’d somehow hidden deep down beneath all his other thoughts and emotions.

“Stop,” he moaned abruptly, grabbing her head. She looked up at him curiously, his fluids running down her chin. The sight disgusted him.

“What?” she murmured.

God. This is pathetic. “Nothing,” he said aloud.

* * *

He lay awake in bed long after Trudie, satisfied by his obligatory (and somewhat robotic) return performance, had fallen asleep at his side. With considerable envy he

TIME CHASER

studied her naked form, serene and motionless (save for the calm motion of her breathing), illuminated by the neon-blue night light that ran along the bed frame. He'd never been able to fall asleep like that—not even after sex. She'd kissed him goodnight, stretched glamorously, rolled onto her front, one smooth leg draped over his, and that had been that.

The Net was of little assistance. Most of the video feeds were sitcom reruns. There was a political talk show on Sky-One, though. Something to do with the Time Patrol. Storm shifted onto his back and adjusted the volume on his visor.

“ . . . in light of the recent attack on the UniGuard facility, the Time Patrol has found itself the subject of increasing pressure from intergalactic governments who believe it is time to change the way time codes are handled across the board. Tighter security is a nonplus. Many believe the Patrol should be decentralized. And of course there is the school of thought that the technology itself should be withdrawn from the public, restricted to government use only.

“To offer his insight into the Patrol, where it stands now, and what's in store for the consortium's future, we have Foreman Daniel Ketch with us in the studio. Good morning, foreman.”

“Good morning.”

“The recent attacks . . . they certainly serve as a reminder of just how delicate an operation it is to maintain and protect the very fabric of time, as it were.

With this and the numerous other attacks or thefts involving time codes seeming to be on an increase . . . is the public's concern warranted?"

"Well, it's certainly a delicate operation. The very nature of time, and the technology that allows us to stream into the past . . . we're talking physics. We're talking energy. The physical foundations of our universe—there is always going to be access to the technology no matter how many officers we put out in the field. Should the public be concerned? I don't think so. We're in a unique position today, as there have never been so many varied forms of government working together to reach a common goal. The human population, the Geckos—leonines, sylphids, daulmans—so many societies have come together to cooperate with one another in making sure our universe's time streams don't get crossed. That cooperation has allowed for faster response times, more effective security measures between transportation ports . . . as hard as it may be to believe, streaming actually becomes safer with each passing day."

"You mentioned the various forms of governments, humans and non-human, working together to establish a universal police force—if I'm correct?"

"Yes."

"This law-enforcement body, the Time Patrol . . . it's come to many skeptics' attention that while the supporting members of the Patrol are comprised of various intergalactic species, the central Patrol coordination sector—directed by yourself—is

TIME CHASER

made up entirely of human employees. So if you live, say, outside the solar system where humans aren't the dominant force, you get a strong notion of, 'The humans dominate the Patrol, therefore the humans dominate the time codes'."

"Interesting choice of words. You have to remember that there will always be someone who isn't happy with the way their government is run. There's no perfect candidate to be elected into office. Allow me to put it like this: Streaming technology was largely developed by human scientists, engineers, physicists—and at a time when the Outer Wars were at the forefront of many alien societies' political and financial agendas. Consequently, it became appropriate that the human sector be responsible for itself. Hence the Time Patrol was founded."

"I think the general public understands the why of the Time Patrol . . . however, what I think is being questioned is the Patrol's system of checks and balances. In essence, 'Who polices the police?'"

"Well, naturally, the human government is the regulatory body here. That of course means that we are governed by the same rules and regulations that, say, govern Earth's CIA. As easy as it might be to believe in a police agency that is allowed to wander freely throughout the universe, it just doesn't exist."

"I'm going to shift modes here. The Brotherhood of the Gecko Tree. Many Geckos feel their species is being unfairly persecuted in the hunt for genuine time chasers on their homeworld. I quote the Prime Minis-

ter of the Gecko Homeworld as saying, 'The humans seek to stronghold a gift given to the universe. They seek to become the gods of time through persecution of any species that is not their own.'"

"The Geckos merely represent a statistic—nothing more. The Patrol seeks to curve any criminal activity that might affect the flow of time. It is our belief that every species in the universe should be allowed to live out its natural life cycle untainted by the notions of one man."

"So . . . then, let's say someone—either a citizen of Earth or the Earth Colonies—breaks time law and manages to escape into the Outer Worlds, or say a neighboring galaxy even. How does the Patrol deal with criminals who aren't within the human sector?"

"Well, among other things, the human government has negotiated extensively with alien governments in multiple galaxies. The key is to have a standardized system of communication between police forces, especially at crucial wormhole access points . . ."

Storm clicked off his headset and placed it back in its cubby, which retreated into the side of the bed with a soft hiss. Rather than ease his thoughts, the SkyOne broadcast had simply stirred them up more so. It seemed like all the news focused on these days was the evident time streaming craze and how it was supposed to make or break human existence.

Take it too seriously, he thought, and this could really be the beginning of the end.

TIME CHASER

Shifting on the bed, turning away from Trudie's sleeping form, Storm allowed a familiar chill to come over him—as if loneliness were a thing restricted to the shadows, something that only came out to feed when everyone in the world but Storm Anderson was safely asleep.

But it's always been this way, hasn't it? Loneliness, uncertainty. Missing the mother who never was, the woman who carried your template through gestation. Living for eighteen years with a father and his gay lover, both of whom were, for all intensive purposes, cardboard cutouts, social clichés, so damned sure I was going to become a supermodel or an Olympic hero—and when I was just average, a pretty body wrapped around an average everyday soul, they gave up on me, went through the motions of living, doing the bare minimum it took to get me through public school. And afterwards, at the party with all the other high school graduates . . . getting the message that my father's body had been found out on the front lawn . . . twenty story jump, neck snapped clean—an instantaneous death, luckily. Lucky for dad. He didn't have to read the suicide note left on the kitchen counter. He didn't have to spend that last year with Uncle Damien, an utter mess left to manage what was left of the family that had failed him.

Storm wanted to wake Trudie, to tell her all these things, but he knew she wouldn't get it. She had absolutely no emotional depth—which meant she could easily dilute any excess from him. Usually it worked, and he became serene, and he was thankful for her presence. Sometimes, however, he wondered if he was holding onto his high

school sweetheart as a crutch. Mutual friendship, support, sexual release, one of those rare partners who possessed an active mind and a potent libido. She didn't mind his various mood swings, his superficial template; she didn't mind his lengthy manhood stabbing at her cervix whenever they made love. But was it love?

Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night with the blood rushing in his ears. He would sit up, feel his heart hammering in his chest, hear his breath coming in gasps. He would look around the room for the first few seconds and wonder where he was, wonder *who* he was. If he was in bed with Trudie, he would wonder who she was as well, and he would always feel . . . alone. Like an alien might feel, suddenly transplanted from across the galaxy into a new world, with no friends or family. He might be able to speak the native language, but there was no connection, no point of reference otherwise.

The feeling was creeping in now. Storm shuddered slightly and got up out of bed. It was an odd feeling: his body told him that the air in the room was comfortably warm—yet there was a chill. Upon further consideration he discovered that it was coming from within himself, not without.

He went to the small meal counter that was embedded in the wall opposite Trudie's bed. Taking a seat upon one of the two stools, he swished his hand over the counter, which responded in kind by illuminating itself. A soft beep confirmed that it was ready to take his order. He selected "water" from the beverages list displayed on the service panel and a moment later an eight-ounce glass sparkled

TIME CHASER

into existence on the counter top. He downed it in a single draught, made a face and licked his lips as the “thin” taste registered on his tongue.

Cheap bulk matter, he thought as he replaced the glass on the counter. The water hadn’t been *bad*, but its elements had definitely been derived from generic matter (just because it had the necessary two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule didn’t mean the food synthesizer’s preset had accurately replicated the natural mineral taste he’d become accustomed to). But that was life in San Francisco. So many people crammed into such a small space. Nature’s resources had to be divvied out accordingly, and where there wasn’t enough, technology had to step in and pick up the bill.

Storm rose from the counter with the realization that he was thinking way too much about things that shouldn’t even have been on his mind at one o’clock in the morning.

He went back to bed.

* * *

Eventually, the entities around him came less frequently, and he was able to relax somewhat—if drifting sleeplessly between aura and flesh could be considered *relaxation*. At last, DK was there, a tangible dream coming at him through a murky darkness, reptilian eyes holding the slight glow of the surrounding chamber.

“You do well, for a human. Not many of your kind can so easily induce—and maintain—autostasis at will. There may be hope for you after all, yes? Now, come awake, come

alive . . . it is safe now, I will protect you. Come up, come out . . . I will protect you . . .”

Storm felt gentle hands working over his head and chest, felt something sharp pricking the skin of his left arm—

“Oh, shit,” he groaned suddenly, coming awake all at once, slamming head-on into a wall of wretched sensation. He coughed, doubled over in DK’s arms; his entire body felt swollen and thick. He could taste his own vomit, smell his own feces.

“I have pumped you full of painkillers,” DK said, holding him tight, “and some stimulants to get you going. You are in bad shape, but it is nothing a little nanotherapy will not fix. First, we must get you out of here.”

Storm struggled into a standing position, tried to make out his surroundings, but the lighting was dim, and his eyes burned. At the very least, he knew he was in a holding cell of some kind, small, judging by the lack of aural reverberation. He squinted down at his arms, saw blotchy skin through tattered clothes.

“How long?” he rasped.

“Three days,” DK replied. “They have been torturing you, trying to elicit a response from your mind through various barbaric techniques. However, I do not think they have been successful. Can you walk?”

Storm took a tentative step, wobbled slightly, but remained standing. “I think so.” He looked at DK, noticed the blood trickling from his nostrils. “You’re bleeding.”

DK nodded. “An unfortunate side-effect. A fortress as strong as this has many safeguards against temporal shifts.

TIME CHASER

I alone could not establish a connection. I required a partner.” He gestured towards the opposite end of the cell. Storm could barely make out the comatose form lying on its side near the wall.

“You mean . . . ?”

“He volunteered to give his life for me, so that I could save you. I, in turn, will exchange my life for yours.”

Storm’s gut tightened involuntarily. He clutched DK’s arms fiercely. “I can’t ask this of you.”

“Leaving here will require an enormous amount of energy. I am already drained considerably. Therefore, to accomplish the task which has brought me here in the first place, you must act as the navigator, and I must become the battery. It is the only way.”

“I’m not going to—”

“There is no time to argue. Only time for action.”

Storm continued to protest, but he knew DK had already set his mind on completing the rescue. There was no turning back now. And, after all, it would be unpleasant to remain here indefinitely, at the mercy of Ketch and his Patrol. This was probably the only chance he would have at escape.

“Fuck.” He squeezed back the tears as he nodded and steadied himself within DK’s grip. He felt the telltale vibration beginning to flow from his companion’s hands.

“Remember what I taught you,” DK said. “The wheel always turns. We will come around again, you will see.”

And with that he extended his aura so that it enveloped the both of them. The process was not unlike that performed by the high-tech equipment in a time mall—ex-

cept here and now, their temporal journey knew no boundaries. The cell walls blurred out of focus as the vibrational frequency of their bodies accelerated beyond that of the surrounding space. In essence, they disappeared, though the mind and soul combination remained ever-present, always controlling, always guiding.

At first, it was difficult, and rather like swimming through a thick gel. Storm's astral body strained, his legs kicking firmly, his arms taking wide, broad strokes as he struggled to distance himself from the heavy shell that surrounded the Time Patrol base. However, DK's reservoirs were deep, and the soul connection was strong. Storm did not give up until he was free of the prison cell, free of the physical confines of a regulated time stream. The farther from those confines he went, the more powerful he felt himself become, for without the limited capacities of a flesh body to hold him back, he was one with the cosmos.

He could have gone anywhere in the galaxy. His unhindered presence amongst the stars offered endless possibilities: worlds he'd been to, worlds he'd planned to visit—places even the Patrol didn't know about, places he could hide—but in the end he decided that there was only one option, if he wanted DK to live.

* * *

Though the mind and soul are limitless, the body is not. A finely-tuned precision instrument, its strengths and weaknesses are governed by the laws of physics. One can always

TIME CHASER

rearrange the building blocks of one's own body, but the number of blocks always remains constant. In order to interact with the physical universe, one's physical life force must be strong enough to perpetuate the basic processes of DNA synthesis.

DK's life force was weak indeed; he was comatose when he materialized, alongside Storm, in the Gecko temple.

Storm convulsed involuntarily, gagged and rolled onto his side as he fought back the typical disorientation and attempted to ascertain the status of his companion. He tried to cry out in anguish when he saw the vicious lacerations covering DK's body, but exhaustion overcame him, and he slumped forward, fell headfirst onto the cold wet stone.

Somewhere nearby a holy man called for help.

11 . UNDERGROUND AVENUE

Storm fell quiet, realizing that during her storytelling Annah had come to lay in his arms once again. Her ease in his presence (as well as her apparent knowledge of all his most personal life stories) was intriguing; he wondered just what sort of relationship they'd had together during his previous visit, his previous lifetime.

"That's pretty much on the mark," he said.

"I pride myself on keeping my memory in check."

"I bet—but still, I'm *here* instead where I belong."

"Could be worse. You could have run into a real bitch back in the alley."

Storm laughed, stroked Annah's hair. "Now, *that* would have been interesting." He paused, looking down at her. She must have felt his stare because she looked up. "So, were we . . . *are* we friends?"

She looked away. "We're just lost souls floating on an endless sea."

Another chuckle forced its way up Storm's throat. "No, what I mean is—"

Annah suddenly slipped from his arms and stood up, stretching. "We should get back. Get some sleep before dawn." She started towards the garden wall.

Storm followed, puzzled. He thought of the memories

TIME CHASER

she'd reawakened, memories of himself and Trudie, puttering around her dorm between school and work. Their routine had become a monotony stuck between a monotony—it made him think of what it was really like, living in a specific stream and not just remembering it. The days spent slaving away at his day job, the nights spent sweating and grunting blissfully in bed . . . and then, afterward, the realization that no orgasm, no matter how good, could mask the loneliness.

You don't just tell strangers things like that, he thought, and quietly followed Annah back to her home, studying her as he went, and trying to foretell memories that hadn't yet been born.

* * *

The flow of people into and out of Great Hope was relentless when high noon approached, bringing with it miserable heat and sultry breezes that would make even the most cold-blooded creatures take to the bare necessities where clothing was concerned. However, the group of men loitering around the Xiao-Ping fountain seemed not to notice the temperature. They wore heavy, bulky cloaks and hoods, giving them the appearance of desert travelers who valued moisture conservation over ventilation. Every so often one of the men would swish his hand into the fountain and sip some water, but other than that, the aggregation simply lounged, watching the arched terminal entrance as citizens and traders continued to pass through.

Great Hope's gateways reached peak hour with the ar-

rival of a number of heavily-loaded caravans, just in from a long excursion. As the caravans slowly and meticulously passed through inspection, the cloaked men by the fountain began to stir and became noticeably alert.

Among legions of overlapping voices, some human, some not, they conversed:

“This isn’t good.”

“Yeah, too many people to look after. If he’s anywhere nearby, waiting to slip past . . .”

“Should we call for backup?”

“No, wait. Look. Over by that cart.”

Suddenly one of the cloaked men had a pair of binoculars up to his eyes. He focused in on a young human male, light-skinned and wearing overalls and a straw hat. Beside him was a woman of the typical, ambiguously tanned Great Hope complexion, dressed in the same manner.

“They look like farmers,” whispered one of the men.

“Scan the male.”

The cloaks did well to hide any devices being activated underneath. A moment later, as if something had suddenly caught their attention, the group of cloaked men left the fountain and strode forcefully into the crowd.

“That’s him. Arm yourselves appropriately. We only want him unconscious.”

* * *

“I don’t see him,” Storm muttered, staring intently at the fountain, which was, perhaps, twenty yards away. Here and there, in passing, he thought he caught a glimpse of Chris’s

familiar face, but it always turned out to be someone else.

Come on, Chris, he thought. He blinked—and suddenly his view of the fountain was blocked by a group of cloaked men heading in his direction.

“Let’s go,” he hissed, grabbing Annah’s hand and pulling her through the crowd, away from the fountain.

She shot a confused glance back towards the gateway. “What? Why?”

Storm didn’t answer. He only plowed through the masses of people, his pace quickening. Annah held onto him and looked back over her shoulder.

“Storm!” Annah hissed. “We’re being followed.”

“I know, and I don’t think they want to sell us something. Just stay close to me and try to act calm.”

As he spoke, his pace quickened even more, so that they were almost running. Every time he looked over his shoulder, the men were closer.

“Storm,” Annah said as Storm pulled her between two men who were in the middle of a conversation. “Storm—they’re right behind us!”

Storm looked back again and everything around him—the people, carts, buildings—all slowed and faded into a blur; the six men did not. Within the shade of one of those hoods he saw the flash of teeth, and he could almost hear a voice saying, “We have you.”

“Shit,” he breathed, grabbing Annah and pulling her beside him. “Run!”

The sea of people parted unwillingly as Storm pushed and shoved his way ahead, earning plenty of surprised grunts and swear words from those he disturbed. Such

outbursts were echoed as the Patrolmen shifted into pursuit, drawing their guns. A few nearby onlookers screamed at this point.

"This way!" shouted Storm, pulling Annah along with him as he turned onto another street, one that was even more densely packed than the last. Here, the buildings were smaller and consisted of mostly shops and markets.

"We need a place to hide," said Storm, pausing for a moment to get his bearings. "You know the city—where can we get out of sight?"

Annah took the lead. Her verbal answer came momentarily, when she suddenly dropped to her knees and started clawing at the lid of a manhole. "If we're lucky, this will lead us to the highway. If not . . ."

Storm dropped down, too, and helped her get the lid off. Then he followed her through.

There were two things he noticed when he dropped down onto the subterranean metallic walkway. The first was that he was now standing beside a large six-lane highway, lit by fluorescent strips that ran along the arced walls and cast an artificial glow upon the shuttles that sped back and forth. The second was that he and Annah were now in the midst of a group of men—a half-dozen or so—who did not look all that friendly.

Great, thought Storm, clasping Annah's hand and trying to slow his frantic breath. *Out of the sun and into the arms of Great Hope's finest chain gang.*

"Hey now," said one of the gang members, stepping forward fearlessly. "What's a baby-color like you doing down here without your mama?"

TIME CHASER

Storm cast a quick glance back towards the thin shaft of light that shone down from the open manhole. *At any moment those patrolmen are going to come pouring down, guns and all*

"And who's this fine female specimen you got here?" continued another of the men, reaching out to brush a hand across Annah's chin.

Voices were emanating from above, and suddenly the light was obstructed; the hunters had arrived. Desperation forced Storm into action.

"I don't have time for this," he said, pulling Annah behind him as he delivered a well-placed kick into the chest of the nearest thug. As another man grabbed Storm around the shoulders, he used the hold to give his next kick support before squirming out of the grip and roundhousing his captor in the gut.

"Come on!" he yelled at Annah, and pushed her through the group of men. "Hail a taxi or something!"

The next thug attacked with a sharp jab in the ribs and a quick follow-up punch that ripped the breath from Storm's lungs and sent him staggering. He used his momentum effectively, grabbing another attacker, kneeing him in the groin, and shoving him aside. Just as he turned, another thug was hurtling towards him with a knife. Storm didn't waste a moment as he swung his torso around and kicked the man in the face. The blow was powerful and sent the man stumbling to the ground, blood trickling from a head wound.

The rest of the gang was, no doubt, deciding whether or not to risk their livelihood with a man who was obviously

trained in manual fighting; the bright red beam of a laser rifle being discharged by a descending Patrolman decided for them. The shot just barely missed Storm's shoulder but struck the walkway and sent a small cloud of bitter smoke into the air.

"Storm!" cried Annah. "Over here! Hurry!"

Holding his side, Storm scurried off the walkway and towards a small consumer-sized shuttle where Annah was holding the passenger-door open. He threw himself inside and the shuttle kicked into motion, leaving the mess of wounded gangsters and angry police behind.

"My stars, what was going on back there?" exclaimed the woman in the driver's seat as Storm rearranged himself into a sitting position. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, just a few bruises, that's all," replied Storm, casting a curious glance at their savior, a middle-aged leonine woman with gold-striped fur. Her exotic eyes regarded him with concern.

"Let me see," urged Annah, leaning forward from the back seat and taking hold of Storm's overalls.

"No, I'm fine. It's just a scratch."

The driver's concern was mounting. "Maybe we should have a doctor look at you."

"No, no . . . I'm fine, ma'am," Storm replied, eyeing the other cars that passed. "Every so often there'll be trouble up at the markets with thieves."

She shook her head. "Please, call me Betty."

Storm smiled warmly. "Betty."

* * *

TIME CHASER

Traffic was horrendous leaving Great Hope. Through the radioways and cellular phones the rumor got out that the police were looking for somebody, causing each and every checkpoint to be a web of security. Hundreds of shuttles inched forward through the terminals as swarms of uniformed officers scanned each and every vehicle for their man.

A black Ford Saber XL was among the confusion and before it even neared the highway terminal, ten officers and their rifles pointed at the tinted windows while they yelled for the driver to get out. She was told to hold her hands over her head and back away from the car as it was scanned for the second time, without results.

“The vehicle is empty,” someone said.

“Search it anyway,” said another.

With a sigh that bordered a growl, Betty raised a furry eyebrow and flashed her teeth. “Gentlemen, would you mind telling me what all the fuss is about? I’m late for a dinner appointment, and I’m *ferociously* hungry.”

Some of the younger Patrolmen swallowed uneasily, recalling the semi-true tales of leonine carnivorous appetites.

“Sorry ma’am,” said one of the braver men after Betty had been thoroughly searched. “This won’t take but a minute. Standard procedure and all, strictly to ensure your safety . . .”

Intertwining with his voice were numerous others, all unsure or annoyed:

“Could he have gotten into another shuttle?”

JESSE GORDON

“Maybe she drove him a few miles and dropped him off before the checkpoint.”

“I don’t trust the cat-woman.”

“Do *you* want to take her in and maybe risk losing an arm or a leg in the process?”

“I, er, don’t see what good that would do anyhow. He’s just not here.”

12 . DK

Sometimes it seemed like the only world that was real was the one stored in his mind.

Storm was vaguely aware of his physical surroundings, the vibrations of the shuttle, the echo of cars passing in the avenue, but his consciousness was caught in a bubble that was submerged just beneath the flow of one stream in a billion. Autostasis, sleep, dreaming—call it what you will; it was the haven of the mind, and Storm found himself once again retreading the outward loops of his travels across time and space

* * *

“I’m *not* a chaser.”

“Okay then, Mr. Anderson. If that’s the case, please explain how it’s possible that I’m standing here talking to a living, breathing person rather than a hunk of barbecued meat.”

They’d been over the matter at least a dozen times, and still Storm had no idea what it was Gareth wanted him to admit. *Six hours*, he thought to himself. *Six hours sitting in an uncomfortable chair in the bowels of some Godforsaken police station, the knockout drugs only beginning to*

wear off . . . and a jerk-off Patrolman who hasn't gotten laid in five years, treating me like I'm a fucking time chaser. Whose side is the Patrol on anyway?

Gareth slowly paced the length of the room, his hands clasped behind his back, his head tilted upward as if reading his lines from a teleprompter. "Mr. Anderson . . . I grow tired of these lengthy silences."

"I don't have anything to say," Storm replied, rolling his head around his shoulders, which had begun to tighten up over the last hour or so. "I don't know what you want me to say that I haven't already said or that you haven't already taken from my head with your drugs."

"You're taking this rather lightly, aren't you?"

"No. I'm just tired. I want to go home. I want to forget we ever met."

For the first time since their meeting, Gareth turned and faced Storm, actually *faced* him, his eyes making contact with Storm's. "Then I suggest you start cooperating."

"I've *been* cooperating—"

"How did you do it, then?"

"Do what?"

"Don't play dumb, damn it!" Gareth slammed his fist into the wall.

"I'm not playing dumb!" Storm exclaimed. "Corrupted memory cards, a crossed stream, bad wiring in the helm— isn't this stuff you guys are supposed to be taking care of? And if I was a chaser out to screw with your precious streams, don't you think it would have shown up in the database by now?"

"Maybe. Or maybe you're still screwing around, waiting

for a specific point in time when it's more efficient to make your move. It would be foolish to assume our drugs are infallible. Gecko soldiers can and have been trained to suppress any memory of their mission objective until they reach a point of activation where they activate the appropriate mental trigger. Maybe you've been hanging out with one too many of the fundamentalists and you're convinced it's your job to plant a bomb at Patrol HQ—at which point it's just a little too late to care that old Gareth felt sorry for a pretty-faced neophyte with a far-fetched story.”

Storm swore under his breath. “I get a lawyer. I want my fucking lawyer.”

“Fine, if you want to go that route.” Gareth was obviously having a tough time controlling his temper. “It won't make any difference in front of the United Council. You give us as little information as you've given and you're considered a hands-down security threat.”

“Fine.” *Anything to get out of this room, to get away from you.*

Gareth paused for a moment, on the verge of saying something else but instead only studying Storm curiously. After a moment, he sighed and straightened, heading for the exit. “Have it your way. Effective immediately, you will be transferred to a temporary holding cell at Patrol Headquarters. According to law you have the right to a state-appointed lawyer who will represent you before the UC, etc., etc. Have a good day.” His monotonous, half-assed speech was cut off as the door slid shut.

What a total and complete asshole, Storm thought, at a loss as to how Gareth held down his job with any amount

of dignity. He tried welling up as much anger as he could, but he was nevertheless scared out of his mind. Facing the UC was serious business. Only the bad boys went there: political misfits, murderers, terrorists . . . and time chasers—and everyone in the building seemed to think Storm belonged to the latter most group.

Was everyone in this stream completely insane?

* * *

Storm had his sight knocked out temporarily (despite his protest) as he was transported to Time Patrol Headquarters. It was a quick jolt to the temples, not particularly painful, but extremely discomfoting nonetheless. Afterward, he was handcuffed and seated alone in the passenger compartment of a police shuttle. Only his thoughts provided companionship during the brief journey.

Upon reaching his undisclosed destination, he was herded outside and up a short ramp. He could only imagine what the place looked like; bits of imagery, spawned by the sound of unhindered wind, flickered through his mind. Otherwise, there was total silence.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders, stopping him about fifteen steps up the ramp. An electronic beep sounded off to his right as one of the officers punched in a clearance code of some kind. Momentarily, there was a mechanical swish—a door opening. He was guided inside, then made to stop again. From the way gravity seemed to reverse itself, he realized that they were in an elevator. His brain caught on and he was able to reorient himself

TIME CHASER

quickly so that he didn't stumble. The sensation was familiar—where had he felt this before?

The National Museum of Astronomy. Artificial gravity. He'd visited earlier in the year with Trudie. *We must be aboard a space station*, he thought. *Heavy stuff. Only the science research labs and the Earth Embassy are worth the money to keep up here. I am so fucked . . .*

It was a ten minute walk through a maze of corridors and numerous checkpoints before the officers brought him to a stop in some nameless office where he was processed like a bit of cargo.

"Delivery," said the officer on Storm's right. "Found him in some guy's apartment down in San Fran."

Jason . . . poor Jason. "What's going to happen to me?" Storm asked, unaware that it was his own voice escaping his lips.

He got no response.

"Let's see . . . Storm Anderson. Born November 10, 2279. No criminal record . . ."

That's right, thought Storm as his sightless eyes blinked at nothing. *No criminal record—so why am I being put through all this shit?*

His forehead was stamped and they led him to the holding area.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" he asked.

"Until the foreman can review your case."

"What case? I'm at East Cedar one minute, and the next I'm waking up in the middle of the ghetto. How the hell is *that* a case?"

"Don't make this harder on yourself, Mr. Anderson."

“What about the eyes thing?” he asked as he heard the buzz of a security field being deactivated. He was pushed inside his cell faster than he would have liked, and stumbled a bit, reaching out with his arm to steady himself against the wall. When the cell was sealed again and the officers hadn’t answered, Storm turned around and started making his way back towards the entrance. “Look, I want to know what the hell is going on! I want my lawyer! How long is this going to take?”

“As long as it takes. Now pipe down.”

He heard the officers leaving, then, and knew it was pointless to try getting anything more out of them.

With a frustrated sigh, he leaned back against the wall and rubbed his face. *What the hell am I going to do now?* He blinked a few times, but couldn’t tell yet if his vision was returning. He’d been told it was only temporary, but temporary meant nothing when he was right in the middle of trying to get around with one of his senses handicapped.

“911. Is that a joke?”

Storm flinched. He’d been unaware there was anyone else with him in the cell. Suddenly his anxiety flared. To be alone in a cell with someone he couldn’t see, not even sure if that person was the only other prisoner in the cell—the not-knowing was infuriating.

“Sorry?” Storm replied, his voice unsteady. He straightened somewhat.

“The ID number on your head. SA-00X-911.”

“Oh. Is that what that is . . . ?”

“Yes. You are young to be in here.”

TIME CHASER

“How’s that?” Storm tried to play off his fear as disinterest. He slid his back down along the wall so that he sat with his arms propped on his knees and listened, studying the voice, trying to piece together a face to match the sound.

“Most people who tamper with time do so because they do not like where it is taking them. For humans, usually people shifting from youth to middle life. They see the beginnings of gray hair, wrinkles, sagging skin, and they do not like it. They do not want to die.” A shuffling as whoever it was got off his bunk and approached Storm. “You young ones, though, I have not seen one of you around here in a long while.”

A pause. Storm smelled something like mint—heavy, earthy. He began to speculate as to what species his new cell mate was.

“My name is DK.”

A serpentine hand took hold of Storm’s. He shook it, feeling scaly skin, unnatural for any human, brushing against his palm. “I’m Storm.”

“Hello, Storm. Welcome to The Hole.” DK let go and settled himself down beside his new companion. “There is not much more to do here than what we are doing right now.”

That was hardly reassuring. “How long have you been in here?”

“Three months.”

Three months! Was that what the Patrol considered *temporary* confinement? “Three months?” he echoed.

“Yes, and I am considered a newcomer. Some have been

in captivity for nearly a year.”

Storm was afraid to ask, but did so anyway: “What for?”

DK laughed. “Same as you: for messing with time. For accidentally figuring out the truth for ourselves. You see, no one is supposed to know about the freedom of streaming. It is the human government’s most precious method of control. When people find out, the government makes a point of catching them before they tell, and making them disappear. For good. They have a yearly schedule. They send a shipload of us ‘annoyances’ out to a labor camp in some corner of the galaxy nobody has ever heard of. They keep us swept under the carpet.”

“But I never messed with time. I was in a fucking accident, a *mistake*. I’m a victim.”

“It does not matter. You have jumped streams, right? And chances are you did it against the norm.”

Storm bit his lip. “They say the helm I was in was damaged, that I crossed over on accident and without mechanical help. Like I’m some fucking super-spiritual Gecko.”

DK chuckled again. “Is there something wrong with my kind?”

“Oh . . . sorry,” said Storm, cheeks ablaze.

“I understand. It is not your fault your leaders have given you false information. But it does not matter to the Patrol. You have discovered a breach in the system, and as such you are a liability. For example, what if one day you became unhappy and decided to blackmail your government?

“No, you and I are as good as gone. What happens next depends on how difficult you are, and on what Foreman

TIME CHASER

Ketch decides. If you are a painful nuisance, he will simply keep you in a cell like this for the rest of your life, which could be quite a long, long time considering the effects of free-form jumping on human DNA. However, if you get along well you will receive a better option: life in solitude. You look strong, with enough of a body to do some good hard physical work and perhaps enough of a brain to keep your mouth shut. Yes, they will keep you around because there is a shortage of extraterrestrial labor on the new stations going up here and there. As long as we keep to ourselves and do what is told to us, we are allowed to live.”

I should be so lucky, thought Storm, biting his lip. *I'll never see Jason or Trudie or anyone else again at this rate.* He felt the urge to cry well up within him stronger than it had ever been since he was a boy, but he held back, held onto hope. *No. There's got to be another way. You don't know what's going to happen yet.*

He cleared his throat. “So what's this DNA shit you're talking about? I've never heard of it.”

A snicker from DK. “Of course not. You do not think that if everyone knew the truth they would listen to a single word their government tells them? No, control is keeping the masses ignorant so the Elites can have whatever they want, whenever they want it. Because everyone has a birth stream, a series of predefined events leading from the cradle to the grave. If you stay in your stream, your life is as predictable as a history book timeline. If you break free of your stream, you are no longer governed by fate or time. Your body stops aging, your mind clears and projects itself outward . . . you become freed. Free from the man-

made ritual of mortality.”

“That’s not scientifically possible,” Storm said.

“Of course it is. For years scientists have pondered the problem. The honest ones, at least. Your species’ cells were designed to last for thousands of years—so why don’t they? Why does the human body age and die after only a century? It is time. An energy force that to this day has no means of being accurately measured besides the number of times a planet revolves around its sun, or the number of gray hairs growing on your head, or the number of wrinkles in your face. Time is an explosion streaming outward from the center of our galaxy, a gift from God that is currently being mismanaged by Elites who desire nothing more than power and eternity for themselves.”

“Elites?”

“Yes. Those who have studied and practiced the nuances of time and space so as to be able to interact with its energy directly. They are the ultimate time chasers, being able to jump from one stream to another without using modern technology. They can do what you did a thousand times over, whenever and wherever they want. Most have the wisdom that comes with such discipline to know what to do with themselves—but there are a few who are in high places of power who use their abilities to bully others. That is why most citizens like us are stuck with our mortal lives. Imagine if everyone was immortal. There would be no Elites and no average-folk. Every creature would be the same. No good and no evil.”

“Ah. I see.” Storm had to pause for a moment, for his head was spinning (as much from the blindness as from

the concepts being presented). “What’d you say you’re in here for again?”

“Enjoying the view,” DK said, laughing. “I never stick to one thing much, so I jump from stream to stream every so often to keep myself busy—but the Patrol has caught up with me. Now it is time for me to . . . how do you say? Rest on my laurels. It is not so bad anyway, to be moving from station to station. It is not paradise, but it is not too bad either. There is a lot of work involved, but they feed you well, and it is better than death, because then there is nothing, right? As long as I am alive, there is the chance of escape, even if it is a really small chance.”

That may have been, but Storm didn’t relish the idea of having to spend the rest of his life as a prisoner—even if he spent it on a minimum-security prison station with all the conjugal babes he could ever want. He blinked into (what was for him) the darkness and tried to reason with the fears in his head, tried to really think about the situation and how the UCC would judge his case. For the millionth time since his accident, he found himself thinking about the stories and rumors, the so-called first-hand accounts from people who had, for whatever reason, attempted to break free of their birth streams and who had been hunted by the Patrol—hunted and swept under the carpet, out of the public eye. Even people who’d inadvertently broken the rules and been victimized by the government. Now it was all too real. *People like me don’t matter. They’re going to have their way and there’s nothing I can do about it.*

DK must have read his expression. Storm heard him sigh as he got up and returned to whatever part of the cell

he'd been in before Storm's arrival. "Take my advice, Storm. Release your old life. They will take it from you anyhow. This is where you are now. Think about it. Deal with it."

Storm didn't answer. He merely stared out at nothing and listened to the faint sound of DK's videobox as it broadcast a boxing match. Even after lights out, after his companion had gone to sleep, Storm remained where he was, growing tired and developing a backache, but trying to ignore it all.

Trying to ignore his fear.

* * *

At some point in the middle of the night, his sight returned. He blinked at his dimmed surroundings, seeing the cell for the first time by way of the faint security bar which glowed along the upper perimeter of the compartment, where the walls met the ceiling. There was a bunk in one corner, a urinal in the other, a sealed entranceway at his right, and not much else. DK slept sprawled on the bottom bunk. His body was considerably more massive than a well-built, fully-grown human male's, with muscles that looked to be the result of careful cultivation. He wore large bracelets on his wrists and ankles—motion inhibitors.

Storm rearranged himself into a slightly more comfortable position—but not too comfortable, for he didn't want to sleep soundly in his present situation. He kept his eyes halfway open for the remainder of the night, studying the

TIME CHASER

cell (which seemed to be foolproof), drifting in and out of sleep, and just when he was about to nod off for good, the cell door swished open and a guard nudged him with his foot.

“On your feet, Anderson. Time to go.”

13 . UCC HEARING

It was nearing sunset when Annah told the driver to stop at a motel. Immediately, she jumped out of the shuttle and ran to the rear, pulling off the tarp. The driver (a private farmer) helped excavated Storm's comatose body, buried deep in layers of burlap, and carried him into the room, where he laid Storm on the bed.

"He's so cold," Annah remarked. Storm's body was limp, lifeless, and covered with a sheen of sweat, matting his hair and trickling down his skin.

He looks dead, she thought.

She thanked the farmer for the lift and left the room, then, making her way quickly to the drugstore across the street. She remembered what Storm had told her back in Great Hope: *Find a pharmacy, buy some kind of stimulant and inject it in my arm. If I don't come around within a couple minutes, slap me, hit me, yell at me . . . that should do the trick.*

She searched the shelves until she found an insulin kit and a suitable stimulant. Upon purchasing the items, she hurried back to the motel room and, with shaking hands, fumbled open the bottle of medication. She dispensed some into the syringe, then pulled up Storm's sleeve and gave him a jab in the arm.

TIME CHASER

Slowly but surely, life came back to Storm's body. It started with faint breath, then color to the skin and, lastly, a hoarse coughing fit as his respiratory system came into full swing again. The cough turned to tremors followed by incoherent mumbling.

"It's okay," Annah said, gathering him in her arms. "It's over. We're outside the city."

With his arms quivering and his teeth chattering, Storm reached out and grasped her wrist, holding her tight as he did his best to speak. "W-we . . . d-did it. N-n-nearly there . . . now."

"Yeah," Annah replied. "Smooth sailing from here."

Her words were lost; though now out of autostasis, Storm had fallen asleep.

* * *

Andrew Benson was hardly the lawyer Storm had expected. The man resembled a nervous penguin: he was squat, overweight, balding—he had nothing of the charisma of someone who was supposed to stand up to some of the most fearsome judges known to humankind.

Storm met with him as he was being hustled into a shuttle bound for the UCC.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Anderson," Benson panted, sweating as if he'd just run a mile uphill. He wiped the moisture from his face with a handkerchief. "I'll be representing you during today's hearing."

Storm sat slumped on his end of the seat. It was difficult for him to keep a decent posture with the heavy MI

bracelets on his wrists and ankles. He'd been dressed in a suit and tie for his court date—the tailor had laughed while fitting him, saying something like, “The suit and tie is a side-step. Count on your next one being a one-piece, and bright orange, at that.”

Charming fellow, Storm had thought. With frankness like that, no wonder he works for the Patrol and not for Sears.

The shuttle launched promptly (apparently, due process was on a tight schedule these days).

Storm turned slightly in his seat and scrutinized his lawyer. “Well?” he grunted.

“Pardon?”

“What’s the sentence these days for falling out of your chair at a time mall?”

Benson tried to put on his most comforting expression as he gripped his briefcase with whitened knuckles. Apparently, he didn’t do well on extraterrestrial trips. “I’m not going to lie to you. The Patrol takes security very seriously, right down to the smallest ‘accident’. You have to understand that in these cases a mouse getting lost in an adjacent stream is just as bad as Napoleon getting a time machine for his birthday.”

“It was an accident. You can tell them that, right?”

“Mr. Anderson, I will do everything in my power to help you. I’m just trying to make sure you keep yourself grounded. We can’t expect the impossible. You have to understand, the slightest security breach could open the doorway to much more complicated things—”

“We’ve already been over that. But how the hell is what

happened to me a security breach?”

“In leaving your own birth stream, you’ve invariably entered someone else’s, which infringes upon his or her personal rights—”

“So why not just send me back to my own stream?”

“It’s not that simple—”

“No shit.” Storm looked away.

“I’m sorry, Storm. Can I call you Storm? I’d prefer to—”

“Whatever.” Storm’s gaze held the tapestry of stars beyond the window. *Might as well get a good view out of all this.*

“Well . . .” Benson continued after a moment’s silence. “Let’s start with that, then. Let’s work on making the Council see things from our point of view. Convince them that there’s nothing to worry about.”

Brilliant notion, you being a lawyer and all. “All I want is to get back home to my apartment, my job, my friends.” Storm turned finally to face Benson. “Can you do that for me?”

Now it was Benson’s turn to stare out the window. “Let’s hope for the best.”

* * *

The UCC had been designed with power in mind—power on the side of the law, not the citizen. It was the single largest structure on the moon besides the sports dome, and it was the most intimidating. A panel of judges sat at the head of the domed courtroom hall, and as Storm entered, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread.

It was the kind of place that made one think: *I am an insect. This is their picnic. Chances are the only attention they'll pay me is enough to rid themselves of my presence.*

"Must be a slow day," Benson muttered, gesturing at the patches of people—human and otherwise—sitting in the stadium-sized spectator tier.

It was just like in the news feeds.

"Yeah . . . right," Storm breathed, taking his seat. He turned to Benson, who was typing furiously in his notebook. "So how is this going to work?"

Benson didn't look up as he answered (further adding to Storm's sense of doom). "Well, I'll be presenting your case in a few moments. I'll state the facts, which will be reviewed amongst the panel members, who will advise the judge on whether or not we move on to trial. Most likely, we'll have this whole thing behind us within a few minutes."

Storm was incredulous. "A few *minutes*?"

"The UCC is very efficient. One way or another, they'll let you know what they think. There's no beating around the bush."

"What about the trial? And a jury?"

"Again, if it's deemed appropriate by the panel . . ."

Garbage in, garbage out, thought Storm, leaning against the metallic table he and Benson shared (along with a spare Patrol officer). For a moment he stared out at the panel members as they situated themselves in their seats, all lined up side by side on a high platform. Most noticeable was one gentleman who sat near the center of the panel, right above the UCC emblem. He was speaking with

TIME CHASER

the judge about something and casting brief glances down at Storm. Unlike the other panel members, he wore an admiral's uniform and had long white hair tied in a tail. It was obvious he was someone important since he was allowed to deviate from the dress code as such. Then again, his face could have done the trick by itself. Cold and hawkish, with dark eyebrows sweeping down over piercing eyes; even from where Storm sat it was apparent this was the sort of man you didn't want to cross under the wrong circumstances.

"Who's the evil sorcerer-looking guy?" Storm asked, recognizing the face but not the name.

Looking up briefly, Benson made a face—something bordering on terror. "That's Foreman Ketch. He's one of the higher-ups. An admiral or ambassador or something like that. Sometimes he stops by a hearing to preside over things, but he's not part of the actual process."

Just then, a klaxon sounded, and any idle conversations within the hall came to an abrupt halt. Benson stopped doodling in his notebook and looked up as a pair of remote camera modules floated over to focus on their table. Nearer to the platform, two more modules took up their places before the sedate-looking council members.

The hearing began.

"The United Council recognizes case number 0237439-B: Storm Anderson, represented by Andrew Benson. Mr. Benson, please address the panel now."

Storm watched with a mixture of curiosity and dread as Benson left the table and walked out onto a circular platform, which levitated (at his command) until he was face-

to-face with the panel. A spotlight from above shown down on him, presumably for the video cameras. The effect was quite dramatic—more of a stage play than a council hearing.

The judge cleared his throat as, beside him, Ketch observed with his hands clasped beneath his chin.

“Mr. Benson. On the night of June 18, 2304, your client visited the East Cedar Time Mall for a routine streaming session, during which time he, intentionally or by accident, left his birth stream. Is this information correct?”

Benson cleared his throat. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“Is your client aware of the implications, legal and otherwise, of such an event?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“How does your client plead?”

“Not guilty.”

“Please continue, then.”

Another fit of phlegm and Benson continued (by now his brow had begun to glisten with tiny beads of sweat): “Your Honor, I would like to assure the panel that the incident in question is nothing more than an accident. My client’s intent was not to deceive or test the law in any way. I would like to suggest that the fault does not lie with Mr. Anderson but with East Cedar’s equipment.”

“Your evidence to support this?”

Tapping the controls of his platform, Benson floated up to the judge and handed him a data card. “I present to the panel a surveillance video taken on the night of the incident.”

The judge took the card and inserted it into his per-

sonal terminal as Benson reclaimed his former position several feet back from the panel. Momentarily, all the council members' terminals came to life as they reviewed the footage and discussed it amongst each other. Storm, below, watched and waited, noting that Foreman Ketch was eyeing him instead of the footage.

"Mr. Benson," the judge said after a few minutes' discussion. "Once in his current stream, did your client make any attempt to immediately notify the authorities as to what had happened?"

"Er, no, not immediately, Your Honor, but let me stress the fact that my client was distraught—"

"Is your client aware that it is a felony to conceal inter-stream activity? Why didn't Mr. Anderson simply notify the authorities?"

Benson didn't answer right away, but rather looked like he was losing a game of poker. He bit his lip nervously before replying: "Your Honor, I would like to suggest further investigation of this case by a third party, as the exact cause of my client's accident has obviously not yet been determined."

A moment of brief discussion between the council members, then, "Very well. The Council will appoint an investigative agent to study the case. In the meantime, Mr. Anderson will be required to serve time in a court-appointed community service program in order to pay off the damages inhered by the possible misuse of the East Cedar Mall's equipment, as it has not been ascertained which party is guilty. We will meet again when proper evidence is presented to us through the third party agent. Mr. Benson,

you are dismissed.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.”

With a fair amount of haste, Benson bowed away and returned to where Storm was half standing, half sitting, not sure if he should be disappointed, outraged or both.

“That was it?” Storm asked incredulously as the security guard nudged him in the direction of the exit.

With a less-than-comforting shrug, Benson nodded as he gathered his things. “You’re not actually being charged with anything, so that’s a plus for now. On the bright side, the council is willing to work with us.”

Storm’s voice rose a notch, his anger winning out over his disappointment. “So this means I’m guilty until they can prove otherwise?” When Benson didn’t answer, Storm’s mood only darkened. “What the hell kind of lawyer are you?”

The answer was, of course, that Benson was the kind of lawyer who was satisfied enough with his meager life to go on living off the government payroll as his client was dragged away into oblivion.

As he caught his last glimpse of the Council courtroom, Storm realized there were no rules to the galaxy anymore, no order—no justice. DK had been right: Whoever had the power used it as they pleased, and whoever didn’t either kept to themselves (if they were smart) or got swept under the carpet.

And I sure as hell don’t have any power.

His former life had come to an end.

14 . MOON 608

Though no one came right out and stated it officially, Storm knew he'd been sentenced to a lifetime of labor on an "undisclosed" moon (presumably near the edge of the human sector, since the trip there took roughly three days without hyper-travel), some hunk of rock and ice that had been converted into a manufacturing facility where "criminal" workers were gathered to build and maintain spacecraft components, planetary development tools, and the like. The facility itself was dull and heavy, a labyrinth of metallic domes glinting diminutively in the indigo-hued air beneath an artificial satellite which orbited like a sore in the sky.

The first day was hell. Storm was herded (along with several dozen other newly-arrived convicts) off the shuttle and into a main lobby, where assistant drones approached each prisoner and performed the chore of undressing and disinfecting the new arrivals. Along the perimeter, guards equipped with heavy laser rifles observed without expression.

The process of disinfecting was not pleasant and involved the removal of all body hair, from head to toe (save for minor important bits such as eyelashes and eyebrows). At the touch of a specific instrument, Storm was engulfed

in what felt like a cloud of microscopic razorblades for a moment as all the follicles in his skin died. His groin clenched involuntarily as the process rendered his genital sterile—had it not been for the drone’s firm clamps holding him around the arms and shoulders, he would have convulsed and possibly fallen forward onto the floor.

One more buzz from the drone and suddenly the pain became an uncertain tingling as small nanites crept along his limbs and torso, spewing out a gelatinous substance that spread rapidly over his body and formed into a bright orange skinsuit that had his ID number printed on chest and back—organic clothing, a manmade extension of his own skin, molded to fit his body so that there were no folds, no creases in which weapons could be hidden.

The entire process took no more than a minute. There was hardly any time for Storm to be concerned about what was happening until he stood in line, wrists chained to a group of three other individuals (one man, two women), before a door marked “Orientation.” Once all prisoners had been conditioned, the door swished open and the guards ushered them into a small auditorium with bare, windowless, dark gray walls. Everyone was seated, and silence was called for, though the majority of the people present were already quiet as they tried to adjust to the metallic taste in their mouths.

As Storm took his seat, he glanced quickly at his companions. The man was tall, fit, and wore a cold expression, as if he’d done hard time elsewhere prior to his being brought here. One of the women was Asian, full-figured—very attractive save for a rather nasty scar that ran across

her cheek. The other woman was Caucasian, pale and slightly malnourished looking. Through her form-fitting skinsuit he saw her ribs and pelvis projecting themselves almost obscenely beneath her skin. She had no breasts.

She returned his gaze briefly, an odd sort of recognition evident in her expression. Like everyone else present, her age was evasive; she could have been sixteen, she could have been thirty. There was youth and maturity in her, and neither quality seemed to prevail.

(Storm wondered if, since leaving his own stream, he was exhibiting the same manifestations of ambiguous youth.)

Momentarily, a man dressed in a general's uniform entered the room and took the podium. He was middle-aged, judging by his whitened hair and beard, but in remarkable physical condition, as if he'd never left the bulk and height of his youth behind. He also had an ironclad expression on his face, the kind of facial mold that said, "I've seen the Outer Wars firsthand and lived to tell about it; I've been left for dead in Siberia with nothing more than a knife and a pack of chewing gum, and here I stand before you, alive and well. Anyone here with more impressive credentials, please, stand and I will break your neck."

There was ample reason to believe that Storm wasn't the only one who suddenly stopped worrying about not having any pubic hair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the general said, smirking slightly as any man who'd done his sort of work for many years would have. "Allow me to welcome you to your new home. I am General Oro, your new unquestioned master.

From this moment on, you are the property of the Ken-Dyne Manufacturing Plant, which means that you belong to *me*. Your sole purpose is to aid in the manufacturing of materials for the Galactic Development Alliance. In exchange for said duties, you will be allowed to keep your lives.

“The rules here are simple. Work hard and you will find things bearable, maybe even enjoyable. Misbehave, and you will be tossed out the nearest airlock. No excuses, including inability to work, since our medical drones can pretty much fix anything short of a severed head. You will either grow accustomed to the work, grow strong, or you will die. Either way, at the end of the day, I will think no more of you than I did the day before.” A pause as Oro glanced at his wristwatch. Then: “It’s 1300 hours, which means you still have quite awhile before your bedtime. I think you’ll find plenty to keep you busy until then. You will be assigned a position in our rotating group roster. Don’t get too attached to anyone or anything or you’ll only make your stay here more inconvenient than it really is.

“Lastly, remember this: When you’re not working, you’re sleeping. When you’re not sleeping you’re working. I am a man tolerant of those two activities, nothing more. Good day.”

Oro left the podium, his guards stepping in to handle the rest.

“911,” one said, addressing Storm. “You are appointed ringmaster of your group. At the end of your shift, it will be your duty to make sure the others in your group make the best of their shower time before lights out. It will also

TIME CHASER

be your duty to make sure they are awake and ready in time when the next shift begins at 0600. Understood?”

Storm nodded as he and the others were hustled onward.

Evidently, time was of the essence, even to those for whom it no longer had meaning.

* * *

Oro liked to shake things up from the start. He assigned Storm's group to one of the mines where fresh mineral deposits had to be extracted and processed for use in the manufacturing plant. Their instructor was female, a woman named Camie—though she was built just as strong as any man who'd spent a handful of years at hard labor. More surprisingly, she was a prisoner herself, for she was hairless and wore her ID number upon both her skinsuit and forehead.

“This isn't a hard job,” she said, addressing Storm's group. “A family of baboons could easily capture these ganymite deposits. Unfortunately, since baboons don't do well in extraterrestrial environments, we'll have to use the next best thing.” She paused for a moment. Nobody laughed. “Now then. Let's get down to it. Follow me, and don't stick your hand through the forcefields unless you want to lose it.”

They took an elevator down into the heart of the hazy mine, where Camie instructed everyone to hold their hands up above their heads as she fetched a remote control from her waist pouch. At the click of a button, everyone's

handcuffs morphed into MI bracelets.

“Everyone will need an oxygen mask and a sonic drill,” Camie said, handing out the equipment. “Your cuffs are temporarily being replaced by the MI bracelets, which will allow you to move pretty freely around inanimate objects—but *only* inanimate objects. Not people. Try anything funny and you’ll get juiced so sharply you’ll forget how many fingers and toes you have.”

As he donned his mask and drill, Storm caught a few other prisoners giving Camie’s remote control envious glances. Nobody, however, looked as if they were scheming to steal it just yet, for Camie was obviously someone to reckon with. Her skinsuit revealed a torso that was uncommonly muscular—more so than Storm had first realized. It would take someone with the same brawn to even *challenge* her . . . unless she was outrageously stupid in some mental way. But no, Storm’s thoughts weren’t that far ahead. He could ponder escape, but had no idea where he would escape *to*. The mining complex appeared to be a network of narrow tunnels surrounded by an intolerable atmosphere, impossible to traverse on foot. There would be no old-fashioned Earth-style jail-breaking around here.

Besides these formidable obstacles, Storm was still in shock over his situation. It was almost like sleepwalking: following his team down into a mining vault, listening distantly to what Camie had to say about the drills, then letting his body take over as the real work began.

Ganymite was basically extracted in large chunks from the cavern walls, delivered to the receptacles, which processed the ore into refined chunks which had to be manu-

ally loaded onto wagons for delivery to the mineral refinery. After three hours of drilling and lifting—wanting to wipe the sweat from his brow, forgetting about the facial mask and having to let it soak his face, burn his eyes—he was dog-tired.

Apparently, so was another of the prisoners, a beefy, swollen-looking man who looked as if he had never been accustomed to physical labor of any kind. His body bulged and sagged obviously beneath the material of his suit as he leaned against his drill and tried to defog his mask, which seemed to be malfunctioning. After a moment, one of the rifled guards approached him. Everyone else watched half-heartedly, but kept to their work.

“LT-26C-341,” asked the guard, calling the prisoner by ID number. “Why have you stopped working?”

LT looked up, facial expression hidden by the condensation on his mask. “Why the fuck do you think?”

“Inappropriate language is not allowed. Correct yourself immediately or you will be disciplined.”

“This is bullshit,” LT responded harshly, letting his drill fall to the ground. “I can’t see a damned thing. How do you expect me to work under these conditions?”

The guard ignored the question and grabbed LT by the head, evidently intent on correcting his behavior before anything else. “You have been warned, LT-26C-341.” Immediately, a stream of nanites began to flow from the guard’s fingers and into LT’s ears. He squirmed and kicked for a moment, but the guard didn’t seem to feel any of it, and suddenly LT screamed, his limbs convulsing. It all happened very quickly. After a moment, he quieted, and the

guard let go as he returned to his work, all desire to complain gone. From where Storm watched, it looked like blood was leaking from his ears.

"There is always an example," muttered someone behind Storm. He turned and saw a taller man standing beside him, working steadily at the rocky wall. The details that shown through his face mask indicated he was not human—

"DK?" Storm hissed.

DK nodded. "Storm. Hello again." He smiled briefly, then nodded in LT's direction. "Every new shipload and Oro has dinner theater performed, to make sure everyone understands there is no fooling around on the job."

Storm glanced again at LT, who seemed to be quite content despite his recent ordeal. "What did they do to LT-what's-his-name?"

"Only what he has been programmed for. My guess is that he is an android, like most of the guards. They do not typically treat humanoids like that, but they want you to *believe* they do."

"How do you know?"

"I have never seen one without his helmet, but the same fat man complains about his mask not working, and he gets corrected every time, and then I never see him again . . . until the next time. It is obvious, I think."

"Figures," Storm muttered.

"They must keep us in line. They do not treat us bad here, but they want us to know they would, if necessary."

DK fell silent as a guard passed their way. It was hard to believe it was a machine, the way it walked just like a hu-

man. Storm hadn't seen many of those on Earth, thanks to human rights activists—though it did make more sense to keep androids out where the work was tough, the environment unforgiving.

Once the guard had passed, Storm whispered, "If LT had been human, what would have happened to him?"

"Brainwashing, though I have not seen it much since people prefer the work over losing their will to live. The android sends in a fleet of nanotech bugs to reorganize your braincells—like programming a computer, yes? Uploading a new program, flushing out or deleting unnecessary files. They have bugs for everything here. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the medicine we take. Every part of our lives here is controlled by computer."

Storm nodded, falling silent as he knocked a chunk out of the wall and hefted it in his arms. *What a way to live*, he thought. *Your head hollowed out, only the bare necessities there to keep you working as long as your body lives.*

On Earth, there was always the rumor that nanotech was being misused in such a fashion. However, the government was good at hiding its secrets, and that sort of thing was just another entry on the What-If? list. Nevertheless, how many other prisons in the galaxy were using the same technology to keep their inmates in line?

The message was clear: do what you're told or the bugs will eat your brain.

* * *

Downtime came just when Storm thought he would have

to try sleeping standing up while simultaneously operating his drill. Camie called out for everyone to return their equipment and head for the lift. She reinstated everyone's shackles as the guards began reorganizing the prisoners back into groups.

"See you tomorrow," DK said, brushing past Storm, who looked up briefly and caught sight of his scaly, pseudo-human face—set in a mischievous smirk. He wondered if DK always looked like that.

Once everyone had been accounted for, Camie brought the group back up to ground level and sent them off to their respective bunkers, which were unisex. Storm's co-workers were also his cellmates.

"Lights out in thirty minutes," said the guard as he ushered Storm's group into their cell. There was a pair of bunks, and a small shower compartment and toilet in the back. The door swished shut and a hum filled the room. Storm felt his skin tingling and looked down to see his MIs dissolving, along with the entirety of his skinsuit. He glimpsed the tiny nanites trickling down between his toes and into the grated floor. Looking up, he saw his companions were equally bare.

There were no bedclothes.

Only the first few moments of seeing each other naked was uncomfortable, for the day's work had taken its toll. A shower and a good night's rest was all anyone cared about at this point. Storm's male cellmate didn't bother to introduce himself; he merely availed himself of the shower. Storm decided to call him by the first two letters of his ID number: HP. The Asian woman, whose ID number started

TIME CHASER

with NC, made it clear she was next in line, while JT (the two-pounds-away-from-anorexia girl) was third. Nobody spoke to each other where motions could convey the necessary thoughts.

When it was Storm's turn, he stepped onto the mat, leaned against the wall, and tapped the controls, encasing himself in the spray, which began to work the sweat and grime from his skin. A small mirror had been set into the wall, and for the first time since coming here, he was able to see what he looked like. The reflection was a bit shocking. Across his forehead, the permanent markings that read, "SA-00X-911" reminded him of a price tag. He looked down at his groin, where his penis—still impressive despite its bare state—hung limp, hairless, almost dead. He wondered if the impotence was permanent.

He finished his shower and crawled into bed, where he fell asleep instantly.

15 . man made of screens

Via a secure communications channel, unbeknown to anyone but those who created it:

Em_zayers: Knock-knock.

2max1176: Who's there?

Em_zayers: Wouldn't *you* like to know?

2max1176: Answering a question with another question, Gregori? Do you still think you are a poet? Or has the artificial gravity gone to your head?

Em_zayers: A little of both.

2max1176: So how are things on your side of the rock?

Em_zayers: Intolerable, as always. Oro's roster system is going to be the death of me. Last month I exceeded my quota of orders processed and was consequently promoted another level. Now I'm allowed a corner "office," if you can call it that, and a larger quota during work shifts.

2max1176: Poor Gregori. Gods forbid you should be forced to spend your waking hours sitting behind a desk while I and the rest of the musclebound grunts in the manufacturing sector have to break our backs hauling spaceship guts around the warehouse all day.

Em_zayers: I do take care of you, don't I?

TIME CHASER

2max1176: Of course. That is why we have a business partnership. So, what is on your mind?

Em_zayers: Time, DK. Time. Today I turn fifty. My life would otherwise be half over, were it not for my present physical condition.

2max1176: I will make you a cake.

Em_zayers: I do hope that is not a jest at my expense.

2max1176: Of course not. I am just playing with the fire, as usual.

Em_zayers: Indeed. I look back at our youthful days with quite some fondness. I will never be able to wrestle like that again. But I suppose it's the price paid by those who enter into dangerous partnerships without watching their backs.

2max1176: You are . . . what is the word for full of thought?

Em_zayers: Thoughtful. Philosophical.

2max1176: Yes.

Em_zayers: Why, so I am. Ages on this blasted moon, waiting patiently while my body turns to gel. It has brought about a newfound desire to see the outside world once again before I die. To escape Oro's prison before the prison of the flesh collapses around me.

2max1176: Do not talk like that. You are breaking my heart.

Em_zayers: There's no need to suppress that which brings distress. Too much time has passed since our last great scheme. At the very least, I would like to try once again before I relegate myself to infinity. What news have you of this year's prospective candidates?

2max1176: Funny you should ask now. It has been relatively quiet these last few years, but I have had the chance to meet a young human who has recently been stationed in the mining sector. He works obediently, has a good body, and he is very favorable with the females. He does not cause trouble, and he talks only to a small group of friends whom he has stood up for intensely during downtime brawls in the mines or recreational areas. Loyalty to the people he deems worthy. He is the kind of man who takes it seriously while the rest of us have lost our minds, yes?

Em_zayers: In other words, with the right influences, he's programmable?

2max1176: I would say yes. It may be harder than trying to hold your breath outside the dome, but he is a very good choice. He has power in him, like Camie, only I think there is more opportunity here. I will send you a photograph.

Em_zayers: What about assets?

2max1176: He has a circle of friends. A human woman named Jennie, and surprisingly, our friendly warden, Camie.

Em_zayers: Really now?

2max1176: Not outwardly, but there is a chemistry between them. They are both kindred spirits. Both of them are nice people sent here on accident. Besides that, it has most likely been a decade since Camie had sexual relations. I study humans closely, and I can tell when a female is considering a male in that way. She is too proud to admit it, but she wishes a relationship with

TIME CHASER

the newcomer.

Em_zayers: You're sure of all this, now?

2max1176: Very nearly. I will be studying further—you will visit us in the pub tomorrow, yes?

Em_zayers: Weather permitting.

2max1176: Silly Gregori.

* * *

Storm didn't think about sex at first. Initially, it was all work, sleep, work, sleep, and trying to get used to things in between. He and his cellmates adapted relatively quickly, though it was difficult. Early on, weeping in the darkness during downtime was commonplace, but gradually the pain and soreness of labor faded into the background as his accentuated muscles adjusted to their new workload, as his mind became more attuned to deeper thought. Somewhere along the way, he actually began considering his new home a tolerable hell. Eventually, even, he slipped into a sort of satisfied state, doing his work, talking on and off to DK or, more rarely, JT (who eventually admitted her first name was Jennie).

HP and NC paired up rather quickly, taking to rather uninhibited (and sometimes sadistic) coupling during the night. Though the pitch black darkness hid them from view, the sounds they made only reminded Storm of his own needs.

Jennie kept to herself at first, giving no indication whatsoever that she desired intimacy (or any other social interaction, for that matter) of any shape or form. In fact, she

was the *last* person Storm would have thought he would be sharing a bed with until one day, just before lights out, she (quite unexpectedly) made the request.

“You know how to do oral?” she asked, matter-of-factly as she stepped from the shower pad and folded her arms across her chest.

Storm was taken aback (despite the obvious intentions behind Oro’s pairing up male and female workers). His impression of Jennie had nothing sexual to it. Even now, with several months of lean muscle on her, she simply seemed too young, too frail.

Still, the procreative urge was evident—and to have someone, even Jennie

“Yeah,” he replied, his penis twitching ever so slightly.

“Okay then. After lights out.”

Jennie left him, climbed into her bunk and faced the wall in her usual manner. Despite the businesslike formality of her request, he found himself shamefully aroused at the thought of physical intimacy—even if it was to be strictly oral. Quickly, before he embarrassed himself, he got into bed and waited.

Eventually the cell plunged into darkness. Storm fidgeted, his heart racing madly, his engorged genital tingling in anticipation. He tried to think of Trudie, stuck in her wheelchair somewhere and waiting for him; he’d left her once, and now he’d done it again—indefinitely. She was dead to him now, a distant memory. Her and everyone else from his former life. It was incredibly depressing—and yet, in this moment, he was still unbelievably aroused, insatiably eager to find a biological release.

That's all it is, he told himself. A bodily function. There's no disease here, no pregnancy . . . all we have is a good-night fuck.

Mind swimming, senses reeling, he heard Jennie slip from her bunk, felt her climb onto his. He couldn't see in the darkness, but he could feel her motions as she moved between his legs, spread them apart and began lapping away at him. As she did this, she brushed his thighs and abdomen with her hands, massaging, tickling. In no time she had him writhing and biting his lip to keep from moaning. Modesty was pointless in such cramped quarters, especially since he'd already showered naked in front of his cellmates (and listened to their own sex play during nights), but he attempted it anyway. It wasn't easy, for Jennie's technique was extremely aggressive, and she didn't relent until after he'd jetted forcefully into her mouth—at which point the pleasure became unbearable and he let loose a low growl.

"My turn," Jennie hissed.

Storm sat up, leaned forward and gently pushed her down onto her back to return the favor. She moved with him, massaging his neck and shoulders with her hands, running the soles of her feet along his sides, grappling his buttocks with her toes as she neared her moment. When she climaxed, she clamped her legs together, inadvertently trapping his head as she moaned several swear words under her breath.

The entire experience was quick and dirty. There was no cuddling and cooling afterward. When Jennie's moment

had passed, she politely thanked Storm for his services and slid from his bunk. He leaned back, wiping the moisture from his lips and listening to the sound of the shower as she rinsed off and then climbed wordlessly into bed. He followed suit, amazed at how lightly he'd taken the affair.

Only after he'd cleaned himself off, only when he was lying in bed and drifting off to sleep did he think again of Trudie. And even then she was still a far-off memory, a temporary holding spot in his life lost to time. Coupling with her hadn't been much different than coupling with Jennie, for in both cases it was a service, a machination followed by the inevitable loneliness.

A part of him was saddened by this realization, and he found himself sobbing, scolding himself over the sort of man he'd become—but then again, he told himself, this was what he'd been bred for: physicality, sensuality. His parents' idea of bliss.

The roots had always been there; it had merely taken them a while to grow.

* * *

General Oro might have had the reputation of a hellish tyrant, but in actuality he treated his “employees” rather well after the initial shakedown. The first six months was all obedience and conditioning, a reminder to everyone that they were there to work, that there was no room for laziness or fooling around. Storm discovered, however, that there *was* room for living. Halfway through his first year on the station, his work schedule (as well as the

TIME CHASER

schedules of most of the others who'd come aboard with him) was shifted to allow several hours of free time before lights-out. Workers were allowed to do pretty much whatever they wanted, albeit in the presence of the ever-vigilant guards.

Most understood and accepted these terms. The few who didn't, either by refusing to work or attempting to escape, were personally dealt with by Oro in the form of brutal public beatings and sentencings to three months spent in solitude.

Storm steered clear of such trouble, sticking to his work and routine visits to the recreational sector. He only crossed the general once, in The Boiler Room (a popular cafeteria and arcade on the station's promenade): HP was in the arcade area that day, jousting with another worker and apparently not taking his losing streak too well. When the final match was called in favor of his opponent, he threw down his baton and let loose. Storm, who'd been sitting with DK on the dining tier, immediately rushed down and restrained his cellmate, who managed to dish out several damaging blows despite the fact that he was wearing his MIs.

A trio of guards stepped in momentarily and separated everyone, detaining each of them until Oro arrived. Storm waited silently along with the others, blood trickling from his nose, breath coming in gasps from what felt like a broken rib. The general, accompanied by a med drone, eventually made his appearance. He looked none too happy about being disturbed from his normal work schedule.

"Gentlemen," he said in his usual slow, barely-tempered

manner. “I trust there’s a good explanation behind this?” He approached Storm and tapped him on the chest—a particularly painful experience at the moment. “911—you’re in charge of this sorry brute, yes?”

“HP’s my cellmate, yes, sir,” Storm replied, wincing from the pain.

“And you let him get out of hand?”

I’m not a babysitter, Storm wanted to say, but checked himself, and instead responded: “He just became a little overexcited during the game, sir.”

“Hmf.” There was something of an amused twinkle in Oro’s eyes. He nodded and tapped Storm’s chest once again as he signaled for the drone to begin repairing his wounds. Then he turned and faced HP. “Your explanation, 756?”

HP made no effort to control himself. “That fucker, Krueger, had the game rigged so he’d beat me. I was only leveling the playing field.”

Oro had a multi-unit with him, which he used to quickly replay surveillance footage of the jousting match. When he was through, he tucked the device away and stepped up to HP.

“Judging from the video, I’d say *you* were the problem here. Half-assed grip on the baton, too much weight on your left foot while taking a hit—not good when someone wants to knock you off-balance. Is it at all possible that you just plain *suck* at the game?”

The crowd cooed.

“Why don’t you try me?” HP answered.

Something in Oro’s demeanor went ice cold.

"756 . . . before I continue, do you have any injuries that need looking after by the drone? No? That's good." With a sudden unexpected motion, he smacked HP hard across the face with the back of his fist, creating a nasty wound that began to bleed profusely. He gestured at the guard. "No meds for Mr. Tough Guy here. He can do his own healing. Take him to isolation."

With that, Oro exited the arcade, leaving the remaining guards to look after the drone until it finished its work. When it was through, it released Storm, who flexed his arms, took a deep breathe, and found there was little more than some residual soreness to remind him of his injury. Even with the MIs on, it felt little different than having done some moderate weight-lifting the day before.

Thank God for modern medicine, he thought as he made his way out of the arcade, past the swarms of chuckling onlookers, and back to the dining tier.

DK snorted playfully. "Good show. Do you do dinner theater as well?"

"Don't start," murmured Storm. He reclaimed his seat at their table and tapped in an order for ice water (alcoholic beverages were not allowed). He downed the entire glass and leaned back, closing his eyes and thinking of something DK had taught him. Something to do with self-control, relaxation—it was all Gecko spiritual pap, but it came in handy whenever he was affected by stress . . . if he concentrated hard enough. Sometimes the concentration itself became too stressful and he had to simply think of *nothing* in order to calm himself. What had DK called it? Zerostate?

“You all right?”

Storm came out of his reverie and found Jennie standing beside him. She held a glass with some dark, sparkling cider swirling inside. “Couldn’t be better. HP’s got strength like the rest of us, but he just kind of throws it around. No precision.”

“So you are a professional fighter, yes?” DK jested.

“I hate the fucker,” Jennie said, taking a seat. “Looks at me the wrong way while I’m showering. I swear, if he ever tries anything during lights out . . .”

“He’s not *that* much of a creep,” Storm said. “He’s pretty much like the rest of us after hours: too tired to give a shit about anything but a good night’s rest. He’s the first one asleep when the lights go out—unless his bitch is in the mood.”

Jennie snorted, finishing off her drink and making eye contact with Storm (something she’d been doing more and more often as time passed). “You know her name—or *his* name, for that matter?”

“No, and that suits me just fine.”

“Same here.” Jennie twirled her empty glass in a clockwise fashion. “So . . . we’ve been fucking for a while now, you and I—would that make us friends?”

Storm blushed. On 608, everyone *fucked*; it was part of General Oro’s Utopian plan and everyone knew it—yet Storm still treated his own sexual activity as if it were something private. “Of course,” he said, “if it had been the *Asian* girl on the top bunk, instead of you . . .”

Jennie scowled and stuck her tongue out at him. “She’s too small. You’d split her at the seams with that monster-

cock of yours.” She laughed. “Anyway, since we’re all such good friends here, let’s swap stories. You first, Storm.”

“Let’s see,” he replied, sighing. “I’m Earthborn, San Fran. A model and an athlete until I told my parents to go fuck themselves.”

“And the bod? A birthday present?”

“You could say that. I tried not to use it as a crutch. After high school, I got myself a nice little job fixing shuttles. I was twenty-four when I took a ride in the wrong booth at a time mall. It knocked me off course by two years. They say I should have been killed, but here I am, having drinks in hell instead.”

“Wow,” Jennie said, raising her eyebrows. “You’re just a kid.”

“How old are you?”

Jennie shrugged. “Who knows? I was forty-seven when I first broke my birth stream, and that was a while ago.”

“Jesus,” said Storm, incredulous. “I’m young enough to be your son.”

“Nice sentiment, though we all even out once we break our streams . . . but if fucking older women turns you on —”

Storm held his hand up. “Enough. How about you, DK?”

“A citizen of time,” said DK, smiling. “There is no doubt you know of my people’s relationship with the human Patrol. I was raised as a protector of the old ways. My first experiences came at a Mars rally. Human engineers were installing new gravitational field generators—they said it was to improve streaming accuracy for the human sector,

but we knew there were certain of our own neighboring streams that would have been canceled out if there was the slightest miscalculation. Most of us were captured, and the generators went online anyway, but my sensei took me off-stream, and we went into hiding. Shortly after that, the first ‘mistake’ happened, and a major bloodline on the Gecko Homeworld was lost. I joined a rebel clan, then, and worked on cross-streaming in the Outer Wars—trying to confuse the Patrolmen long enough so that our brothers could defend themselves. That was nearly seventy years ago.”

“Seventy years!” Storm shook his head. Outwardly, DK was a robust youth, Jennie a disgruntled teenager—but then again, Storm had seen the evidence himself while examining his own face in the mirror. Gone were the innocent, barely noticeable lines around his eyes, the laugh lines flanking his mouth, the certain subtle scars he’d earned during boyhood jaunts. Free of his birth stream, he looked eighteen again, with the only evidence of passing time being measured by the size of his newly-adjusted muscles, the number of new memories set against the sterile backdrop of Moon 608.

He had to bite his lip from slipping into another reverie. “What about you, Jennie? What was your old life like?”

“It wasn’t *much* of a life,” she replied. “I had my kids, paid my taxes, and put up with an asshole of a husband for twenty years. After that, I decided to leave it all behind. I had friends who dabbled in chasing, though I think I was the first to actually *try* it. Of course, I never saw my family again, but I was *free*. It was a fair exchange.”

TIME CHASER

Silence fell over the table as everyone pondered their own histories. It was only a brief intermission, though; DK promptly tapped Storm's hand and pointed towards the entrance. "This is your lucky day. Gregori has come."

Storm turned in his seat and watched as a cacophony of computer screens, servomechanisms, and folded flesh, all supported by an oversized hover chair (with an artificial respirator attached), drifted into the Boiler Room.

Gregori, thought Storm, trying to place a face amidst the tumescent cellulite. *God . . . DK had been telling the truth all this time.*

The man was grossly overweight, with unsightly sacks of fat hanging from arms and chest, legs and thighs. There were deposits under his chin, in his cheekbones, globules bulging from his neck, simultaneously pulling and pushing his facial features into a permanent sneer. He was the multiplied opposite of every other man and woman on 608, as physically inadequate as could be—yet he was kept alive, kept *encased* to serve out his life sentence. Rumor had it he'd once been an agile chaser, but had fallen out of favor after supposedly betraying his peers. Consequently, the disgruntled party involved had infected him with a retrovirus that caused his body to produce excessive amounts of fat—a grotesque twist on the myostatin therapies used by many Olympic athletes. Eventually, he would be crushed under his own weight.

Various other prisoners greeted him cheerfully (and by first name) as he floated onto the dining tier and approached Storm's table.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said, clasping

hands with Storm, Jennie, and DK. All around him, his collection of video screens (currently muted) flickered and flashed various newsfeeds and sports broadcasts. “I am Gregori, Moon 608 pencil-pusher by day, mysterious romantic by night.” He made a subtle movement with his hand and produced a rose out of thin air. He handed it to Jennie.

DK laughed. “Always on the lookout for an opportunity, yes?”

“Yes, indeed,” Gregori said,

“Nano critters?” Storm asked, nodding at the rose.

“*Magic*,” Gregori replied.

Storm laughed. “You’re every bit as eccentric as I’d imagined.”

“The benefit of a life sentence . . . but tell me, Storm, where do you see yourself in six months?”

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all.” Gregori started dealing playing cards—again, from out of thin air. As he did this, he fiddled with a knob on his console so that the volume of several of his screens jumped up several decibels. Under the cover of a cacophony of conflicting video broadcasts, he continued: “Texas Hold ’Em. Have a good time, listen—but don’t *look* like you’re listening. Got it?”

“Um, sure.” Storm looked curiously at Jennie, who shrugged nonchalantly; DK merely nodded and smiled.

“Now, as DK mentioned, I’m always looking for opportunities. All these people”—Gregori waved one of his gelatinous hands in the air—“are from different walks of life, and they’re all wearing the shackles of different trans-

gressions leading to the same eternal damnation. We all *want* the same thing, when it comes down to it, but there are only a precious few who have the charisma to *get* it. Storm, my friend, you reek of charisma.”

Storm laughed, genuinely amused. “So, I have a fan?”

“An *interested party*,” Gregori corrected.

“You’re not gay, are you?”

“Not at all—but I *am* an aficionado of want, an archaeologist of need, male or female. You may have heard there’s a Tooth Fairy roaming around the station, you may have even returned to your cell one night and found a coveted item or two lying on your pillow, no note, no explanation.”

“So . . . *you’re* the Tooth Fairy?”

“Not exactly. I’m more of an executive producer, a coordinator. You see, whether by law or by nature, I’m condemned to a life sentence—but I am as immortal as the next chaser. Hence the chair, the office job—the moderate freedom in captivity. Even for a scum-bucket like myself, Oro has allowed a certain amount of pity. He knows I will never live to see the light of day again, so he’s given me certain privileges as a general overseer of inmate satisfaction. No frills are allowed, of course, but if we can keep the workers *happy*, why it’s the best of both worlds. What Oro *doesn’t* know, however, is that, as I’m doing him a favor by smuggling amenities between the domes, my beneficiaries are doing *me* a favor by providing security, a savings plan for the days when I need to make a withdrawal. And my men and women are more than happy to lend a helping hand if it guarantees them cigarettes and booze and nov-

elty cock-rings.

“So I bide my time. I try to stay out of trouble, I study the opportunities as they pass before my eyes . . . and you, my dear Mr. Anderson, have caught my eye.”

Storm raised an eyebrow. “Me?”

“Let me ask you: What basic principle guides all men and women in the galaxy to lie, cheat, steal, and all that good stuff? *Sex*. Love’s a term used in greetings cards; sex is the ultimate goal, the mover and shaker of our precious, precious genetic material—and that’s what really matters, right? Getting our DNA from point A to point B, and it’s all dependent on how we utilize our flesh machines.

“Now, a man such as yourself, you have the good looks, the sound body, and, most importantly, the *personality* to direct your way effortlessly through the minefield, so to speak. Yet here you are, plucked chicken-clean and painted orange and taking orders from a fleet of drones . . . unless *you* start directing things.”

Gregori paused, the edges of his lips curling upward into a smile. He wanted something—that much Storm understood, but *what* exactly, he couldn’t fathom. Storm himself had never received any under-the-table perks, though his cellmates had—and *I’m the one he’s asking for the return favor?*

“I’m not sure I get you,” Storm said, slowly.

There was visible light in Gregori’s eyes now. He glanced towards the Boiler Room entrance. “Camie has a thing for you.”

Storm almost choked on his tongue, turned slightly to watch as Camie, who’d just walked in, went over to an

empty table and ordered whatever it was she usually came for. "Where the hell do you get *that* idea from?"

"I've been here a while. I know people . . . I know how they react to each other. I've done favors for Camie in the past. Sometimes we have a drink together and she tells me little tidbits about herself. I've ascertained the fact that she hasn't had a man in eight years. Says she gave them up after a really bad experience in her dating days—but you, you're the first guy she's even *considered*. You didn't hear that from me, though."

Storm glanced again at Camie, who nursed her drink, staring down at the table. She was nearly six feet tall, her bodybuilder's frame bristling even though she was relaxed. Even if he *was* interested in a relationship with her, just the *thought* of sex would crush him. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "You must be right. The way she's just sitting there, not paying me any attention at all, the way she's not said two words to me the whole time I've been here. God, how could I pass up *that*."

Jennie hit him—gently enough so that her MIs wouldn't act up. "*I'm* your bitch, don't forget."

Gregori chuckled again, giving Storm the finger. "Your sarcasm will be the death of you, my boy. I'm telling you, she's not the type of woman you'd expect at all. And I'm not just talking about those biceps. She's a thinker, a loner, someone who doesn't really belong here but, well, here she is anyway—sort of like you, if you get my drift."

"Are you trying to set me up?"

"That would be a waste of my time, wouldn't it? No, I study social patterns. I work for Oro—we all do—but I also

work for *us*. And when the pendulum swings in our favor . . . well, it's merely been in the back of my mind how you've earned a good, solid reputation as a worker and a citizen of Oro's little planetoid hole. No one expects the slightest bit of trouble from you. You see, Camie's been promoted to Head Warden of the prisoner sector, which means she's almost a free woman—as free as you can get with a life sentence, anyway.”

“Your wealth of knowledge amazes me.”

“The point is, she'll have direct access to certain areas of the computer mainframe. That's a door for us, you see? A way out. Everything on this blasted station is computer-controlled. All we need is a key.”

Jennie shook her head. “She can't be approached. The bitch is deep-space cold. Seems to *enjoy* the bureaucracy of 6o8.”

“Ah,” said Gregori, “but if only she had someone to keep her warm at night, someone to open her heart *and* her legs . . . you think maybe *then* she'd find something worth rocking the boat?”

A collective understanding was reached, and everyone looked tentatively at Storm, who felt something stir inside him—something he'd worked hard to suppress during his time in prison.

Hope.

“You want me to seduce Camie,” he said.

“Descriptives are hardly necessary,” Gregori said. “I mean, we're talking about a chance at *freedom* here. You do this one little thing, and I can guarantee us accommodations off this godforsaken rock.”

TIME CHASER

Storm smiled, shaking his head and laughing lightly.

“What’s so funny?” Jennie asked.

“We don’t know him,” Storm said. “This could well be one of Oro’s games, testing worker loyalty. We go along with Gregori, we play right into Oro’s hands—I, for one, don’t look forward to three months in solitude.”

DK leaned forward, serpentine tongue flicking over polished-ivory teeth. “Think about it, Storm.”

* * *

That night, after their usual carnal ritual, Jennie capitalized on Storm’s predicament.

“So, what’s the offensive for our oversized warden?” she whispered, cuddling up beside him, tickling his chest and belly with her fingers.

“Doesn’t it bother you,” he said, “that some guy I don’t even know just comes up to me and suggests I bang Camie in the hopes that she’ll turn over the key?”

“He’s not ‘some guy,’ he’s *Gregori*. He’s got connections. He wouldn’t have approached you if he hadn’t done his homework first.”

“You don’t know him any better than I.”

“What, you think I don’t talk to anyone but you anymore? Stories get around. Gregori’s genuine.”

“Still, it’s creepy. I bet those screens of his have something to do with it too. Probably watches us all while we’re showering. And for me to simply prance up to Camie, act like I *like* her . . .”

Jennie stopped touching him. “Are you fucking *nuts*? A

chance at escape and you're worrying about your conscience?"

"I can't just—"

"Storm, I'm your fuck buddy. I like sleeping with you, but that's it. Between work and bedtime, what do we have in common?"

Storm couldn't think of anything.

"That's right. *Nothing*. We're making the best of a situation. I don't regret it, and you shouldn't either. I'm sorry if you got attached during our time together, but that's *your* problem, not mine. I guess somewhere else in some other stream some girl would have been lucky to date you. Here, we have to improvise. I mean, do you *really* want to spend the rest of your life like this? Shit, I miss my hair, I miss wearing *clothes*—I miss being able to take a walk without a drone trailing my every move. Don't *you* miss any of those things?"

"Yeah . . ." Storm replied, though there wasn't much conviction in his voice. He was too caught up trying to unravel the tightness in his chest, the pulling from two opposite directions. On the one hand, he ached for freedom, the chance to rejoin the living in a world without mandatory MIs. On the other, he'd gotten so used to suppressing his own angst and homesickness that he'd almost gotten *used* to living on 6o8. Now, with a chance at escape, he had to piece together a new plan, a way to survive outside Oro's dome. It would be freedom, but he would still be on the run, he would still be disconnected from his own stream.

He simply had no idea what to do next.

TIME CHASER

* * *

Having watched Storm and Jennie make love, Gregori was flushed and bursting with arousal unrelieved. He sighed wistfully and muted the volume as, somewhere deep down in his groin, his penis begged for attention. He might have masturbated earlier, timed his orgasm to match Storm's, but alas, the effort required to access himself often resulted in more trouble than pleasure. For now, he merely watched Storm as, with Jennie's hand cupping one of his buttocks, he feigned sleep.

The infrared catches all, my friend, Gregori thought, and I can see that you've never been more awake . . . thinking of my offer, yes, but thinking of the other things too. Day after day after day of working in the mines and factories, night after night of working in bed . . . and still you are distracted, more terrified than ever of the void just outside this prison-bubble. The vast emptiness of space seeps into you somehow; all this time now, as an immortal, and you have no one but soulless convicts to spend it with. That's why you fuck a throwaway tramp like Jennie, that's why you'll fuck Camie: routine. Predictability. It's not comfort, but it's the slightest bit of control over your life, knowing that after all you've been through, things on 608 will still be the same in a thousand years . . . and if you can get used to that, well, maybe you can whittle your fears down to white noise.

He turned on Camie's camera, watched her from above, watched her nude, musclebound body as she slept fitfully on her bunk. Physically, she was a prime specimen, but he

knew her secrets . . . knew her weaknesses.

And you, my dear. Storm's other half. . . if only he knew. You've made a career for yourself out of the mundane. Civilization exiled you for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you've convinced yourself that your life here, as monotonous as it will be for centuries to come, is livable. Yet, with the slightest push, you could shine as brightly as a supernova. My only regret is that you came here so late. Had I a body like Storm's, with the charm to match, I wouldn't even have to use words to win you over. But love, sex, passion—that's for the young, the soldiers of this play called life. I am the director, the thoughtsmith who lives through his creations. Patience brings promise.

Eventually he turned off his screens and sat unmoving in the darkness until he fell asleep.

* * *

It took a week to work up the courage to approach Camie. In the meantime, Storm tried to shut himself down emotionally, tried to sort things out. During free-time opportunities in the Boiler Room, he feigned fatigue, disinterest—he even stopped having sex with Jennie, who'd started making a habit out of mentioning Gregori's offer during the most inappropriate moments.

In the end, it came down to an appropriated coincidence, both Storm and Camie happening to be in the right place at the right time. DK had been acting as Gregori's messenger, pushing for progress; Storm had finally initiated a conversation with Camie during a ride on one of the

TIME CHASER

lifts—and it was as much a genuine social activity as it was an attempt to get his peers off his back.

They talked, and Camie warmed to him instantly. They had a good enough time of it that they met for dinner later in the evening. Storm didn't push; he let things happen, pretended he was merely having a good time and not trying to follow Gregori's itinerary.

Afterwards, as they were sipping nonalcoholic wine, Camie asked, "So, how about that name of yours? Is it supposed to be a descriptive term?"

Storm shook his head. "Not really. If that had been the case, my parents would have named me 'Flex' or something."

"Really, now?" Camie laughed.

He explained his parents' pretty-boy plans.

"So . . . you didn't get on well with them?"

"There wasn't a trend either way. I guess it's just the usual apathy. You go to the clinic to have a template made for your child, you pick out just the right body, the hair, the eyes, the face, the arm and leg proportions, athletic inclination, optimum height, weight, circumcised or uncircumcised—you piece together this perfect image of what you want your child to be like, but it still comes out with its own personality. Doesn't matter how much you *paid* for the template."

Camie tilted her head slightly as she studied him. "You know, most guys wear their templates like jewelry, always expecting us gals to be *impressed* regardless of whatever kind of horrible personality might lie under the shiny exterior." She shook her head. "I can't believe we haven't spo-

ken before today. I mean, more than just the usual technical babble during work.”

“Same here.” A male inmate passed by the table, giving Storm a dirty look; he ignored it and continued to return Camie’s smile. “I guess with the work and the disinfection and all, casual conversation wasn’t exactly on my mind.”

“Yeah. The drones aren’t particularly subtle in that respect.”

“What sort of hair did you have?”

Camie blushed. “What color was *your* hair?”

“Blond.”

“Long? Short? Curly? Straight?”

“Hard to remember—buzzed, most of the time.”

“I was a brunette, about shoulder-length.”

“Ah.” Storm superimposed a mental image of hair over Camie’s bald pate. “Want to swap stories?”

Camie frowned, glanced quickly around. “No . . . not here. Too many eyes and ears—but I know a place.”

* * *

There was an observation deck just above the transport warehouse. Most often, it was used for visual confirmation when shuttles docked; now it was a private clubhouse for Storm and Camie to sit together conversing whilst overlooking Moon 608’s frozen terrain. After only a few minutes, it became (unexpectedly) apparent to Storm just how much he had in common with Camie. Specifically, she was also the victim of a streaming accident.

“The hearing was total garbage,” she said. “I hadn’t done

TIME CHASER

anything wrong, but the company that owned the equipment was so embarrassed that they made sure I didn't talk—they planted evidence, made sure I was sent *here* and not to some ordinary Earthside prison."

It had been much the same for Storm; he told her so, told her his story, and when he was finished he felt her hand slip into his—and he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of familiarity—as if he'd met Camie somewhere long before coming to Oro's domain (though he was certain he would have remembered someone like Camie, had they crossed paths previously).

She must have felt it too, for she settled her head against his shoulder and whispered, "I've missed this so much . . . just being with someone . . ."

"That makes two of us," he replied, swallowing.

He tried not to think of Gregori.

* * *

The so-called "seduction" progressed over the course of a month. Initially, Camie seemed satisfied with talk, holding hands, and the occasional kiss; two weeks in, and he spent his first night with her in her cell; after a month, she made arrangements to be paired with him permanently.

(Jennie agreed, though Storm had the feeling it had little to do with her casual attitude towards physical intimacy. She was no doubt expecting him to deliver on his promise: fucking for freedom.)

All this happened through Storm's passive persuasion. He genuinely wouldn't have been disappointed—or heart-

broken, even—if Camie had turned him down from the start. He wasn't leading her on; rather, he was allowing her attraction towards him to do the guiding . . . though he found himself growing more and more emotionally attached as each day passed.

Ultimately, this lead to a guilt trip unlike any Storm had experienced with any of his former girlfriends—even Jennie.

DK approached him alone in the Boiler Room one day and requested a progress report, and he found himself responding defensively, telling his friend that he had no business monitoring him like a teacher would monitor a student working on a project.

"Do not forget," DK warned, "that we are still prisoners. What kind of future do you have with a woman when all you will ever share with her is the inside of a cell? How will you ever have children with the nanobots constantly suppressing your sperm? What is there to *do* when the first wonders of love settle down and your attention wanders back to the problem at hand: imprisonment?"

DK left, though his words remained—a residue.

Storm returned to Camie's cell after work. They made love standing on the shower pad, then went to bed. Shortly thereafter, once Camie had fallen asleep, Storm slipped from her side, quietly made his way to where her computer console was. The chair didn't quite seem to fit, the chill of the faux-leather seat numbed his bare buttocks, the keys kept slipping elusively under his fingers—still, he managed to open his e-mail account. He peered over his shoulder to make sure Camie was facing away from him, and

TIME CHASER

sent off his password—an inevitable security breach that would ultimately allow access to the rest of Camie’s computer—to Gregori.

He returned to the bed, wrapped his arms about Camie again.

“Mmm,” she purred contentedly, still mostly asleep.

Please don’t hate me, he thought.

16 . ESCAPE

From Earth, the explosion could be seen as a glimmer in the night sky—the uncommon birth of a miniature star at the edge of the solar system; from Storm’s point of view, it was a single tear caught midway down Camie’s cheek.

“I can’t, Storm,” she said softly, her toes and fingers planted firmly in the mesh wall. All around her, the details of her cell trickled and ran as if the rubber and metal elements were made of melting ice.

Storm gripped the door frame, felt gravity pulling at him from several different directions at once as somewhere in the distance an alarm klaxon choked and hiccuped beneath the louder, more ominous groan of metal giving way to enormous pressure. “Camie, please . . . we have to go now!”

Camie shook her head; her tears were flowing freely now. “I *can’t*. You know that. This is where I belong, it’s the only place I know.”

“This isn’t Moon 6o8 anymore—at least, it won’t be very soon. The nanites are digesting everything. If you stay here you’ll *die*.”

The deck shuddered. Storm felt the door frame losing its form, felt the nano critters flowing like water along his arms. He looked down at himself, saw that his skinsuit was

still black, still intact. The anti-virus program that DK had installed was still operating, which meant he would have air and resistance pressure even without the station's life support systems . . . but Camie, she'd refused the skinsuit upgrade, and, consequently, her body was now smeared in tatters, like oil and dirt, that dripped off her in thick, ropey blobs. It gave her the appearance of a flesh tumor, all muscle and glistening smooth skin embedded in the bubbling bulkhead.

"Camie," Storm breathed, trying to find strength within himself. "Sweetheart, please. Don't do this."

A flex of Camie's right arm as she made a fist caused her bicep and forearm to bulge almost obscenely. "Look at me. An Earthside woman doesn't look like *this*. Who would want me?"

"I want you. With me. Both of us, together."

"Storm . . . that's nice of you to say that. You're a nice guy, but you know you can't go back home. If they weren't looking for you before, they'll be combing every corner of the human sector now. I can't live jumping from stream to stream . . . and I can't live in the world that kicked me out, left me to eternity."

The deck was beginning to sag. Storm glanced over his shoulder, saw that the corridor had become oval-shaped. He looked back at Camie.

"Go," she said.

He ran, down along the corridor, hopping across metal beams coated with steaming rubber as the bile rose in his stomach. He thought of Camie and all the other 608ers caught naked and helpless in the midst of death.

Gregori didn't say anything about this. Escape, yes, but taking down the whole station for the sake of ourselves? Fucking hell . . .

There hadn't even been a warning. For months, the only news had been that Gregori had received Storm's computer password and was working on cracking Camie's security safeguards. Then, earlier in the evening, Storm had gotten off work and gone for a shower only to find DK waiting outside Camie's door with the anti-virus program and a simple message: *now*.

All hell had broken loose after that. Gregori's main-frame virus made quick work of the security and environmental systems. Storm, DK, Jennie, and Gregori had been spared; Camie would have been spared too, but she'd refused to join the troop.

Stubborn, stubborn Camie.

Storm made it to the transport terminal (there was no air here, as was evidenced by the half-dozen or so carcasses strewn about the deck). DK, laser rifle in hand, spotted him from the inside and hauled the door open.

"Jennie and Gregori have gone," he said, his mask making his accent even thicker. "Where is Camie?"

Storm didn't answer as he pushed into the terminal, stood facing the modified helm, which warped the light, causing the room to slouch inward. He imagined Jennie's exit; she probably hadn't even said goodbye before jumping streams. Gregori might have waited a while, but being so physically limited, had probably not wanted to risk the necessity of a quick escape if things got hairy. And DK . . . DK was the only one here, the only other person (perhaps)

TIME CHASER

alive on Moon 6o8.

“This is it, yes?” DK said, smiling and tapping him on the shoulder. “Where do you want to go?”

Yes, thought Storm. *This is it . . . but where do I want to go?*

Everything, every hope, every nightmare since his stationing on 6o8, had led up to this point, and yet it was still somehow anti-climactic. He thought of Camie, poor hulking Camie, her once-magnificent frame probably dissolved into an organic stew by now, and he realized in order to free himself, he’d destroyed her home and taken her life.

“I don’t know where I want to go,” he said at last, his knees buckling. “Jesus, DK . . . I don’t fucking know.”

17 . PORT CARR

Somewhere else, in a stuffy motel room, Storm awoke from an extended dream and hurriedly arranged the bed-sheets around himself as he heard a sequence of knocks at the door. For a moment he was caught between realities, uncertain as to which side of his mind he was supposed to be on—then he remembered.

Annah came inside quickly, closing and locking the door behind her and setting a large tote bag down on the floor.

“There’s a Sears just outside Khandu,” she explained, pulling out a shirt and a pair of pants from the bag. “I hope these fit you okay. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah,” replied Storm, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His clothes had been soiled during the Underground Avenue ride. As such, he’d simply rested in bed for the evening, recovering from zerostate and watching the newsfeeds as Annah had done her shopping.

“I also got you underwear and socks,” she said, digging deeper into the bag. “Oh, and Mexican food, if you feel like eating.”

Storm shook his head and forced the disorientation down. “How did you pay for all this?”

“I always keep cash on me, though it’s no excuse for

TIME CHASER

splurging, and I'll probably have to wean my spending for the next few weeks. But money can always be earned again; rebuilding your life isn't as easy."

"All right," Storm said, placing his new garments beside him on the bed, "but you *do* know you could get into a shitload of trouble helping me, right?"

"I don't care about that. I care about you. Now eat."

Storm ate, tacos and quesadillas. Junk food, yes—but his efficient metabolism would hardly notice.

I can't go on like this, he thought. I've been way too sloppy in this stream . . . enough to get my head on a pike if I keep it up. And here I've drawn this poor woman into the thick of things. Twice, apparently.

And there was Chris. He hadn't been at the rendezvous point. Storm didn't want to think about it, but it probably meant he'd met with some form of trouble. There was only hope that Chris had somehow managed to worm his way out of danger's way without serious harm—unless he was already dead. In which case Storm's staying would undermine everything their friendship had stood for.

Storm finished his meal and pulled on his pants, moved to get out of bed. He pushed his anxiety deep down within himself and came to a conclusion about what he needed to do next.

"It's getting late," he said, walking into the bathroom to splash some water on his face. "If we're going to get things back on track we'd better get some sleep."

Annah nodded in agreement, though she kept up her vigilance until both of them were in bed (and laying politely apart from each other). Eventually she drifted off to

sleep, and didn't seem to notice the light bounce of the mattress as Storm rose, put on the rest of his clothes, and slipped out into the night.

He took with him only what he needed: his mind, his body, and the renewed promise to keep his fate from affecting anyone else ever again. It was the only way, no matter how much his heart yearned for more.

* * *

Storm found transportation off Sparrow after a few hours' worth of heavy lifting. He hired himself off as an extra hand for a large freight ship that was headed for the Upper Ports space station in orbit around Sparrow (on his way there, he'd efficiently acquired a stolen ID card back at the motel café and dressed appropriately to match his new identity: a fake goatee and shaggy dyed-black hair complete with dark sunglasses did their job to make him the epitome of Donnie Mahler, former postal worker looking for a way to earn some quick cash in between jobs.

He reached the giant space station at 21:00 and began planning what to do next. Most of the ships docked were already emptied out and their crew members relaxing in the many bars and virtual reality parlors, spending their credits just as soon as they'd been earned. Storm spent his off-time wandering the corridors, waiting for the morning shift to begin. He moved from bar to bar, drinking more than enough coffee to keep him awake for days as he inspected as much of the station as he could (indirectly). One thing was for sure: Upper Ports was massive. Built like

TIME CHASER

a giant floating wheel, the station's outer ring was reserved for mainly residential housing and terraforming projects, resembling a small planet, lush and clean—the opposite of Sparrow's dusty hold on civilization.

Being one of the lower-ranking people, Storm was limited to the inner-ring, composed mainly of bars and whore houses that traded money for a cheap thrill. He visited the former and ignored the latter, all the time watching the movements of the security guards near the shipping ports as they went through their shifts, taking out those who had served their time and replacing them with new guards.

The opportunity to move into action came not too long after the morning shift began. Two guards were watching over an empty terminal, and they didn't seem all that thrilled about it. As such, it didn't take much to attract their attention elsewhere: an equally bored hooker, wandering in from the strip of bars nearby and offering her services for a few extra credits. With the terminal long forgotten, the guards approached the woman eagerly and headed towards one of the restrooms; as the doors slid shut, Storm left his place near one of the viewing ports and strode towards the terminal, which, he discovered, hosted a small two-man "hopper" used for short-distance missions. With a few modifications, it would get him exactly where he wanted.

Getting into the locking system wasn't difficult. He'd been dealing with this sort of "borrowing" for some time, and he knew how to get around most computer safeguards. The only problem arose when he tried getting

through without setting off an alarm. Nine times out of ten he could pull it off, but on this occasion he wasn't so lucky. Just as he entered the final command in the console, the doors to the ship's terminal slid open in unison with the alert drone's sharp warning. Without a second thought Storm made a dash for the terminal, slamming his hand down on the "close" button and locking the door before he climbed into the shuttle and started the departure sequence.

Navigation was rough, due to the spontaneous nature of his leaving, but he managed to coax the shuttle away from the station and out into space without incident.

By the time the guards got their pants pulled up and their shirts buttoned again, there was nothing left for them but an empty terminal, a dozen flashing red lights, and the chief security officer's raging voice coming through the intercom demanding to know what had just happened.

"We just lost our jobs, that's what," muttered one of the guards, heading reluctantly toward the security console.

* * *

A lot of people thought of Port Carr as the bane of the galaxy, and with good cause: the small, privately-owned moon was home to the most controversial substances and mischievous creatures known to humankind. Many criminals were sent there to live out their sentence killing or being killed by a myriad of devilish lowlifes who weren't shamed by much.

TIME CHASER

As a human, Storm was somewhere on the lower end of Port Carr's chain of significance. He easily realized that when he strode into the only organized town the planet offered. There was no name, no security, but plenty of riffraff to make him glad he'd worn the small hand-laser he'd found in the shuttle.

Two naked female Geckos with formidably large breasts (probably implants) spotted him and waved from their spot against an old rusted shuttle.

"Hey there, baby face," one of them greeted. "Ever have sex with a lizard?"

Storm smiled casually and walked towards them, stuffing his hands in his pockets and readying the hand-laser. "Yeah, but she couldn't keep up."

The hookers looked incredulously at each other.

"I find that hard to believe," said one, giggling.

"Human pride," said the other, gesturing towards Storm's crotch. "Why don't you show us what we're up against?"

"I might just do that," Storm said, "but first you've got to give me a little something."

"What would that be?"

"Tell me where Gregori is."

Both women looked disappointed.

"The Fat Man, eh?" snorted the one who'd been appreciating his crotch. "Why should we tell you? We haven't been guaranteed a good time yet."

Storm held up his—Donnie's—credit card. "I pay well . . . if you survive the night."

The other woman whispered something to her friend

and both nodded. "All right, then. We'll take you to someone who knows him, and then you take us to bed. *Both* of us, 45 credits an hour."

"Lead the way," Storm directed, putting his arm around the one woman who'd been most forward.

The Geckos led him to a bar called Spike's, which was in the center of town. The place was teeming with dozens of sleazy traders and swindlers of all species strutting their wares for prospective buyers.

Inside, the bar was smoky and noisy as spectators drank themselves silly and watched a wrestling match between a large four-armed, half insect, half woman and a leonine man who looked like he was having trouble keeping on his feet. With one lousy swing of his arms he was trapped in his opponent's embrace, two arms holding, the other two pounding. As the man went tumbling to the floor with a loud grunt, the crowd cheered and screamed for more, though at the moment nobody was volunteering for the fatal task of wrestling the insect woman. She held up her arms in victory and stepped out of the way as her opponent's unconscious body was dragged out of the ring.

"Who am I looking for?" asked Storm, looking around the joint.

"Daisy deals with him directly," replied one of his escorts, pointing to the insect woman. "Talk to her."

"Thank you," Storm said, and started to leave, but the women suddenly held him back, both of their tongues tickling his cheek.

"What about our compensation?"

Storm smiled again. "Oh, yeah. Almost forgot, with all

the excitement.”

They navigated through the crowd of creatures and entered the restroom at the back of the bar. The door slid shut with a muffled click, then opened a moment later as Storm stepped out again, replacing the hand-laser in his pocket and heading for the bar, where Daisy was ordering a drink and resting between bouts.

“Daisy?” he inquired, seating himself beside the woman’s sizable frame (it was no surprise that the chairs in her immediate area were empty). He was reminded of Camie, and he wondered if maybe this wasn’t an alternate incarnation.

Guzzling strong-smelling liquor from a huge tankard, Daisy regarded him with bloodshot eyes. “Yeah? And who are you?”

“Call me Donnie. Do you know Gregori?”

“That’s a common name.”

“This is Port Carr—you *know* which Gregori I’m talking about.”

Daisy downed the rest of her drink. “I do for people who possess a very big wallet, or other significant attributes.”

“I’m a friend.”

“Flex for me.” Daisy paused and tore open the front of Storm’s shirt with a swipe of her hand. Then she measured the swell of his pectoral muscles. “Very nice. Tell you what, human. Since I’m in a good mood tonight, I’ll deliver you to him—if you know how to handle yourself in the ring. If you can get me off my feet, you win and I take you to Gregori’s place. If not, then oh well. You’re out of luck and in need of a good doctor.”

“What’s the catch?” Storm replied, removing her hand from his chest and standing. He hoped the expression on his face was a fearless one because he was beginning to think coming in here was a bad idea. He couldn’t possibly hope to wrestle with this monster lady and win, yet here he was, following her to the small ring in the center of forty drunken bar-hoppers squandering their money by betting on potential Davids trying to slay Goliath. Or in this case, Daisy.

Once everyone became aware that a new match was beginning, the noise in the bar became considerably louder. People cooed, cheered, and exchanged bets, mostly in favor of Daisy. Storm removed the remains of his shirt, hoping that his athlete’s template would impress, if not intimidate, his opponent.

“The pants, too,” said Daisy, putting all four of her hands on her hips. “I don’t want any unexpected pocket-lasers or switchblades popping up from out of nowhere.”

Storm wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth or if she simply wanted to shame him witless, but he complied, deciding that protest would only show his fear and uncertainty. As he undressed, he noticed that Daisy’s body, all seven feet and three-hundred pounds of it, was unclothed. It only seemed that she wore garments because of the way her torso grew its own natural breastplates and such. It was almost as if she were part human and part armadillo—a formidable foe in any case.

“Let’s do it then,” Daisy prompted, stepping forward with a devious smile.

Immediately she lunged at him with her arms. Storm

TIME CHASER

ducked out of the way, kicking her in the thigh. Without shoes it was risky business mixing his force and her firm resistance. The only way he could win this match was to make her harm herself, for there was no way he would be able to damage her without damaging himself in the process. He would have to concentrate on tripping her or tiring her out so that she finally collapsed from exhaustion.

Giving her another tentative kick—this time a fancy one—in the back, he knew it was going to take a lot more than he had to defeat this rival. She hardly expended more energy than necessary as she swung around and nearly took off his ear with her fist. He dropped onto the floor and kicked again at her ankle, which didn't budge except for when she stooped to loop one of her arms around his waist and hoist him up in the air. The ear-splitting shouts of the spectators reached a crescendo as Daisy held him with one arm, used another to ram her fist into his gut. Then she dropped him onto the floor and stepped back, waiting for his next move.

He refused to acknowledge the pain, concentrated on zero state as he rose to his feet again, tried desperately to think of what to do next. Daisy began closing in (along with the roar of the crowd). He fell to his knees and crawled between her legs as an idea suddenly came to him. Before she could turn around, he was leaping up onto her back, wrapping his legs around her waist and his arms around her head in an effort to simultaneously blind and strangle her. She started staggering and swinging her arms wildly and for a moment he thought he might have a chance—until he felt her steel-hard grip on his legs, un-

locking them so that only his arms kept him from falling to the floor again. He tightened his grip around her neck, but it did little more than anger her further as she swiped at him with all four arms at once, two of them raking rather sharp fingernails across his skin. Crying out, he let go and fell away, tracks of blood staining his skin.

By now the audience was going wild, yelling, “Kill! Kill!” as Daisy faced Storm with a half-pissed, half impressed expression on her face. In fact, she looked like she was rolling in the grass with a friend for fun, though her “friend” was getting the stuffing knocked out of him at her expense.

Again she moved towards him with surprising agility. He tried to leap out of the way, failed and found himself being thrown over her shoulder. The crowd thundered as she started spanking his bare buttocks as a mother would a child’s—another example of her showmanship.

The move, however embarrassing on Storm’s part, was not without its rewards, for as he struggled to get a hold of one of her arms, he spotted a blessing from heaven: a hairpin nestled in Daisy’s stringy bun. He grabbed the hairpin, which was large, crude, sharp, and jabbed it underneath one of the segmented shells that protected her shoulders.

Daisy screeched and let go of him as she clawed ineffectively at the site of her wound, trying to find the source of the exquisite pain. Storm wasted no time in launching another attack, this time running at his opponent full force and knocking into her legs. That, combined with the distraction in her shoulder, was enough to send Daisy plunging downward. The crowd parted hastily as she slammed

TIME CHASER

through one side of the ring, snapping the ropes and collapsing a table with her bulky frame.

Storm righted himself, blood from his own wounds running along his arms and mixing with Daisy's, which was darker, rust-tinged. Some of the crowd cheered, some booed and others simply fell silent as he found his clothes in the corner of the ring and got dressed. When he was finished, Daisy was standing again and shaking her head.

"I'll be damned," she said, chuckling. "Beaten by a human—but *only* because I was distracted by that delightful cock of yours." She reached out and squeezed his crotch a little too gingerly. "In any event, you've earned my respect for the time being. There will be a rematch in the near future, and I assure you then I will be much more sober than tonight." There was a graveness to her face, but not without traces of humor as she put her arm around him and flashed a devilish grin. "Now, let's share a drink."

As much as he appreciated the gesture, Storm *did* have more important matters to attend to, though he took a moment to wash himself off (during which time Daisy indulged in two more tankards of beer) and tend to his wounds before insisting that he be taken to Gregori at once.

"Very well," said Daisy, heading towards the bar entrance. "Follow me, human."

18 . a conversation with the fat man

Gregori's shop was a clutter of wood beams and dusty stone masonry bathed in the autumn light of the setting sun. Storm was greeted at the entrance by an adolescent girl wearing nothing but MIs and several layers of grit.

"I'm here to see Gregori," Storm said.

The girl had been working on a mechanical contraption of some sort; she set down her screwdriver and picked up a remote control. At the press of a button, four drones whizzed into view and surrounded Storm.

"Let's see your invitation," the girl said.

Storm swallowed, reached into his pocket and withdrew the note Daisy had given him. He handed it to the girl, who nodded and disappeared into the shop. Several minutes passed; the drones hummed and hovered, their insect-like eyes trained on Storm and no doubt ready to dice him if he made the wrong move.

Presently, the girl returned and sent the drones away. "This way," she said.

Inside, it was dim and musty. There were shelves, boxes, crates—all stacked neatly, though there was so much it simply wasn't possible to make the place look *clean*. Eventually, after several twists and turns, Storm found himself standing in a large office, with ornate (though somewhat

crusty) throw rugs on the floor and antique Earthside furniture offsetting the translucent rear wall, which offered a view of the backcountry beyond.

Gregori, hydraulics and all, was sitting behind a sprawling oak desk, and was much as Storm remembered him, save for the fact that he now wore decent clothes instead of a millimeters-thick orange skinsuit. He also had hair, snow-white and delicately balanced atop his prematurely-wrinkled pate.

This must be his birth stream, Storm thought. That's why his body's resumed the aging process.

"Storm!" boomed Gregori, spreading his hands wide (he might have held out his arms, had his physical condition not been so precarious). "My God, you haven't changed a bit! It's good to see you!"

"Good to see you, too," Storm said, pumping Gregori's hand. "I see you've made a niche for yourself?"

"Indeed. All the trinkets I can handle. What brings you here?"

"I need a favor."

Gregori nodded, sighed. "You may leave us, Irena."

The girl with the MIs smiled and exited the office, closing the door behind her.

"Please, sit, my friend."

Storm took a seat.

"How's Camie—or Jennie, is it?"

"I don't know," Storm replied. "Camie wouldn't leave the station. Jennie was gone by the time I got to the terminal. I guess it's up to time and the ages now."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Gregori shook his head. "And

DK? I hear you two spent some time together on the Gecko Homeworld?"

"Yeah. Learned a lot, utilitarian and otherwise."

"That's good . . . that's good. If there's a sacred place left in the galaxy, it's the Homeworld."

"Yep. You doing well?"

"I can't complain. After all, I'm a very bad man—but I don't pretend to be anything else. A hole in the ground like this is where I belong. It's where I *thrive*."

"Oh?"

"My magnum opus comes through my trading—*that's* the life I've made for myself, it's the shadowy doppelganger I've cast out amongst the stars to do my living for me. Here, confined to my chair, trapped in my dying body, all I want is a livable home, young flesh to keep me warm at night. Irena's mother was killed in a domestic scuffle. I bought the lass at an auction. She cooks and cleans for me, and does other things as well. I'm not proud of my tastes, and I'm sure she'll kill me and run away with my savings as soon as she figures out the combination to my safe, but it's not the worst way to go . . . and working for me is far more preferable to working on hands and knees for the local orphanage's headmaster."

Storm smiled sadly. "I always wondered why they sent you to Oro."

"Everyone has their demons . . . but you said you need a favor?"

"Yeah. I need you to get me to the Temples of Time."

"Ah . . . I see." Gregori laughed, turning away and moving over to the window so he could watch the shuttles

TIME CHASER

move to and fro against the horizon. “Still chasing time, are you? Lord, Storm. How I wish I had half the ambition you do. I might have actually *done* something with my second chance. As it is, well, I’ve already told you, haven’t I?”

“You probably already know that this isn’t my chosen stream. It’s simply where I was born. I think the majority are stuck like this, being people we don’t want to be, living lives that aren’t ours, but we do it because there are a billion other streams out there that are a lot worse. We *settle*. You . . . you’ve found something, Storm. A way back, a way forward—a way *out*.” He looked back at Storm and huffed and puffed, tried to catch his breath. “It’s dangerous business setting up passage for a grunt like you to the Holy World. Doing so means I’ll have to watch my back even more carefully for God knows how long, but . . . fuck it. These machines won’t keep me alive forever. Even now I can feel the weight of my internal organs steadily pulling me apart from the inside. This will probably be the last time we speak to one another—I might as well do something creative with the time I have left, eh?”

Storm smiled. “You’re something else, Greg.”

“Aren’t I, though?”

19 . THE TEMPLES OF TIME

Storm was immensely glad when the trip was over. He'd had to spend sixteen hours enclosed in a crate that resembled a metallic coffin, with nothing more than a flask of water and a small pouch of food pellets to keep himself nourished. Furthermore, the sensor-retardant body suit he wore underneath his regular clothes was uncomfortably hot. On the plus side, Gregori had waived the typical business fee.

A group of Babylonian shippers unloaded the crates from the cargo bay. Storm had heard stories of their graceful nature and found that they were all true. Even their handling of freight was delicate . . . so delicate that it was difficult to tell when he was being moved and when he was being set down. As far as he'd been told, he would be put onto a smaller ground shuttle that would travel into Maarken, the capitol city where the Temples were located.

Sure enough, from what he sensed through the crate's walls, things were going according to plan. Only when he felt the steady hum of the shuttle did he reach up and unlock the latch that held the crate closed. Popping the lid, he climbed out, seeing other stacks of crates and realizing that he was very lucky not to have been placed at the bottom of one of them. Quickly, he went to the rear loading

TIME CHASER

door, opened it and saw that the shuttle was already in Maarken's suburbs. Homes of different sizes and shapes with healthy green lawns rested on either side underneath a misty but bright morning. It was a welcome sight after spending time on Sparrow and Port Carr, where plant life was more like a fable than an abundance of nature.

At the first stoplight, he jumped from the shuttle and ran to the cobbled sidewalk where he took his first breath of fresh air. As he looked around he saw only two humans, a man and woman walking along the opposite sidewalk. The rest were Babylonians, emerald-skinned, graceful, beautiful. Babylonian children played games in the park nearby; across the street a Babylonian man was trimming his hedges, sculpted in the shape of a swan. It was tranquil, pure, untouched by the chaos of the galaxy. Compared to and in many ways superior to Earth, it was the center of everything esoteric. Great philosophers and spiritual thinkers came here to study the universe or to cleanse themselves while surrounded by tranquility. Of course, there was a price, and many commoners on many worlds never got the chance to visit such splendor unless they were important leaders, ambassadors, famous celebrities or athletes. A middle-class Earthborn might live to be 120 in good health; a Babylonian import could last a thousand years and retain the flower of his own youth.

The reason why movie stars, Storm thought, seem to remain untouched by time—until their contracts ran out.

He looked towards the heart of the city and saw the tops of four enormous pyramids rising out of the morning mist and sparkling in the sun's light. Always keeping them

in his sight, he walked along the city streets, finding a suitable spot to change into his street clothes along the way. By high noon he was standing in a lush bower and surrounded by delicately-carved granite sculptures.

There was no security, no barrier preventing an uninvited outsider from partaking in the bath of the Elites. Storm strode up a flight of steps that led into a low-ceilinged chamber where a Babylonian man was stepping barefoot into a shallow fountain of water. Curious, Storm approached the man.

“Good morning, sir,” he said. “Lovely day, isn’t it?”

The Babylonian man responded with a friendly smile. “Indeed. Like a painted portrait. Are you here for any specific stream?”

“Yes,” replied Storm, removing his own shoes and socks and following the Babylonian’s example. After stepping about for a few moments and whispering prayers (at the prompt of the Babylonian man), he left the fountain behind and entered the interior of the temple. Immediately he gasped at what he saw, heard, and *felt*.

The vision: gently sloping stone walkways leading across each other and over a lake of clear water. Numerous visitors were swimming in the water, their bodies unclad and shimmering in and out of existence. The time streams themselves resembled rings of colored light, two meters in diameter, some spinning fast and some slow. The rings were halfway under the water and halfway above, the lower halves casting mysterious glows like living spirits.

The sound: like ten billion overlapping voices threatening to overload Storm’s brain. He could understand every

TIME CHASER

single one, all at once as if he had ten billion ears to draw in the sound—and yet, he could manage it (DK's training hadn't been in vain).

The feeling: total detachment. He felt at one with everything around him and realized in the back of his mind that he was experiencing the past, present and future all at once in this place where time, unhindered by government regulations, collided with itself. At first he tried to fight it, to block out the voices and arrange them in order, but his shock rapidly turned into tranquility as he suddenly honed in on a single, very familiar voice.

Trudie's voice.

She was with him suddenly, a mental image clad in a bright orange skinsuit, caressing him in a lonely prison cell as he wept tears of joy. He shook his head and she became a dark-skinned ghetto girl leading him down a moonlit alley caught between the societal cracks of Sparrow.

But how . . . ?

Storm walked toward her voice, shedding his clothes as he went (behind him, the Babylonian attendant carried them to a wardrobe).

Trudie in San Francisco, in bed with him during a rare meaningful moment:

God, I love it when you fuck me, Storm—but I love it even more when you just lie with me and we pig out on sweet potato chips and watch the news together. Baby, you make me high.

Trudie, nonchalantly spitting watermelon seeds at him at their table in the Boiler Room:

I don't give a shit about you, Storm—but you're the only

guy who's ever treated me decently, you know that? And if you ever ditch this place, God willing, I want you to remember that when you're screwing some other bitch.

He laughed, her words drawing him onward, entrancing him. He slipped into the water, so delighted that he hardly noticed anything around him. Certainly he didn't realize what was happening near the temple entrance until it was too late—

—and then there was chaos as he was ambushed by a gaggle of Patrolmen, each and every one of their laser rifles pointed at his head. They wore sealed helmets to protect them from the flux of overlapping streams; distractions would be impossible.

Several people in the water screamed and swam for cover, sensing that these men had no intention of preserving peace in the face of the law.

"Raise your hands above your head, palms facing out!" shouted one of the men menacingly.

Storm obeyed, his hopes evaporating. He was so close and now this. After more than a lifetime of escaping death, he was going to end here, in a pool of blood, staining the most sacred of places. There could be no justice in the universe, he knew that now and vowed to take that lesson with him into his next life where he just might get things right for a change.

"Storm Anderson," came a familiar voice—this one bringing an echo of fear and hatred with it. "At last we are allowed an encore reunion."

He turned around, found himself face to face with Foreman Ketch, who stood with his arms folded and a smile on

his lips. He was exactly the same as he'd always been—time had not touched his hawk-like visage. Unlike his men, he wore no protective helmet, but that was no surprise since he *was* an immortal and, apparently, an avatar. He provided his own protection from the inside.

“You again,” Storm responded coldly. “I must be quite the thorn in the Patrol’s side for you to make an appearance *here*—or do all higher-ups get to enjoy the splendor while three quarters of the galaxy fights over novelty time machines?”

Ketch smiled. “I pride myself on my patience, and I must admit that you gave me quite a run for the money. Annoying at times, but overall a memorable experience. Not just for me, but for all the human race, for you see you have become an icon, a symbol to the people of what we can achieve when we are driven by fear and intolerance. But all is not lost, for very shortly you will have one last chance to redeem yourself as you make an example of what happens to renegade streamers when justice is finally enforced.”

“Justice?” echoed Storm with the mother of all disgusted expressions. “You call *this* justice? Shooting a naked, unarmed man in the holy Temples of Time?”

Ketch waved at his men to lower their rifles as he stepped in close. “I call it justice when the man responsible for the permanent alteration of the space-time continuum is at last captured and given the punishment he deserves for his crimes.”

“Still using outdated science, eh? But you forget—I know the *truth* now. I’ve seen across the streams. There is-

n't just *one* timeline, *one* beginning, *one* end."

"You've said as much during our previous meetings."

"It doesn't end here—it never ends, don't you see? Push someone like me out of the way and I just slip into another cosmic layer. We're all the same energy."

Ketch's face darkened. "You know, when I return to my own time, several decades from now, and have to put the missing pieces of the puzzle that you've destroyed back together, I will take great pleasure in knowing that I will never see you again."

"Don't be too sure."

"On the contrary, I am quite certain you will never be seen again after today, for I have taken the liberty of finding your birth stream and insuring that you are never born. Your good friend, Mr. Squire, will not be able to help you either because he too has now ceased to exist."

Storm felt the urge to vomit, but held back his weakness; he was determined to go down with dignity. "Still the same old story, eh? Facing your victims at their weakest moments." It was an outright attempt at verbal leverage and he knew it, but words were all he had now.

Ketch had them as well. "Chris said something like that just before he died."

Suddenly Storm's sanity cracked. He couldn't keep the rage under control anymore as he lunged for Ketch and grabbed his neck. If nothing else, he demanded to see this man's death before his own.

The assault took everyone by surprise. The Patrolmen stepped back, lifting their weapons but not discharging them as Storm and Ketch staggered along the walkway in a

murderous embrace. For a moment, there was only the two men struggling with each other and it looked as if Storm was winning. Ketch's face was beet-red by the time he managed to raise a hand above his shoulder and snap his finger. The soldiers nearby tensed, lifting their rifles.

"Stop immediately or we will open fire!" one of them yelled.

Storm cast a crazed glance towards the men and knew that as much as he would have liked to see Ketch die beside him, the inner-urges that had kept him alive for all this time made him far more afraid of dying. He trusted, he believed there was a way to continue without the physical anchor of his body, but he didn't yet *know*—and so everything he'd done and experienced in this life might have been part of his spiritual growth . . . or it might have simply been part of the highly complex chain of biological and chemical responses that comprised his human template.

"Storm," gurgled Ketch as he struggled to loosen the death-grip on his neck. "Release me and you have a chance. If not, you're as good as dead. After all this time, to end this way . . . such a shame . . ."

It was over then. Storm knew the man was lying, knew there was nothing left here but a grim inevitability—and yet he let go, physically and mentally stricken by a new inexplicable epiphany.

Relinquishing his grip, he stepped back towards the edge of the walkway, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his entire body shuddering.

Ketch rubbed his neck and made a gesture with his hand. "Shoot him," he ordered, his voice hoarse but impec-

cably devoid of emotion.

Storm merely stood and waited, didn't even cry out in pain as a laser charge ripped through his chest, tore him apart so efficiently that there wasn't even a splash below.

* * *

Fire laps at him, cleansing him of everything but a single all-encompassing impression of a spiral galaxy turning and turning—and then there is emptiness, a void more overwhelming than the most horrific nightmare, tiny points of light spread far apart and representing distant universes not yet grown large enough to fill the endlessness; falling face-forward in every direction at once as he falls into himself, his memories swirling all around without a brain to hold it all and he grabs at the first image, the first place and time, holding it, holding it

* * *

The beaches of Moon 3 were known to be some of the most beautiful in the galaxy. Crystal clear waters lapped gently at white sands, faintly glittering in the violet light of the weather satellites which orbited above. Here and there, tall, spindly-looking palms and lulling goose-tongues swayed in the light breeze that tousled the sand during an utterly breathtaking (if man-made) evening.

Storm lifted his head from the ground, sucked in a deep breath as he coughed sand and spittle. He sat up—and felt as if two versions of himself were occupying the same

body. One, shivering from the shock of being blasted in the chest by a laser rifle; the other, shivering from cold and claustrophobia, being stuffed into a flesh body so he could meet Chris in time for—

—Chris, he thought. *The rendezvous point. My God . . . I'm doing it all over again.*

All sorts of notions flashed through his mind, then, and he got to his feet, squinted in the direction of where he knew the shuttle would be landing soon. His first instinct—his *original* instinct—was to get there as quickly as possible, so as to not miss his friend. However, a dozen steps along, he turned around and started walking in the opposite direction, ascending the wind-sculpted slopes until he found a patch of goose-tongues to squat behind.

He waited, and, as expected, the shuttle came, hovering over the beach and training its lights back and forth, back and forth. Eventually it lifted off and was gone.

Without clothes, without identification—without a *future*—Storm wandered the beach. He thought of the Void, the infinitesimal universes he'd spied in the fraction of an instant, the many, many worlds where he'd ended his life locked in a death-hold with Foreman Ketch; he wondered if it hadn't been part of the foreman's plan, to keep him locked in the karmic cycle, stuck in the Patrol's exhaustive database—trapped in Standard as long as he continued to blindly follow the loop that lead him to the Temples of Time and to death.

This world, however, was a completely new offshoot; new, but more familiar and reassuring than anything Storm had ever known—because it was *his*. In breaking

the cycle, in letting go of everything at the last instant, he'd created a new quantum possibility that no one knew about, and that meant he was off the map.

Free.

He thought of physics, of science and the technical possibility that the Patrol's laser rifles, in such close proximity with the Temple time streams, had created some sort of time warp transferring his molecules into an adjacent stream. In the end, however, he decided on a miracle.

He walked for a while, breathed the air, listened to the sea—tried to figure out what he'd done, what he was going to do. *Only a chaser could have pulled off something like this*, he thought, *but I'm no chaser. I'm no master of the streams*. During his time on the Gecko Homeworld, DK had taught him things, mostly of a disciplinary nature, but the truths he'd found there had been less revelatory than he'd expected. There had been no magic spells, no metaphysics—no veteran holy men levitating for the amusement of others. Nothing like he used to see in the newsfeeds back on Earth.

There is only the center, DK had once said. *The desire within that shapes what is without. You have a thought that travels through the motions of your body and affects the physical world around you to get you what you want. Chasers know that sometimes to get what they want they have to adjust the world around them before they can affect it.*

Eventually Storm crossed paths with a married couple, John and Suzanne, who invited him onto their towel. When they asked him about his clothes, he lied, made up

TIME CHASER

a story about the tide washing them away. They smiled and laughed in a good-natured way and offered him what they had, as well as a lift into the city.

During the drive, he sat quietly in his seat and stared at the stars, and he felt at peace—physically apart from everything he'd ever known, yes, but at home in the universe.

My own little universe, he thought, recalling Foreman Ketch's ominous words regarding the erasure of his birth stream. *This might be a dream, or I might be dead—but it's still happening. Somehow I still exist, and with an entirely new set of circumstances . . . something the Patrol can't touch because it's not listed in their database.*

"You okay back there, buddy?" asked John, friendly eyes twinkling in the rear-view mirror.

Storm smiled, inside and out, and wiped a tear from his cheek. "Couldn't be better."

"So, where to?"

"Sparrow, I think. Got an old friend there I've been meaning to visit."

"Ah, Sparrow. Suzy and myself visited there a few years ago. Amazing outback."

Storm nodded, and he thought of Chris, still alive, and of Trudie, Jason, DK, Jennie, Annah—all still alive, all still untouched in this instance where the worst had never happened.

He closed his eyes and dreamed of the possibilities.

XX . BREAKFAST WITH CHRONOS

So, I'm sitting splat in the middle of this pub, this thinly-disguised excuse for a fuck club, this neon haze-filled, hormone-ridden anomaly growing on the dark side of a space station stuck in a half-assed orbit around Saturn, and I'm thinking to myself: why the hell aren't I getting triple-bypass surgery? It's not that the place is that bad, mind you. Fuck clubs are magnets for the younger, more devastatingly beautiful generation—those who were borne from all the latest templates and who have absolutely no inhibitions when it comes to flaunting their pre-programmed glory for a room full of horny strangers. I could sit here for the rest of my life just getting by on the sheer quantity of bare female ass—but I'm old, you see, just past fifty, sitting bloated and drunk in my cheesy plastic overcoat (the XTC management has a thing for erotic costumes—call it a fetish). I must look like a pervert, a relic trying to fit in with the cool kids. Hell, I *feel* like a pervert, even though everyone here is supposedly nice and legal.

Ah, but all is not lost. There's a relatively good selection of potent, organic Earth-style alcoholic drinks being served regularly by this naked brunette with perky, hand-sized breasts and the firmest, most perfectly shaped rear you ever saw. She smiles at me as she unloads the lat-

est in a barrage of beers, gins, and vodkas—my most recent paycheck now gone to hell—onto the small rounded piece of faux-wood which I've claimed as my table for the evening.

"Forget your costume at home?" she asks.

I flash her, revealing my naked puffy body for a brief moment before hastily covering up again. "I've improvised."

"It's going to take an entire evening to work all this off."

"Sorry, sweet thing. I got work tonight. Gotta keep my editor satisfied or else he goes supernova."

She kisses me on the forehead. I think her name is Elena, though it's been a while since I last spent the night with her. Almost a year since I've been out in this neck of the woods. But God, she's still as cute as I remember. I stroke her thigh briefly. Just the right amount of muscle, the right curves; she's got an athletic template—like most people these days—and it looks good on her, probably looks even better when she's in bed and careening towards an orgasm with all the spunk of an Olympian.

Elena Whatsername holds my gaze for a moment, waiting for me to change my mind. When I don't say anything, she cocks her head slightly to the left and puts on her pouty schoolgirl look. "Well, don't work too hard. I don't want to see anymore gray in that magnificent head of hair you've got there. I'm not seeing anyone tonight. Call my room later if you change your mind."

"Sure thing."

One last squeeze and she's gone, weaving her way between the two dozen other tables occupied by men far

younger and far more attractive than I. They pinch and squeeze and politely ask for her room number; she's had all her shots, so there's nothing she can pick up besides a cheap one-night stand, maybe some extra credit. Most of these men—hell, most of these *boys*—however, wouldn't know how to treat a lady proper if she had instructions tattooed on her cunt . . . which is probably why Elena puts up with a 50-year-old bachelor like myself when she could just as easily be sucking down the juice from some young twenty-something with a freshly-charged credit card. I may be fat and bald, I may sometimes lose my breath during foreplay, but I know how to make an evening last. At least, that's the story I'm sticking to.

Hell, I'm going down the familiar road again. Pretty soon I'll be feeling sorry for myself in one of the nearby restroom stalls (I always sit close to the men's room—force of habit) as I hurl up my weight in booze and fast food.

Time to get down to business, I tell myself.

And business is, somewhere in the background, why I'm here tonight. With drink in hand, I shift in my chair and look out across the pit, above and beyond the neon-colored soap suds shrouding the ravers, dancing, touching, kissing, fucking. I look for that lone figure sitting at one of the personal tables near the rear wall of the club, where the view of Saturn is unobstructed. They said he'd be wearing an angel costume; one look at him and I believe he *is* an angel. Too out of place, too respectable looking. Young and yet somehow not naive, not here to relieve his hormones in any mouth or cunt that happens to pass his way. He's tall, lean, has a slightly overenthusiastic muscle

TIME CHASER

build, and long blond hair tied in a tail. His costume is a jab at his own masculinity: boots, a pair of shimmering, skintight stockings that reach his thighs, and a pair of glittery wings attached to a long-sleeved, collared spandex athletic top that looks as if it shrank a dozen sizes in the wash. Chest, abdomen, butt, and crotch are all blatantly unobstructed. He may not be here for the skin, I think to myself, but he knows how to pimp himself regardless.

The last of my drinks is now a lingering memory at the back of my throat. I set my glass down and fumble in my pocket for the multi-unit I'd almost forgotten back at the hotel room. A quick tap of the wake key and my notes pop up onscreen, right where I left them:

- They call him Chronos. No one knows his real name.
- Supposedly much, much older than his appearance lets on. Possibly centuries old.
- You won't know him, nor will he look at all familiar to you or anyone else connected to your birth stream. Naturally that's because he's supposedly broken free of his own stream and now wanders from time to time in order to keep ahead of the feds.
- Frequents Club XTC. His trademark costume is a pair of angel wings. He'll be sitting at the edge of the club, near the viewports. Ask him the secret question and make sure he gives the correct reply.

I take another look at Chronos and I'm sure he could be the man I'm looking for. If not, the worst that could happen is I approach him, he thinks I'm hitting on him, and

he clocks me one in the jaw. Fortunately, there's so much liquor in my bloodstream right now I probably wouldn't feel a thing until tomorrow anyway.

Tucking the multi-unit back into my coat pocket, I make my way around the pit, past perky waitresses and slick-skinned patrons, skirting the sea of sex, ascending the steep ramp that leads me to the private tables. Chronos is totally non-responsive as I take a seat beside him and clear my throat, trying not to notice that, in its relaxed state, even, his cock is several inches longer than mine. My ego assures me it must be a prosthetic, part of his costume.

A pause, a quick rehearsal of my lines, and then:

"What's the deal with JON?"

Chronos doesn't answer me directly, nor does he even turn his head in the slightest to acknowledge my presence. I'm either not worth the effort or else he's friggin' deaf. Somewhere amidst the low purr of the air filtration system, the background cacophony of drunken, carnal moans, wet skin slapping against wet skin, he decides to whisper a reply in a single, subtle note:

"You tell me."

Give this guy an Oscar; he memorized three words. "It's an acronym. The lead singer thinks he's a descendant of Jim Morrison. When once the band was coming up with its signature neo-retro sound, he was quoted as saying, 'It's Jim or Nothing.' This led to the rhythm guitarist quitting and the name 'JON' being adopted by the remaining members."

"Which is why everyone considers them a covers band now," says Chronos. "Even the original material is disre-

garded as *repeat rock*.” He faces me now, and I can see that he’s smiling; this amuses him somehow but he’s playing along anyway for the fuck of it. His dark green eyes catch the light of the nearest viewport as if the solar system dances just for him. I have to admit I’m caught off-guard—but only for a second. Once I figure out how to breathe again, I realize Chronos has just got exotic looks, a damned good template, nothing more, and he knows how to make his facial features radiate charm, charisma, power. If I’d been born a woman, I’m sure I’d have half his cock jammed down my throat right about now. If I’d been born a woman.

Another disgruntled man-child, I hear myself thinking as I continue checking out his face for even the slightest wrinkle. Probably just turned twenty-one . . . shit, he looks more like an out-of-work fashion model than a notorious time chaser. Any hope of a real story quickly dissolves, and I realize I’m going to have to shovel horse shit to make my deadline.

I offer my hand. “Name’s Demis. I’m from SkyOne.”

Chronos shakes my hand and chuckles. “One of the big boys, huh?”

“I’ve done fairly well for myself.” I trail off, waiting for him to offer me some insight. Instead, he merely studies me, leaning his arm on the table and waiting patiently. I find myself falling into his gaze again, so I turn away briefly and clear my throat as I pull out my multi-unit. “Word has it that you go by the name Chronos.”

He nods, still smiling slightly.

I think I’m getting a nervous twitch around my right

eye. “Okay. *The Chronos*, as in *Chronos: the Time Patrol’s Most Wanted Chaser?*”

“Really, now? Is that my reputation?”

“I would think that if you’re really who you say you are, you’d have paid attention to a newscast or two.” A sigh escapes my lips. The kid’s probably drunk, though his table is occupied by a single glass containing—I find out when I blatantly take a whiff—ice water.

I wait.

So does he.

I clear my throat again and gaze over my shoulder. I could use Elena and another drink right about now. “I’m just supposed to believe that you’re Chronos, then?”

“You believe whatever you want to believe.”

“Granted, you fit the description. But no one’s ever really *seen* Chronos. It’s all urban legend. They all say you’re tall, blond, you’ve got this stare so that you just *know* you’re you—but then again, anyone with good enough looks and enough free time on their hands can mold themselves to match that description. The fashion industry would be long dead otherwise.”

Chronos takes my skepticism in stride. “There should be questions, right?”

“Yeah,” I reply, scanning my notes. “Questions that only you would know the answer to, since you’re not from this stream and therefore don’t exist. No one else can know them unless they’d traveled to your birth stream. But then again, if you have enough money and you can make the right connections . . . I know a guy who knew a guy who did just that to avoid paying back taxes on his estate.” I

pause just long enough to take another glance at Chronos, who folds his hands on the table and holds me in his gaze. There's something there behind those eyes, something large and deep . . . something I've never seen before, period. If this guy is a scammer, he's the best in the business. If he's an actor . . . well, I've already given him an Oscar, haven't I?

"You're human, I assume?" I murmur, looking away again and pretending to be busy jotting down notes.

"Sure thing."

"Born where?"

"San Francisco, California. Earth."

"When?"

"November 10, 2279."

I put my multi-unit down. "2279?"

"Yes."

"That makes you nearly three-hundred years old."

"Lucky me."

There's just a little sarcasm in my voice as I laugh and say, "You bear it well."

"It's hard to get past my appearance, I know—"

"What's hard to get past? You're telling me I'm supposed to believe you're a day over nineteen—twenty at the most—when I don't think you've even started shaving yet —"

Chronos cuts me off: "You're thinking in terms of old style age. Wrinkles, sagging skin—you're only old if you're *old*. I don't look old enough so I'm full of shit, right? And you, a middle-aged tabloid reporter, having to come out here on a limb because you haven't had a really hot story in

too long, your editor thinks it's time to put you out to pasture unless maybe, *maybe* you can come up with an exclusive that nobody's been able to get in almost three centuries. An exclusive that only Demis Matheson could possibly get. So you follow a lead or two, a friend of a friend of a friend drops the hint that he can get you an interview with Chronos, the human sector's only time chaser to have jumped multiple streams without being caught by the feds . . . you come here to meet me in person, and when you do, you suddenly want to call it a night simply because *I don't look the part*. Sounds like an awful waste of time, doesn't it? For the both of us."

I feel myself get all tense inside. Chronos has touched upon most of the major points of my life (the most recent stuff, anyway). Still, I'm not inclined to believe he's anything more than a well-researched pain in the ass. Not unless he offers some proof. "Have you been talking to Ben? Did he put you up to this? A joke, right?"

"Do you want the story or not?"

I'm starting to wonder if he gets the point. "It depends on what kind of story. We can sit here bullshitting all night, but where's it going to lead us? I need proof. I need a goddamned story."

Chronos nods, his smile returning. He turns and faces me fully now. "Sure thing, but we're going to have to make a little pact, okay?"

"A pact?"

"Yes. I prove my identity, and no matter what happens, you stick around for a while as my, um, publicist."

"Prove to me that you're really Chronos and I will write a

TIME CHASER

fucking novel about you with all the proceeds going to your favorite chaser cult.” I’m half serious, thinking to myself that if the man sitting before me really *is* Chronos, I’ll probably have to paddle to the restroom there’ll be so much piss in my pants.

“Do I have your word?”

“Yeah, sure. What do you have in mind?”

Chronos slides his chair back now, stands up. “Let’s . . . step outside for some fresh air.”

I blink, uncomprehending. “We’re on a space station.”

“So?”

Chronos walks up to one of the viewports, leaving me hanging in the process. I don’t understand what the hell he intends, and he’s not making any attempt to explain.

I get up after a moment and move to his side. “Well?” I ask, my patience wearing dangerously thin.

“Do you get space sick?”

“Not typically.”

“Good. Hold on.”

I’m about to say something else when suddenly Chronos links my arm in his and lunges at the viewport—no, *through* the viewport. For a sickening moment I feel myself being knocked into the vacuum of space—and then, half a heartbeat later, my body, my senses—everything around me dissolves into nothing. Without eyes I can’t see; without ears I can’t hear; without skin I can’t feel what’s happening . . . but somehow I can still *think*. I can still worry about why the fuck I’m a disembodied galactic burp. There’s a moment of frantic scrambling (pretty hard to describe when you have no senses to go by) before I feel

JESSE GORDON

Chronos' presence somewhere nearby. He's pulling at me; I can feel his mind embracing my own. He's communicating with me:

Settle down. The Guard will mistake you for a comet if you keep this up. Now, where do you want to go?

Anywhere but here, I think. I try to yell a profanity in his general direction, but that proves useless as my vocal cords are now a fragment of my imagination.

Back in your body, huh? Why not relax out here for a while? We can take as much time as we want, and when we're finished, we can return to any stream we choose at any moment we choose. That's right. You and I are on the other side, so to speak. Out of the loop. Purveyors of nonexistence. Still not thrilled? Okay, then. I know a place.

* * *

You feel like you're falling at the speed of light, imploding, being packed down into an impossibly small space as your body re-materializes in the physical world. I have to admit that I'm taking it like a bitch and screaming bloody murder as I fall head-first into a soft hardness—sand, I realize after a moment's confusion. It's kind of hard to sort it all out because my senses are turned up full, amplified a thousand times so that every breath of the wind, every grain of sand clinging to my skin, every subdued sound filling my ears is like a sharpened knife point. The logical half of my brain is telling me to calm down, open my eyes and see what's what. I'll find more answers that way than if I merely lie in a heap on the ground and whine like an in-

fant.

I push myself onto all fours—and I puke my guts out. Five minutes of this and I can finally open my eyes. I see Chronos squatting nearby, his costume gone, the wind tousling his now unbridled hair and giving him the appearance of some dangerously calm animal out on the prowl. We're planetside, on a beach, apparently. As I wipe my chin with the back of my hand, I manage to get to my knees and look up into the night sky where several artificial satellites orbit, providing a pale bluish light to make up for the missing moon. Closer to home, there's the glowing nightclub strip; in the background, the sound of waves washing ashore.

"Earth . . . how the fuck . . . ?" It's almost too much to believe, but here I am. Nearly a billion miles from where I should be according to all laws of physics. I start to stand up, to ask Chronos how the hell this can be possible, but I realize when I feel the breeze on my cock that I'm as nude as he is.

My plastic raincoat has failed to make the transition.

Something like "goddammit" escapes my lips and I fall back into a sitting position, covering myself with my hands and glaring at Chronos. The dizzying vertigo is rapidly giving way to angered embarrassment, as there are other people out on the beach, some of whom are looking in my direction and no doubt wondering what my fucking problem is.

Chronos' shame is nonexistent. He looks as if he's never been more at ease. "Don't worry. This is a nude beach. Comes in handy when you need to come and go in the

buff. No questions asked.”

My thoughts are racing. There’s no longer any doubt in my mind: Chronos is the real thing. Or else I’m really, really plastered. In either case, I have to deal with it.

Chronos grins, reaches down and grabs a handful of sand, which he lets sift through his fingers as he speaks. “You wanted proof. Actual facts to back my story. I’m giving it to you. A front-row seat, if you will.”

“Story?” I whisper loudly. “This isn’t a story—it’s a fucking *phenomenon*! I mean, we just set a universal record for the lightest trip across the solar system! Holy shit, I don’t even know where to begin!”

“At the beginning, naturally. This is just an example, your proof. A little demonstration of time and motion, which are synonymous.”

“What are you saying?”

Standing, Chronos offers me his hand. “I’m saying that you and I just took a nice little trip through time. Now, I want you to go home—or try to at least, ’cause you’ll probably find out real soon that Demis Matheson doesn’t exist anymore. At least, not in this stream or any other stream governed by the Patrol.”

I get to my feet, though I’m remaining slightly hunched in a feeble attempt to hide my noticeable potbelly and graying pubic hair. “We’ve streamed? Are you serious?” Stupid question. I can see it in Chronos’ expression: of course he’s serious.

“See, time streaming, it’s not just one straight line,” continues Chronos as he takes a few steps and then stops, lifting his foot into the air and letting the sand slip between

his toes. "It's something else entirely . . . and I want you to help me make this common knowledge."

"Okay, but . . . I mean, *how* . . ." God, I'm babbling, prickling from head to toe. "My things are all gone, my clothes, my notes, my ID card. Shouldn't you whisk us back to XTC or something?"

Chronos folds his arms. "There's no reason to go back to the station right now. Here's where you need to be. Right now. You." He points at me. "That's all you need to get the story right. When we're through, I'm sure you'll remember more than a thing or two. Now, go home like I said. When you've seen the truth, come back here. I'll be waiting." With that he turns away and starts towards the water. After a few steps he stops and turns back to face me. "Oh, and by the way, if you're thinking of reporting our little trip to the Patrol . . . don't. You'll only make yourself look like a basket case, and you'll sure as hell miss out on a cool story."

His instructions are clear, but even still, I stumble after him like a boy after his departing father. "Wait—where the fuck are you going?"

"For a swim."

"But—you can't just leave me here! What about my clothes? My things? Chronos!"

Momentarily, I quiet down as I notice a young couple glaring at me from where they sit together on the beach. I ignore them, though, and watch in disbelief as Chronos wades into the pitch-black water, finally diving in when it's deep enough. After a moment he's gone from sight. The only indication of his presence is the occasional appear-

ance of a sleek, muscular body as it slices through the water like a dolphin.

I can't very well go in after him, so I take his advice and head back up the beach, eventually stumbling onto a paved sidewalk that leads to a small community area. There's a dimly-lit public restroom at one end, with a telephone booth built into its side. I make my way there hastily, shutting myself inside the booth and punching in the code for a collect call. Ben's number comes to mind, since he was the one who gave me the lead concerning Chronos in the first place. Fucking better be there. (How the hell am I going to explain *this* one?)

"Hello?"

"Holy shit, Ben! It's good to hear your voice!"

"Who is *this*?"

"It's Demis. Look, I don't have time to explain right now. I'm sorry for waking you up—just come down and pick me up. I'm at—fuck, where the hell am I? It looks like Newport Beach. I'm near a restroom, across the street from a nightclub called The Horizon—"

"Sir, I think you have the wrong number. I don't know anyone named Demis."

"What? No, Ben—it's me, Demis! Goddammit, get the wax out of your ears!"

"Hey, it's going on midnight. I don't need this—fuck off, pal."

The connection terminates unceremoniously, leaving me quite alone to fend for myself. A small part of me insists that this is a joke, friends fucking with friends for the hell of it. So I call three other people; two of them accept

TIME CHASER

my call, and you know what? They don't have the slightest clue who I am. I hang up and lean against the inside of the booth and try to puzzle it all out until someone knocks on the plastic and asks to use the phone. I take my leave and head for cover under a tree, where I gaze up and down the street and seriously consider trying to make my way home.

I'm back on the beach before I can finish the thought.

Chronos is there, waiting for me just like he said. He's sharing a towel with some college girl, laying on his side and chatting jovially with her. She's looking at him (or should I say she's looking at *parts* of him?) like she wants to do more than just chat, and, in fact, reaches out at one point to grasp his penis.

That's when I butt in.

The girl looks disappointed; Chronos merely glances up at me and then gets to his feet.

"Sorry, I have to go," he tells his female companion as he helps her up.

"So soon?" she murmurs, brushing sand from her butt and giving me a look.

"Afraid so."

"Can I kiss you goodnight?"

Chronos nods—but instead of kissing him on the mouth, the girl crouches and plants one on the tip of his semi-erect cock. Then, grabbing her towel, she straightens, gives me another dirty look, and jogs off.

I walk with Chronos a ways until we're relatively out of earshot of the nighttime nudies.

Then I start gushing:

"I'm convinced. You're the real thing. Joke or not, no-

body else could do something like this and be so damned cool about it. And then there's the instantaneous space travel thing—but I have a million questions, and I don't know where to start. You suggested the beginning, so . . ." I set myself on the sand and gesture for Chronos to do the same. ". . . let's start at the beginning. Tell me how all this shit works. Tell me how you've gone from point A to point B and everything in between. Christ, man, tell me what the hell is going on."

Chronos joins me on the sand.

Hence, we begin.

* * *

I began as Storm Anderson.

Born in San Francisco at the height of the overly-indulgent body template fad, I was to be a vigorous blending of my parents' favorite runway models and sports stars. Prominent muscle build, efficient metabolism, well-balanced facial features, impeccable coordination, dick several sizes larger than the norm—they paid a pretty penny to have me cooked up into a delectable portrait of vanity. And it wasn't just the genetic template, but everything else that goes along with being the perfect child. I was a veteran model by the time I hit the fourth grade; I was a seasoned dancer, a solid gymnast, a world-class athlete performing around the globe by the time I was thirteen, and when it came time to get my first car, well, let's just say I didn't need to haggle the price down on the showroom floor.

TIME CHASER

I hated every minute of it.

Between school, practice, and photo shoots, I had about five minutes a day to do what I wanted. My first time with a girl was in the janitor's closet at a modeling agency—five minutes to learn how to become a man before we were discovered, quickly scolded, and rushed off to our respective shoots. One day, when my dad caught me playing hooky from gym, he cleared out my room—toys, books, video games, medals, trophies, and certificates—and left only a mattress for me to sleep on. If ever I had an afternoon free to bum around the mall with the guys, my mom would call me an hour in with news that they needed a boy with my body type down at the studio.

By seventeen, I'd had enough. I demanded a seat in a public school. I showed up at the studio or in the gym when it suited me. I started going to parties, meeting girls; I never really got into the drug scene, but I was always on the fringes, always ready to slip over the edge. My parents reminded me that I was young, extraordinarily beautiful, and genetically predisposed to dominate any arena of my choice. I ignored them and did the bare minimum required to graduate. The day I turned eighteen, I moved out of my parents' place, stayed with a girl I'd met through the modeling agency. I let my parents keep all the money—I needed to do for myself, me and my girl, the two of us working, saving up for a place of our own.

But the real change came a year later. A year out of my parents' place, a year away from all the glitz and glamor my template had afforded me, I switched from office clerk to computer grunt at a local time joint called Timewise.

I remember the day that started me on my journey towards becoming a chaser: I was standing inside streaming booth number 32 and admiring the handiwork of a time-sick customer who'd only moments ago taken it upon himself to vomit all over the helm, as well as a formidable portion of the booth itself.

What a fucking mess, I thought. Bits of undigested lunch meat and what appeared to be rice were smeared over the controls like a grotesque marinade. And I got to clean it up.

I pulled a pair of gloves from my coveralls and got to work, cursing my luck. It was to be expected, though. Timewise was a small venue, an upstart in the streaming business. Bad management had brought about routine downsizing, resulting in the remaining pool of employees "consolidating their efforts." Simply put: I held a mop and bucket about as often as I held a multi-unit.

Ten minutes of diligent work and the booth smelled presentable again. I knelt before the helm and popped off the access panel to the data bay. A quick scan of the system revealed that an upgrade was in order. I whipped out my multi-unit and punched in a request for the then-current time codes. Thankfully they'd been transferred to Timewise's servers already. The company may have been ailing as far as management was concerned, but at least they kept up with the current codes, which allowed them to offer the most up-to-date, secured streams—even though that was probably only because the technology was government-regulated—without me having to fetch them from the official servers first. Get too out of date and you're

TIME CHASER

shut down because you become a security risk for cyber hackers or time chasers to exploit. (Which was, I'm pretty sure, Timewise's eventual downfall, though I haven't been in that part of town for ages, so I can't confirm.)

Anyway, I was doing my job, watching the megabytes flow, when my co-worker and friend, Jason Dang, barged into the booth.

"Anderson! Get a move on! Some fat kid wants to re-live his first buffet!"

I glanced over my shoulder; Jason—tall, sporty, Asian—stood grinning in the doorway. He held a broken power coil in his hands, which he hefted like a football. "You know," I said, "I started streaming when I was eight years old and I never spilled my guts like this." I followed Jason out of the booth, disposed of my soiled gloves in a nearby recycle unit.

Jason shrugged. "Then again, you probably never inhaled a whole sub sandwich five minutes before you sat in the chair."

I sighed. "Life is great. Fat old guys trying to cling to their college days or zit-faced teenagers wanting to re-live their first and only fuck for the hundredth time in a row—that's all I see, everyday."

"Yeah, well . . . you and I both make decent money doing this crap. Nothing to blow our noses with, but it's keeping you and Trudie in that posh penthouse of yours, right?"

I laughed, nodded.

"So, shut up—it's quittin' time in an hour."

Jason and I entered the main lobby of the cafe. The in-

terior of the place was a tacky remake of ancient Egypt meets the modern era. You had plastic pharaohs and hieroglyphs on the walls; streaming booths were speckled at regular intervals around a central dining area, which was comprised of a dozen circular tables. Faint easy listening music wafted in between sounds of idle conversation, plates clinking, and curtains swishing as customers went about their business.

We were halfway across the lobby when there came a sudden change in the overall mood of the place—people's attention became disjointed, voices scattered, hushed, faded beneath a louder argument taking place at Time-wise's service desk.

"Aw, crap," Jason muttered, grabbing my arm and halting me in my tracks. "Another one of *them*."

I scanned the lobby, spotted a pale, twenty-something woman holding one of the cashiers at gunpoint near the front desk. The woman looked anorexic, was skinned in black spandex and chains—the latest cyber-grunge garb—and wore a prominent tattoo on her forehead that marked her as a member of some sort of anti-conformist group.

In this case, a time chaser.

Curiosity got the better of me. I left Jason's side and pushed forward through the crowd to get a better view of the scene. Now that everyone had taken notice of what was going on, the time chaser's nervous demeanor increased tenfold. She was obviously inexperienced, and evidently coming off some sort of heavy psychotropic high—a common symptom among those who abused the streams. Namely wannabe chasers, those who go for the

TIME CHASER

pure euphoria rather than for the principle of freedom. These kinds of people can be dangerous when they don't keep their thoughts in order—and this chick looked about as out of order as you can get.

"Everyone stay where you are!" she shouted, her hands starting to shake slightly. She nevertheless kept her gun pressed relatively firmly against the cashier's temple. "Don't move! Just . . . just everyone on the floor! Now!"

Several of the customers uttered frightened gasps; I merely sighed and slowly lowered myself onto the floor like everyone else. You see, every so often these sorts of people would come waltzing into the cafe demanding to be given access to the latest time codes in the hopes that there was some secret way, some bit of encoded data that would allow access to alternate-running time streams—even though that's legally impossible, because as you know, commercial streaming only allows you to jump backwards in your own birth stream. And besides the point, the codes are so heavily encoded it would take a crypto-genius ten years to figure things out, and by then, the encryption would have been routinely changed dozens of times so that such attempts at breaking the codes would have proved worthless. Even the supposed techie guys like me never actually saw the codes. We only maintained the equipment they ran on. The technology's inner workings remains propriety. Miss Time Chaser either didn't know that, or was naive enough to believe she could actually succeed where countless others had failed.

She had the cashier secure the main entrance.

"The codes," she said, pulling a data card from her

knapsack. She shoved it into the cashier's quivering hand. "I want everything you got . . . now!"

The cashier—a leonine female—was new (as well as young). As such, she didn't have her full growth on her yet. The result was a furry humanoid adult of comparative strength and size. "I-I . . . there are hundreds of terabytes—and the card has to be formatted, which could take twenty minutes . . ." She was stalling, of course. Trying to drag things out until the Time Patrol arrived.

The chaser looked slightly caught off-guard. Her right eye twitched involuntarily as she licked her lips. For a moment it looked as if she might just forget the whole idea and leave, but then she seemed to work things out in her head and she shoved the cashier forward. "Don't gimme any bullshit! Just . . . just start downloading!"

"There's a keycard," murmured the cashier. "I don't have the keycard."

As a security measure, no single person was in charge of the data vault. The keycard was attached to a dog tag which the wearer tucked down into his or her shirt and which was rotated at regular intervals—and at the moment it rested against my chest.

"Mother fucker," I breathed, for the first time feeling a bit endangered. I could feel the card pressing ominously against my skin.

The chaser experienced another brief epileptic episode before calling out across the lobby: "Well . . . fuck! Who has the keycard?!?"

Nobody moved. I bit his lip.

"You got five seconds!" The time chaser shouted. "Who-

TIME CHASER

ever has the keycard . . . you got five seconds to stand up or I blow this bitch's brains out! One! Two! Three—"

I swallowed hard and got to my feet, arms hanging at my sides, relaxed as possible, *easy-bitch-don't-shoot*.

The time chaser's eyes focused on me. "You . . . t-take me to the data vault. Go!"

There was a brief moment of eye contact between me and the frightened cashier, whose eyes said clearly, help me. Don't let me get killed so close to quitting time. I could only sigh and hope she didn't freak out before the feds arrived. I turned slowly and began walking towards the rear of the lobby. I remember passing a middle-aged man in a business suit, an overweight woman who was breathing heavily as if she were on the verge of fainting, a high school girl with her hand clasping a small crucifix attached to a bead necklace—all huddled on the floor, come to Timewise as customers and instead finding themselves prisoners. And they all had the same stare, that universal expectation: You've got the keycard, you've got control. Handle the situation.

When I reached the data vault door, I was surprised to find the time chaser (and her hostage) a mere three feet behind me. I figured she'd want to stay near the entrance—she seemed to realize the inefficient position she'd put herself in, and glanced anxiously back and forth between the lobby area and the vault as she tried to keep track of two situations at once. I was tempted to lunge at her when she wasn't looking; I definitely had the advantage as far as height and body mass were concerned—it was just wondering how loose my captor's trigger finger was that kept

me minding my manners.

“Get busy,” the time chaser said with a nod at the door.

I unzipped my coveralls and pulled out the keycard. I inserted it into the reader.

“Voice authorization required,” came the security system’s androgynous drone.

“Anderson, Storm. System maintenance administrator,” I answered.

There was a brief pause as the computer did its thing, matching my voice with the recorded audio print. And then, “Access granted.”

The door clicked and swished open, revealing the two dozen softly humming server racks that made up Time-wise’s data vault. The time chaser handed me the blank data card and reminded me again to start downloading immediately. Meanwhile, she kept her stance at the edge of the lobby.

“Just keep still, everybody!” she shouted. “Just . . . keep on the floor and nobody will get hurt!”

I went to the nearest terminal and began the process of formatting the data card. As I worked, I found myself routinely checking my captor’s moves and imagining myself in her place. How would I handle the situation if I desperately thought I needed to steal Timewise’s codes? There were more efficient ways to do this, most of them involving hacking in from the outside, over a fiber-optics line—it would have at least negated the risk of having to put a laser through someone’s head.

“You got a name?” I asked, trying to sound mellow as I slowly seated myself on the floor beside the server. I admit

TIME CHASER

it was a mustered calm; I looked far more at ease than I really was.

The time chaser flinched. Or maybe it was a glare. “Hey . . . hey. I didn’t tell you to sit down, fucker.”

I spread my hands. “It’s going to be a while. I’ve been on my feet all day. You should probably sit down too.” I looked up at my captor and wished I could see myself through her eyes. Firm? Persuasive? Handling the situation or silently pleading for my life? There was no way to know what my body language betrayed (although I suppose if I really wanted to, I could hop on back during my next stream . . . just to see).

A moment of silence passed. I looked away, checked the server’s progress.

“Jennie.”

I looked up again. My captor was looking at me, her head twitching slightly, her eyes fixed on mine—and for a moment I felt a pang of emotion I couldn’t describe.

Such need . . . such desperation.

“What?” I asked, blinking, the feeling vexing.

“My name . . . it’s Jennie.”

“Oh.” I swallowed. Suddenly I felt as if I were the captor and she the captured. It made no sense . . . but somehow I’d gained some sort of advantage. “I’m Storm.”

“Storm . . .” Jennie echoed.

There was something almost mesmerizing about the way she was looking at me. Overwhelmingly sad, a deep remorse, a wish, a hope—something deep. Burning. I had to look away.

She wouldn’t let me though. Her gaze held mine as if it

were something tangible. There was passion behind the rail-thin facade, power in the lean countenance.

“I wish you could know . . .” she said. “I wish you could see . . . what I’ve seen . . . you don’t understand now, but . . . you can’t know what it’s like. To truly be free, to be alive . . .”

I didn’t know. My childhood had been spent at the whim of my parents; my adolescence had delivered me into frustrated youth. All I knew was what I was told to do, on the dance floor, on the podium, in front of the camera. At this moment, with Jennie holding me hostage, I felt for the first time the source of my own unmaking. The room seemed to melt away, leaving only Jennie’s face in slow-motion as a dot of red light suddenly appeared on her right cheek, traveled up towards her forehead . . .

“ . . . unless you break free. It’s not just one way. It’s not just backwards or forwards along some fixed birth-to-death fate. It’s every direction at once, exploding . . . from the center. Everything at once, Storm . . . and they don’t want us to know . . .”

The sight was now fixed on Jennie’s forehead. One last movement of her lips:

“ . . . the truth—”

—and suddenly I snapped out of my trance. A quick, searing noise ripped through the air, and Jennie’s head erupted in a geyser of blood, her body stumbling forward, the cashier screaming as four men clad in heavily-padded bodysuits and armed with laser rifles swarmed into the space between the lobby and the data vault.

The Time Patrol had arrived.

TIME CHASER

* * *

I was supposed to pop naked out of a cake. The whole thing had been planned as a surprise for Trudie's twenty-first birthday, it had been her half-serious wish for years—but instead I arrived home four hours late with blood on my clothes and death on my mind.

"What happened to you?" Trudie asked as she let me in. She was half asleep, her hair mussed, her oversized T-shirt rumpled.

I went straight for the love seat at the foot of the bed.

"There was a holdup today," I murmured, leaning back and unzipping the upper portion of my coveralls. I closed my eyes.

"Oh my God," Trudie breathed, pulling random wisps of hair from her face as she came to me. "Are you okay? What happened?"

I sighed, shrugged. "They blew her head off."

"Shit."

"Some time chaser chick. Cops said they'd been on her heels for a while. Dunno what she did, but whatever it was, they took care of it in front of twenty-six customers."

Both of us fell silent for a moment, Trudie leaning against me and gently running her hands along the top of my head (I had a buzz cut back then). We all know public displays of the Patrol's power are somewhat routine, but it's never easy having to watch that power being enacted. It reminds you how delicate the whole time streaming concept is, and how dangerous it can be if you don't play by

the rules. Chasers get little sympathy from the rest of their respective societies because they supposedly risk the healthy continuum of the universe for the sake of addiction. Addiction to the rush of jumping from time to time, no boundaries chaining you to your God-given birth stream. Some say it feels like flying through outer space—only your body is your starship. Others liken it to having a decade's worth of orgasms crammed into a blissful singularity (How was it for you, Demis? Ah . . . sorry to hear that. First times can be rough.)

Eventually I broke the silence with a forced smile. "Happy birthday," I told Trudie.

"Inverted romantic," Trudie replied, tapping her finger against my chest and leaning in close for a kiss. She called me that whenever I shifted moods suddenly. It was her way of letting me know she was interested in helping me deal with my turmoil—by changing the subject. I returned her kisses, felt under her T-shirt, found she wasn't wearing any underwear. I wasn't in the mood for a fuck, but it would take my mind off the Timewise incident. Something life-affirming.

"You know," I whispered into her ear as I helped her pull off her shirt. "There was supposed to be a cake."

Trudie was tugging at my coveralls now, brushing her lips over my abs as she helped me undress. "I know . . . Jason told me last week."

Fucking Jason. "Figures. I hope you're not too disappointed."

"You can make it up to me."

Already the incident at Timewise was forgotten. At

least, in Trudie's mind. It was enough for me, though. I stood, cupped her buttocks with my hands, and led her towards the bathroom. It was cramped, but there was just enough room in the shower stall for two.

"High steam," Trudie instructed as she nibbled at my chest. As I complied, punching in the temperature preset, she slid down onto her knees.

"Hey," I said as she started stroking me. "This is supposed to be *your* birthday."

"Oh, quiet," she replied, and took me into her mouth.

I fell silent, leaned against the wall of the stall and closed my eyes. It was our way. Trudie was my friend, a fellow ex-fashion model riding on the raw sex appeal of her template—but that was all. No heart to heart, no spiritual connection . . . only casual support, physical attention, partly because that was who we were, and partly because that was who we were programmed to be. There was no need to attempt conversation, for the scope of her empathy was limited to what she could see or feel. If her partner looked sad, she had sex with him to cheer him up. If he looked happy, she had sex with him to keep him happy. For a while, since that first time in the janitor's closet, it had been all I wanted in a woman—all I knew how to want (again, we come back to the underlying influence a tweaked template has on one's thoughts and emotions; my fashion model's genes drove me to seek out beauty, to put flesh before soul). Not always, though.

Not tonight.

Trudie's relentless tongue caused me to tremble. Not to brag, but I'm pretty big when fully erect—my father's in-

ability, no doubt, to resist from passing along his exaggerated notion of male pride when he was taking his turn with my template. Consequently, any of the women I've ever been with have had to learn quickly: Don't try to jam it down your throat. Trudie knew this, and so combined her oral and manual techniques in a way that was usually sublime. On this night, however, I looked down to watch her performance, and I felt . . . wrong. All the right elements were there—her free hand tickling my thighs and belly, the water cascading down her slim, athletic body as she writhed in earnest, eager to spur me towards completion—I just wasn't feeling it. Not in any sort of meaningful way.

Efficient little machines, I thought. Both of us. All body and no mind. Typical blonds. We weren't dumb or ditsy; we were just young, horny, pretty to look at, divine to fuck. Trudie had probably loved me, in some shallow way. "He's my boyfriend," she would say with pride when friends were around. Like it was just a game. Mr. Tall, Blond, and Handsome . . . I often wondered if she knew that sometimes the only thing keeping me around was the simple comfort of having a warm body pressed against my own on a sleepless night. She could have been anyone, so long as she was there. I know it sounds bad, but that's what Jennie unlocked in me those few brief moments in Timewise's data vault.

An imminent rush in my groin brought me back to the shower. Muscles clenching, head thrown back, I reached my climax with an unexpected image of Jennie in the darkness behind my eyelids. Trudie mumbled something from

between my legs, started humming deep in her throat—a trick I usually relished—but now it only served to sharpen the alienating image wavering inside my head.

“Stop,” I moaned abruptly, grabbing Trudie’s head, pushing her mouth away. She looked up at me curiously, my fluids running down her chin.

“What?” she murmured, swallowing, wiping.

“Nothing,” I told her. The counterfeit smile was back on my lips as I grasped her under the arms, helped her stand. “Let’s just finish up here and get to bed so I can give you your backup present.”

My mind was a million miles away, but you know how it is once your woman takes you to bed, buries your face in her snatch. Trudie was already slick and swollen—it was good eating.

Too much detail, you say? Ah, well, the small details tend to stand the test of time—and I suppose I do have a fascination with carnal sport, both of us models, athletes, overflowing with youth; she was utterly ignorant, and I was totally alienated. Feeling one way, acting another, saying things that had nothing to do with anything.

I lay awake in bed long after Trudie, satisfied by my return performance, had fallen asleep. With considerable envy I studied her naked form, serene and still (save for the steady motion of her shoulders as she breathed), illuminated slightly by the night light strip that ran along the edges of the bed. I’ve never been able to fall asleep like that. She’d kissed me goodnight, stretched, and rolled onto her front.

That had been that.

The Net was of little assistance. Most of the video feeds were sitcom reruns. There was a political talk show on Sky-One, though. Something to do with the Time Patrol—so of course I shifted onto my back and adjusted the volume on my visor.

“... in light of the recent attack on the UniGuard facility, the Time Patrol has found itself the subject of increasing pressure from intergalactic governments who believe it is time—no pun intended—to change the way streaming codes are handled across the board. Tighter security is a nonplus. Many believe the Patrol should be decentralized. And of course there is the school of thought that the technology itself should be withdrawn from the public, restricted to government use only.”

“Here to offer his insights into the Patrol, where it stands now, and what’s in store for the consortium’s future, we have Foreman Daniel Ketch with us in the studio. Good morning, Foreman.”

“Good morning.”

“Now, then: The recent attacks have certainly served as a reminder of just how delicate an operation it is to maintain and protect the space-time continuum. With this and the numerous other attacks or thefts involving time codes seeming to be on an increase, is the public’s concern warranted?”

“Well, it’s certainly a delicate operation. The very nature of time, and the technology that allows us to stream into the past... we’re talking physics. We’re

talking energy. The physical foundations of our universe—there is always going to be access to the technology no matter how many officers we put out in the field. Should the public be concerned? Yes, of course. Should they be worried? I don't think so. We're in a unique position today, as there have never been so many varied forms of government working together to reach a common goal. The human sector, the Geckos, the amphids, the leonines, sylphids, dual-mans—so many societies have come together to cooperate with one another in making sure our universe's time streams are kept in working order. That cooperation has allowed for faster response times, more effective security measures between transportation ports . . . as hard to believe as it may be, streaming actually becomes safer and more secure with each passing day."

"You mentioned the various forms of governments, humans and non-human, working together to establish a universal police force—if I'm correct?"

"Yes."

"This law-enforcement body, the Time Patrol . . . it's come to many skeptics' attention that while the supporting members of the Patrol are comprised of various intergalactic species, the central Patrol coordination sector—directed by yourself—is made up entirely of human employees. So if you live, say, outside the solar system where humans aren't the dominant species, you get a strong notion of 'The humans dominate the Patrol, the humans dominate the

time codes.”

“Interesting choice of words. You have to remember that there will always be someone who isn’t happy with the way the government is run. You can’t please everyone, though it is a priority to strike a balance between opposing opinions. There’s no perfect candidate to be elected into office. Allow me to put it like this: Streaming technology was largely developed by human scientists, engineers, physicists—and at a time when the Outer Wars were at the forefront of many alien societies’ political and financial agendas. We streamlined the technology. Subsequently, it became appropriate that the human sector be responsible for itself. Hence the Time Patrol was founded. I think it is as simple as that.”

“I’m sure, Foreman, that the general public understands the why of the Time Patrol . . . what I think is being questioned is the Patrol’s system of checks and balances. In essence, ‘Who polices the police?’”

“Well, naturally, the human government is the regulatory body here. That of course means that we are governed by the same rules and regulations that, say, govern Earth’s CIA. As easy as it might be to believe in a police agency that is allowed to wander freely throughout the universe, it just doesn’t exist. We are here to serve the people.”

“I’m going to shift modes. The Brotherhood of the Gecko Tree. Many of the intelligent reptilian groups feel their species is being unfairly persecuted in the hunt for genuine time chasers on their homeworld. I

quote the Prime Minister of the Gecko homeworld as saying ‘The humans seek to stronghold the central forces that govern the universe. They seek to become the gods of time through persecution of any species that is not their own or that does not conform to their policies.’”

“The Geckos merely represent a statistic—nothing more. The Patrol seeks to curve any criminal activity that might affect the flow of time. It is our belief that every species in the universe should be allowed to live out its natural life cycle untainted by the notions of one man.”

“So . . . then, let’s say someone—either a citizen of Earth or the Earth Colonies—breaks time law and manages to escape into the Outer Worlds, or, say, a neighboring galaxy even . . . how does the Patrol deal with criminals who aren’t within the human sector?”

“Well, among other things, the human government has negotiated extensively with alien governments in multiple galaxies. The key is to have a standardized system of communication between police forces, especially at crucial wormhole access points . . .”

Politics. I clicked off my visor and placed it back in its cubby, which retracted into the headboard with a soft hiss. Rather than ease my thoughts, or perhaps offer some enlightenment, the SkyOne broadcast had simply stirred me up more so. It seemed like all the news focused on in those days was the evident time streaming craze and how it was supposed to make or break the human sector’s ties with

anyone on the outside. I suppose I wanted to know why it was so important that every intelligent species in the universe be fighting over stream access. Besides the perk of merely possessing something someone else doesn't.

Shifting on the bed, turning away from Trudie's sleeping form, I recalled Jennie's eyes. I thought of how deep they had led into a hunger so alien and yet so familiar. Something inside me, something that had been with me for my whole life, perhaps. It was only now beginning to extrude itself.

Sometimes I woke up in the middle of the night with the blood rushing in my ears. I would sit up, feel my heart hammering in my chest, hear my breath coming in gasps. I would look around the room for a few seconds and wonder where the hell I was, wonder who the hell I was. If Trudie was there with me, I would wonder who she was as well, and I would feel . . . alone. Like an alien must feel, suddenly transplanted from across the galaxy and into a new world with no friends or family. I might be able to speak the native language here on Earth, but there's sometimes no connection, no point of reference otherwise.

On this night of nights, the feeling was creeping in again.

I shuddered and got out of bed. It was an odd feeling: My body told me that the air in the room was comfortably warm—yet there was a chill. Upon further consideration I discovered that it was coming from within, not without. Delayed reaction from Timewise, I told myself.

I went to the small meal counter that was embedded in the wall opposite the bed. Taking a seat upon one of the

TIME CHASER

two stools, I requested a glass of water from the auto-counter. I downed it in a single drift. Then, instead of going back to bed like I probably should have, I paced around the room for several minutes, eventually picking up the phone and calling Jason. I suggested a game of basketball down at Gymbo's, and Jason, being the proverbial night-owl he was, willingly accepted.

* * *

Gymbo's was bustling with activity, as usual. Despite the human tendency to sleep at night and work during the day, many of the alien species prefer just the opposite. As such, Jason and myself were something of a minority.

We met on the courts, both of us dressed down in gray sweat suits, and practiced layups for a while before getting into a more intense one-on-one.

As we played, we talked:

"Why is it that only nuts seem to see the future?" Jason asked.

"I couldn't answer that," I said. "If I did, *I'd* be a nut."

"So this Jennie chick was really fucked up, huh? I mean, she was obviously tweaked out on something—but to get pulverized like that . . ." Jason paused. "What kind of weird shit did she say while you guys were back there?"

"I don't really know. I was downloading, trying to keep an eye on the cashier . . . what's her name?"

"Bayl, or something like that. I don't think she's coming back in on Monday."

"Wouldn't blame her. It was just weird, though. You

know those thrill-seeker vids they have on the Net sometimes? They're always talking about how they've figured out a way to go into the future, but none of them can prove it. They say it sets you free, makes you an immortal because your body isn't linked to your birth stream anymore —"

"—yeah," Jason said, "and then you never hear about these guys again 'cause the gamma radiation or whatever it is fucks up your DNA and you end up growing big-ass tumors all over your body until finally your cells mutate into a steaming lump of shit."

I grabbed the basketball, made a rim shot when I'd been going for a dunk (hey, it was one in the morning). The ball shot off across the court and, since neither of us felt like retrieving it, ended our game.

I went courtside and patted down my forehead with a towel.

"I could never talk to Trudie like this," I said.

Jason looked at me, tried to read my expression. No doubt all he got was waves of pent-up angst. "You going to break up with her? Start seeing a real girl?"

I sighed in response. "I don't want to hurt her." I didn't. She wasn't giving me what I wanted, but then, neither was she holding me back.

"That's your template talking. You tweakers always stick together—and I bet your dick would never forgive you if you ever went to sleep without resting it between those perfect ass cheeks of hers. And that's the problem, right? I mean . . . she's just the kind of girl you get with temporarily. You know that, don't you? Come, I've seen you two to-

gether. There's no chemistry. Only the coincidence that you both happen to get horny during the same time of day."

"Is it that obvious?" I muttered. Stupid question. Of course it was.

"I've known you since we were both little runts. Well, your dick's always been the size of a fucking jumbo Bratwurst, but we can talk about how you've ruined the curve for all other men later. Bottom line is, you've finally outgrown the relationship. Trudie helped you get past all that shit your parents put you through, but now that you're all grown up, out on your own, it's time to face facts."

"I don't know. When I saw Jennie in the data vault—"

"You wanted her, didn't you?"

"No, I wanted to *be* her."

"You mean, like, a sex change kind of thing?"

I swatted at Jason. "Fuck no. I mean the chaser part. For one brief moment I had this . . . feeling, like I should've been born someone else. Maybe to other parents. Another life where Jennie knew that other me. It was in her eyes, an afterimage of . . . of wherever it was she'd gone on her last time trip. It reminded me how sometimes I wish it was really possible to visit the future."

"What, you want to see yourself all old and decrepit?"

"I'm serious." I paused, looked away as I started picking absently at my shoes (my own little defense mechanism—Jason was listening to what I had to say, but he was being really, shall we say, manly about it). "I'm lost. Trapped. When I think about it I get all worked up, I get this tight feeling in my chest and I feel like I'm going over the edge. I

never do, but sometimes I wonder what would happen if I did. And now, after today . . . I'm wondering if maybe that's how Jennie and all those like her got started. They wonder when they're young, how things will turn out in their future."

Jason scowled. "Time chasers start off nuts, Storm. Something's wrong with their heads from the day they're born. Or maybe they're that small percentage of the population whose genetic makeup just doesn't gel nicely with the effects of time travel. One trip into the past and it fucks 'em up, you know? Makes 'em believe in things that aren't there, things that aren't true. Like the future. It just doesn't exist. Science has, if nothing else, proved that we as physical beings can only interact physically with other physical objects. Or in this case energy. We can re-visit the past because there's the imprint of motion, the afterimages that everything in the universe leaves behind. Streaming equipment can detect and amplify this stuff—but the future, it hasn't happened yet. There's no energy to harness. It'd be like trying to take a photograph inside a pitch black room."

"What about psychics?" I asked. "How is it possible for them to predict the future. I mean, the *good* ones . . ."

"Coincidence. Probability. Greed. Any psychic will improvise your future for the right price. It's no more a prediction than it is a proper investment of your time and money, but if you believe in that kind of mumbo-jumbo, your brain subconsciously makes it come true." For a moment Jason watched me. I knew he was trying to come up with the right words to settle me down, but when nothing

TIME CHASER

came to him, he smiled and got to his feet. “You know what I think?” he asked, offering his hand.

“What?” I stood as well.

“I think you need to go home and veg for the entire weekend. Take a pill, turn off your phone and go comatose for a while. No nookie, either.”

I said, “You just want me to shut my yapper.”

“Exactly.”

* * *

The taxi shuttle dropped me off in front of my apartment building at a quarter to three. Somehow, despite having been awake for nearly nineteen hours, I dreaded having to attempt sleep just yet. There was an incompleteness about things, as if the day didn’t want to end. Maybe I didn’t want it to end.

I ran my hands through my hair, still wet from the shower at the gym. The scent of shampoo caught my senses, sparking a memory: Two weeks ago. A late-night visit to the beach with Trudie, Jason, and (Jason’s girlfriend at the time) Naomi. A pleasant memory. There’d been swimming, beach ball, and afterward the showers which had left everyone’s hair with that familiar smell. Later in the early morning, a bonfire, wine coolers, an endless supply of cuddling, holding Trudie in my arms, feeling her, smelling her, listening to her voice. No heavy thinking needed, only the subtle communication of the senses—and the occasional sly remark between friends to keep things light. It was the perfect memory to re-live at the

moment, really.

I dug my hands into my pockets and headed down the near-empty street.

To East Cedar.

East Cedar was probably San Francisco's largest 24-hour time mall, back in the day. Four levels of streaming booths aligned within a central hall that housed tastelessly retro cafes and overpriced coffee shops. I paid the entrance fee and made my way through the crowds of people, most of them human insomniacs or alien revelers looking for a good time.

I found a vacant booth, settled myself in the helm as it auto-adjusted a pair of hefty safety straps over my chest and legs.

"Thank you for choosing East Cedar—provider of quality streams for more than twenty years," said the over-zealous computer once I'd selected my desired stream.

A soft hum filled the booth.

Now, you and I both know that's never a good sign. For a split second I assumed an air-conditioning motor had switched on somewhere, but then I smelled burning plastic—

—and that's when everything went to hell.

The booth went out of focus. A sudden nausea filled my gut; I felt like I'd been jumped by a chain gang and left for dead. I remember feeling like I was falling forward, over and over, tumbling down a never-ending slope. I used to be an acrobat, so I had a head for every manner of back flip, front flip, flyaway, somersault you ever heard of, but this was the worst case of vertigo I'd ever experienced—

TIME CHASER

and all within the space of a few seconds. Hell, a few milliseconds!

It only lasted a moment. Suddenly I slammed hard into the floor. I felt like I was on fire, every part of me prickling. Then it was over and I was left alone to realize that most of the pain I was feeling was not from bodily injury but from the shock of having all my senses turned up full-blast. With my breath coming in ragged gasps and my heart going wild in my chest, I lifted my head from the ground to see that I was lying in semi-darkness. There was light emanating from . . . street lights. I blinked, squinting, crawling onto my hands and knees.

I was on some random street corner.

Not to make fun or anything, but I was much like you were, Demis, after your recent trip across the solar system. Except I had no one to offer a guiding hand.

My gut muscles clenched and I gagged uncontrollably. Nothing came out, but I nevertheless spent the next few minutes on all fours, trying to let it pass. I'm alive, I thought, considering the fact that I should have been sitting in a time booth and not crawling around the streets of San Fran in the middle of the night.

"Holy shit, man."

A middle-aged vagrant had come to stand beside me. The smell, rather than the possibility of a weapon being hidden inside the man's filthy clothes, got me to my feet. My clothes were gone; I was also scratched and bruised considerably, but otherwise none the worse for wear. Extremely fortunate, actually, that I wasn't dead, considering some of the theoretical errors that could occur during a

time stream. I tried to think back to when I'd first entered the booth at East Cedar . . . had I entered the wrong stream number? No . . . no, even if I had, there are security systems set up to make sure no fatal mistakes are made. Otherwise, you can end up decades, centuries, away from your time and a million miles across the galaxy. The worst that could have happened was that I spent some time in the wrong stream, waiting for my session to expire.

So what had gone wrong? An equipment failure? Computer virus? Power fluctuation? To this day, I've never figured it out. All I knew at the time was that I was standing naked on a street corner in the middle of the night. No money, no ID.

"How'd you do that?" asked the vagrant.

I looked at my street side companion and, for the first time, saw the fear and amazement in his weathered face. "Er, do what, exactly?"

The vagrant slowly nodded towards a nearby alleyway. "I was sitting over there minding my own business, and suddenly out of nowhere I see this blurry spot right over the street here—then you come slamming down onto the sidewalk screaming bloody murder." He paused, looked me up and down. "God damn it, boy. You came out of *nowhere!*"

A chill ran up my spine, though not necessarily because of my nudity. With each passing second, more of the reality of it all was sinking in.

Momentarily, a personal shuttle full of young people turned the corner—just slowly enough so that the women inside were able to stick their heads out and whistle at me.

TIME CHASER

“Looks like an escaped tiger,” said one of them, blowing my cock a kiss.

Covering my crotch with my hands, I left the corner, left the vagrant standing there with a dumbfounded look on his face and headed uncertainly up the street (I paused only momentarily to pick up a discarded cardboard box, which I unfolded and fitted around my waist). Thankfully, the streets were mostly empty. Those who were out and about (or who passed by in shuttles) probably thought of me as nothing more than an adamant proponent of nudism, or else the loser in a game of strip poker.

By some wondrous stroke of good luck, I was only a twenty minute jog from my apartment building. The majority of the windows were darkened when I arrived. I crept up the stairs and entered as quietly as I could. Upon reaching the door, I instinctively reached for my wallet, but of course since I wasn't wearing any pants, there were no pockets to reach into.

I swore softly, readjusting my makeshift garments. I made a futile attempt at jiggling the doorknob before cursing Trudie and myself for not having a thumb print scanner installed. On most occasions, if I misplaced my ID card (which was programmed with my home key, mailbox number, and the like) it was merely a nuisance to have to knock on a friend's door and ask to make a call to the nearest locksmith. Now, though . . . how ridiculous would it be to show up in my unclad state on someone else's doorstep—and at such an ungodly hour?

There was nothing else to do but find out.

I wasn't the type to really get to know (or care about) my

neighbors. Preferring my privacy, I'd never paid attention to anyone but an elderly woman named Carla who lived a couple doors down from me (and then only because she made a point of striking up smalltalk every time we passed each other in the hallway). On weekends I helped with her grocery shopping or errands, and she in turn listened to whatever sad-sack story I'd been cultivating throughout the week.

I walked quickly to her door, rang the buzzer, and waited. Every second was an eternity, but eventually I got an answer via the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Carla? It's me. It's Storm. I'm sorry to bother you, but I've, uh, had a little accident—"

"Who?"

"Storm. You know, Storm Anderson from C-12?"

A moment's pause, and then Carla's door opened slightly. She stood cautiously in the threshold, her arms tucked into her shawl where (I knew from my various conversations with her) she gripped a small palm mace. "Oh my lord," she said. She'd forgotten to put on her glasses, and so squinted at me, making the wrinkles in her face look deeper than they should have been. "Is this some kind of prank? I'm warning you, I got no patience for this sort of thing."

"It's no prank," I insisted, suddenly getting a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. "I just . . . I need to use your phone. I got locked out of my apartment on accident."

"What apartment did you say you live in?"

"C-12 . . . don't you remember—"

TIME CHASER

"You a friend of Shawn's?" Carla lifted her head somewhat defiantly.

"Who—?"

"Because I've known him for almost three years and he never mentioned any *Storm*."

I was about to say something else, but then it hit me: Carla wasn't just disconcerted from sleep—she really didn't know me. It was as if we'd never met . . . as if I'd never even existed. "You don't know me?" I murmured, looking over my shoulder in the direction of my apartment door.

"Sorry, son. I can't say that I do."

"Carla, it's *me*!" I exclaimed, suddenly losing any composure I might have been mustering at the moment. "I live in apartment C-12, right down the hall. I work at Time-wise, you know? And . . . and the mall down on Harrison—on weekends I take you grocery shopping! What the hell is going on here?"

In response to my outburst, Carla slammed her door shut. As she locked it: "I don't want any trouble! Now, you get yourself back home before someone calls the police!"

This was nuts. I left Carla's place, ran back up the hallway to my apartment door and started ringing the buzzer repeatedly. No matter that I was ignoring the obvious; I was too infuriated to care—I wanted answers. I wanted to know why someone named Shawn was living in my apartment.

The door opened, and I found myself facing a bearded man of comparative height (minus my athletic build). His hair was mussed and his eyes swollen from suddenly being wrought awake by the raucous. I went immediately for

Shawn's neck, shoving him up against the wall before he could say a word.

"All right," I growled. "What's going on?"

"Ack!" Shawn gasped, grappling inefficiently with his arms. "What the . . . hell are you doing—let me go!"

"What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?"

"I live here! Get the fuck off me! Trudie! Call the police!"

I responded with another rough shove. There was a moment between us during which I bore my gaze full at Shawn as I wondered what to say next. What the hell am I doing? I thought. Am I really going to beat this guy up because—oh my God.

I let Shawn go.

He took a deep, hoarse breath and slid off into the hallway. "I'm calling the cops, you fuckin' asshole!"

I hardly heard him as I stood (cardboard box now laying forgotten on the floor by my feet) in the middle of what should have been my home, had not everything been entirely rearranged. It looked as if Shawn had been living there for years. Not a trace of familiarity about the place. And worse yet, there was Trudie, sitting in bed, the sheets pulled up to her chin as she looked at me like I was an utter stranger, some psycho-stalker come to beat up her boyfriend and have my way with her.

"Please, don't hurt me," she mumbled. "Please, oh, God, don't hurt me." Over and over, tears streaking her face.

"Oh, shit," I murmured, holding my head. "Oh, shit . . ." It was too incredible to believe, but my feeble little brain was putting the pieces together. The accident at East

TIME CHASER

Cedar, being redeposited impossibly back into reality—only in this stream it seemed nobody had ever heard of Storm Anderson. Something had gone wrong. My life should have ended in that chair at the time mall, my atoms spread across the galaxy . . . but here I was: alive. Misplaced, but alive.

Crossed streams, you see. Jumping from one flow of time to another. It's what time chasers preach as cosmic nirvana.

I had to think this through, but I couldn't do it there, what with Trudie sobbing uncontrollably and Shawn about to return with the cops. Shawn's shirt and pants were draped over a chair; I grabbed them, along with his shoes, and left the apartment. I took the emergency stairs—dressing as I went—down to the ground floor of the apartment complex. As I exited the building, I was faced with the decision of where to go next. My most obvious choice was Jason's, but considering the present state of things, it was unlikely he would know me any better than Carla or Trudie had.

So, I started walking. Where? I hadn't a clue.

* * *

"You've got more connections than a diplomatic official, you know that?"

Chronos sits across from me and chuckles politely at my remark. The two of us are now more or less fully dressed (Chronos seems to have an aversion to shirts that completely conceal his chiseled, heaving pecs) and having

breakfast out on the patio of a small corner cafe called Rozetta's. Just before dawn, one of Chronos' "friends" provided us with clothes, money, and a lift into the city (seems the kid has dozens of contacts scattered about the various streams—just in case he needs a helping hand).

"Chasers look out for one another," he says. "And those you make friends with who aren't chasers, they have loyalty. They appreciate the value in sticking it to the man."

Chronos is smiling again. Like a big child playing hooky from school. I rub my temples and wonder briefly if there's a pharmacy nearby. "Okay, you've got friends, you've got free travel—what does a chaser do? What do you *do*, besides serving as an anti-establishment icon?"

"Well," says Chronos, "when you get right down to it, when you take away all the cities and cars and jobs and pop culture propaganda . . . we're really just biological entities, aren't we? Eating, shitting, fucking, sleeping animals."

"That's beautiful."

"What I mean is, existence itself is mediocre. A process. But it's the thought that counts—the billions of thoughts. All of it is illusion; we're still just primates struggling to survive from day to day, but you read a book and suddenly it's something wonderful. You hear a piece of music, and you're sure God is real. You see a movie and people aren't just people, they're characters, intricate, layered. These are all icons. Without them, you just have, well, eating, shitting, fucking, and sleeping, don't you?"

"And monster truck rallies." I'm chuckling, a believer, a skeptic . . . someone who's had too little sleep.

TIME CHASER

Chronos sighs. "I've already described it as best as I can, but for the sake of the interview . . ." He pauses, looks off towards the street where an attractive woman wearing spandex is out having her morning jog. Once she's passed, he turns back to face me and says, "I guess you could describe it like this: You wake up in the early morning, and you're frozen, right? Sleep paralysis they call it. Most everyone gets it occasionally throughout their life, and to some it's harder to deal with than others. It's just like that, though. You wake up and you can see and hear what's going on around you, but you can't move a muscle. You feel like you can, you concentrate on lifting your arm up and you can feel it moving, but you're still lying right where you were ten seconds ago. You're stuck, almost like your soul is floating just a couple inches above your body, trying to find its way back inside so it can wake you up. If you try hard enough, if you concentrate on your body, you can make it happen. You wake up. If you don't, you sort of let go and stay stuck, or else you fall back asleep again."

"I get it," I reply, though I really don't. "If you think it, you can do it?"

A snicker from Chronos. "Well, if you put it that way. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

"Sorry. Force of habit, to condense complex events into an easy-to-read hook."

"My point is that everything's a thought, in the beginning." He leans forward now and tips over the pepper shaker with his hand. "Like that. A thought, put into motion causes the shaker to fall over. The consequence: We've got a little mess to clean up. That's what streaming is."

Thoughts, motions, consequences. I work when there's work, I travel when there's not, but as long as the public is aware of people like me, there'll be thought, action, consequence."

"Delusions of grandeur?" I ask.

"If that's what you want to call it."

"Okay. Let's get back to your first experiences out of your birth stream. How do you go from lost little lad to Time Patrol Enemy Number One?"

"Well," Chronos says, "The really wild stuff came when I met Morgan . . ."

* * *

I'd been living on the streets for several days when she found me, sitting on a park bench and scarfing down stolen leftovers.

"Storm Anderson," she said.

I looked up, caught off-guard, embarrassed. "You know me?"

"Let's get you cleaned up," she said, holding up her hand. "Then we'll talk."

She didn't look like anyone I knew. At least, not since I'd last dealt with a modeling agency. Tall and elegant, tight-arsed and full-breasted, she was dressed plainly in street clothes—though she looked as if she should have been wearing a sequined gown and heels.

"Do I get a name?" I asked.

"Morgan."

I followed her to her apartment, two blocks down the

street.

Inside, she said, "Give me your clothes. I'll wash them while you shower."

I laughed uncomfortably. "Do I smell that bad?"

Morgan smiled, waited with her hands held out. "We're going to a dance club. You get extra points for hygiene."

"And if this is some kind of trick?"

"You have no identification, no money, and no place to go. You've been sleeping on park benches for the better part of a week—do yourself a favor and take advantage of a helpful situation."

I might have protested further, but there was an air about Morgan, something . . . familiar. I studied her, trying to figure out what it was as I slipped out of Shawn's shoes, Shawn's pants, Shawn's shirt.

"There's a clean towel on the rack," Morgan said, taking the clothes. "Help yourself."

The apartment was small, designed for the typical one-room efficiency you'd find at any San Fran high-rise, with one wall dedicated to a kitchen counter and cooler, another sporting shower pad, sink, mirror, and laundry facilities. Bed and desk were at the windowed end.

I stepped onto the shower pad, activated the high-steam mode. There was, of course, no modesty.

"Tell me, Storm, is it your tweak job?" asked Morgan, putting my clothes into the sanitizer and then waiting, arms folded, her gaze wandering noticeably up and down my body. "Or are all the men in your family as, er, well-endowed?"

I turned my backside to her and tried not to blush. "You

seem to know a lot about me.”

“Chasers know each other. They know their facts. We stick together.”

I felt myself sober; modesty forgotten, I faced her full. “But I’m not a chaser—”

“Oh, yes you are. Whether or not it was your intention, for better or for worse, you’re one of us now.”

Something caused my gut to tighten. It was the same feeling I’d gotten when I’d met Jennie. “Are you going to tell me what this is about?”

“Not just yet—but I’m sure you feel the connection between us. You’ve felt it before, during the Timewise holdup.”

“You’ve been watching me,” I said. I finished up, shut off the spray. Morgan handed me a towel.

“The Patrol has things under such strict control,” Morgan said, “it’s only too obvious when someone jumps streams. For example, if you have a room full of laughing, chattering people, you’re not going to hear that random someone talking in the corner—but if everyone’s made to keep quiet, you’re sure as hell going to notice the slightest whisper. Whenever possible, we make it a point to get to newcomers before the Patrol does.”

Dried off, I stepped from the shower pad and wrapped the towel around my waist. “Recruitment?”

Morgan shrugged. “Call it a pilot program. We always look out for like-minded people to help, to help us. I prefer those who genuinely want to be chasers rather than those merely looking for the psychotropic highs.”

“So, then, you think I’m the genuine deal,” I said, think-

TIME CHASER

ing of those long nights laying awake beside Trudie—

“I think you’re the genuine deal.” Morgan went over to the sanitizer and removed my clothes. Then, handing them to me, she said, “Get dressed, honey buns.”

“Where are we going, exactly?”

“A chaser rave.”

* * *

The dance club: a converted warehouse saturated with pounding rhythms, fancy lighting effects, and dozens of bodies dancing, swaying, somehow altering the Earth’s gravity with their frenzied motions.

I stood on the fringes, Morgan beside me. “What am I supposed to do?” I asked. “Dance?”

“Dance,” Morgan acknowledged. “Mingle. Blend in. I’ll see you on the other side.”

Other side? I turned to face Morgan, but she was already gone, weaving her way through the masses.

I danced, swapping partners, smiles, knowing looks. I was a stranger, and yet everyone here seemed to know me—and there were other things, too. Subtle things. I never saw the same face twice. Sometimes I would blink and literally find myself holding someone else. I’d mentioned gravity before; the feeling was physical now, as if the dancers really were creating their own tidal force.

The feeling got to me before I was ready for it; it was a familiar, sickening lurch, as if I were tumbling forward, over and over, through the crowd, through sound and sight, smell and touch and taste, through the fabric of

space and time itself—
—and into another world entirely.

* * *

As was my style at the time, I slammed unceremoniously into the ground, face-down, ass-up. My scalp tingled, my teeth hurt; I was sure my pubic hair was on fire.

Morgan, naked (as was I), crouched beside me. “Give it a moment. It’s just your senses recovering.” She smoothed her hand across my back.

“Should’ve . . . left our clothes at the . . . apartment,” I rasped, though not without appreciation of Morgan’s unclad form. Ample curves, flat tummy, well-tended athletic build, full, shapely breasts that bobbed slightly as she moved; she offered me her hand, and I took it, stood, wobbling on my feet.

We were standing near the edge of a large and elaborately decorated balcony, overlooking a serene ocean that stretched as far as the eye could see. The water reflected the deep reds and violets of the evening sky in which a trio of moons glowed, the satellites of the gods watching over the mortal realm.

“A convenient way to jump streams,” Morgan said, walking over to a small table and removing a pair of robes from one of the chairs, “is to do so where it’s difficult for Big Brother to keep watch.” She handed me a robe. “Public places, crowded, busy—the congestion provides cover.”

I smiled, thinking of the dancers, swapping partners not only on the dance floor, but across the galaxy as well.

TIME CHASER

One moment you held person A, the next it was person B. “Where are we now?”

“My chateau. You won’t find it on any of the stellar charts.” Morgan donned her robe, cinched it at the waist, and sat at the table. “Please, relax.”

Following suit, I sat with her at the table. There was a pitcher of water, dainty appetizers—appropriate fare for my recovering intestines. “So, besides being bold and beautiful, you’re the big shit, then? The head chaser or something?”

“I am an Elite, one of many. I was a countess in my original birth stream, but the powers that be didn’t like it when my family reached a certain level of political influence. Various human governments conspired to have my family line erased—but I’d been involved with the chasers for some time before that, and managed to escape with my life. Most people aren’t as fortunate. And you, of course . . .”

“I fell right through the cracks,” I said.

Morgan nodded. “The Elites have been asking about you. They want to know how it’s possible that you’ve jumped streams completely by accident.”

“Elites?”

“The keepers of time. Some human, others not. They were once chasers themselves, but now . . . I suppose you could call them the ‘big shit.’”

I bit my lip. “And I should be grateful my blunder got caught by them and not the Patrol?”

Morgan poured herself some water, took a long, luxurious sip. Then, “You know the odds as well as I. You’ve

crossed over into a place that's . . . well, let's put it this way: Streaming without mechanical tools is, for most humans, impossible. Such a feat takes immense reserves of concentration and skill that we simply do not comprehend without years of practice. Not only have you defied the odds, but you've jumped into my stream. On your first try."

"I don't know how I did it," I said. "This is all new to me, I assure you. An error with the streaming booth."

"On a physical level, maybe. But mentally, spiritually . . . well, do you believe in the spirit?"

I shrugged. "You mean the soul?"

"No. The soul and the mind together govern the brain, which directly controls the body, but the puppeteer, the spirit is what rules all. It's the higher part of you that allows you to play on the material plane while you are awake, and it's the part that reels you back into the universal ether while you sleep. Your higher self, your guardian angel, you could call it."

"I would have to say I don't have enough experience in that area to give a fair answer."

"You will," said Morgan, smiling. "In time. Experience comes with time. For now, know this: The Elites are a combination of the physical and the spiritual, balanced out so that both are coherent, and so that both can communicate with each other effectively. Think of it as being able to be in many places at once, while retaining complete coherence in every instance. That is the level of self-discipline one must achieve in order to become an Elite and to subsequently be able to switch time streams without mechanical intervention. Therefore, if you have been allowed to

exist outside your birth stream, if you've survived such an 'accident,' it can only mean your spirit has ordained a more direct connection to your body in order to achieve a goal of some sort."

The possibility of a higher-me somehow having delivered me into another time, another dimension, another stream, was hard to swallow—not too hard, though. Not considering what the past few days had shown me.

I said, "It would've been nice if my spirit had called ahead."

"The spirit works in mysterious ways." Morgan stood, still smiling, and undid her robe, let it fall away from her body.

My eyes wandered across her form—I wasn't normally all that promiscuous per se, but here, now, I felt no shame when my masculine reaction tented the front of my robe.

"You'll train under me," Morgan said. "Come." She waited for me to stand, then undid my robe, let it drop to the floor. She grasped my cock, led me inside, to bed, where she lay back, legs spread, spine arched, her impressive breasts thrust provocatively forward. "Let's work on your stamina."

I climbed into bed with her. I didn't know why it was so easy for me. I was giddy, probably still distraught by my most recent jump—but I performed, I put my exaggerated template to good use.

"Can you feel it?" Morgan gasped during the climax.

I didn't know about it, but I could feel her insides milking me for all I was worth. "Fuck yeah," I gasped.

"No . . . *me*," she growled, and buried her nose in my

armpit.

We lay together, a tangle of arms and legs, dampened bedsheets, sweat glistening on our skin. Our balcony conversation had been all about the spirit, the cosmos; a moment away and we were animals acting out our primal programming, looking for comfort in the arms of strangers. And yet I was beginning to understand that Morgan wasn't entirely unknown to me

She sat up slightly. "Do you know who I am?" She was still breathing somewhat heavily from our powerful love-making.

Of course, I thought. You're the most familiar person in the world. "Who?"

"You were supposed to pop naked out of a cake."

"Trudie?" My heart skipped a beat.

"*Morgan.*" She smoothed her hand down my chest. "Trudie there, Morgan here—but your spirit knows. Your spirit guided you here to me. Subconsciously, you knew to be sitting on that particular park bench at that particular time."

I sat up, gathered Morgan in my arms. She'd been another lover in another stream, and here . . . here she was the body on the outside, and the spirit on the inside, whereas the previous Trudie had been body only.

I held her.

Crying, I said, "Nice to meet you, Morgan."

* * *

Back at our table, Chronos sits back and looks off down

the street. He's pouting, wistful—I'm pissed because his penchant for storytelling has given me a raging hard-on.

"Forgive my nitpicking," I say, waving my hand in front of Chronos' face to get his attention, "but has this whole plot line been a covert lead up to you banging some hot chick?"

Chronos looks at me. "That was the start of my training."

"Okay, 'training.' Tell me about that."

"It's something like this."

Chronos rises from his seat, grabs my hand—and it feels like he tosses me out into the street without the slightest trouble. Except there's no street. There are no buildings—there's no goddamned city. I've been whipped back into the nothingness we'd first traversed during our journey from XTC.

Chronos! I yell without yelling.

I'm here, Demis, he replies.

You know I don't do well without my fat ass backing me up!

I just wanted to elaborate a bit on the process.

Well, then, I think fiercely, fucking elaborate and let's get back into our skins!

I feel Chronos close to me. This is what my first time was like, too. Except Morgan kept me out here almost indefinitely. Made me work my way out. Sometimes I never got back into the flesh until I absolutely couldn't hold my concentration any longer—but I always ate it up. I can see how some folks become addicted to the rush. Shit's better than any photo shoot or gym meet.

JESSE GORDON

You'll have to excuse my lack of enthusiasm—

Just try, Chronos tells me. Feel for the closest pit in the astral plane, see where it takes you.

I try—at least, I think that's what I'm doing. Chronos' request insinuates something subtle, sly, sleek; I can only picture myself tripping, falling, stumbling about like a drunkard in a stupor.

All right, Chronos says, steadying me. So maybe you aren't ready yet. How about we pay a visit to the place Morgan took me my first time . . .

* * *

Matter coalesces around me. I have this wide-angle, impossibly humongous view of the night sky stretching out in all directions. I'm planetside, looking upward, and the celestial canvas is painted with stars, galaxies, nebulae. Everything's so bright. So young.

Chronos is young, too. No more than twelve, he's standing beside me; the two of us are in a cramped prison cell and stargazing through a dusty grate in the ceiling. There are other people there with us, chained together. All of us are dressed in rags, layers of dirt and grit caking our skin. And the smell . . . my God, humans can really stink up a place if given the opportunity.

"Cheerful destination," I grumble, glancing around the cell.

"The birth of humanity," Chronos whispers. "At least, in this galaxy. Whether we were designed and deployed here or shipped in from elsewhere is up for debate, but this is

where the first of us decided to become more than merely organic machinery for the mines.”

“Christ almighty, man! Just how old are you?”

“No older than you or the next person,” Chronos replies. “We’ve all lived an innumerable number of lives. We only forget because the flesh leaves us so frequently. But if, at any given moment, you can recall your entire existence, back to the beginning, you can evolve. You can beat the reincarnation debacle. The Patrol doesn’t want this, our governments don’t want this—what incentive is there to work, to pay taxes, to go to church on Sundays when you have such utter freedom, the power to do as you please at any given moment? It would be total anarchy in the eyes of our world leaders.”

I pay my cell mates another cursory glance, wonder if they can see me . . . if they care. “Well, wouldn’t it?”

“We have that problem now.”

“Except now it’s only fighting over continents and moons. In your world it would be each of us hurling solar systems and galaxies at each other.”

Chronos shifts beside me, his chains rattling. “We’re always in danger of destroying ourselves. Spiritual evolution is a gradual process that will take many more millions of years. The little steps are important. I’m telling you this because a thousand years from now, you will have lived a thousand lives, you will have forgotten this entire conversation—but your article will still be in the archives. The lore will be out there. One by one, people will discover the truth. One by one they will accept it, when they’re ready. We will evolve.”

I nod. "I think I'm beginning to understand you, Chronos."

"Really?" His question has a double effect because, in this instance, he's twelve; his innocence is easily reflected in his starlit eyes.

"Sure," I say. "This whole time chaser business, it's just one more way to leave your mark, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

I snort. "Helluva way to leave your mark. You could've written a novel, painted a mural, had some kids . . . this outshines it all, doesn't it?"

Chronos nods, smiles. "I'm not looking to be a star. I did all that as a kid. This"—he waves his hand towards the grate—"is it. This is what I wanted from you. When you go to write your story, you'll know the difference between all the epiphanies of the nonconformists and the simple pleasure of just being—being's what this is about. One at a time, humans learning to be."

Someone beside me coughs; I wrinkle my nose at the smell. "That's good—now get me out of here before I wretch."

A nod from Chronos, a wave of his hand—
—and I wake up.

My hotel room is dark and musty. Of course, at first, I have no idea where I am, why I'm smelling like cheap booze, why there's this horrendous racket going off in my head.

I roll into a sitting position—Jesus fucking Christ, I'm wearing a plastic overcoat, nothing underneath. Why the hell am I dressed like this—

TIME CHASER

XTC. The interview with Chronos. I'm back on the space station.

Or perhaps I'd never left.

I find the note resting on the bedside table. There's not much to it, just a simple goodbye, a "by the time you read this I will have ejected myself from one of the station's airlocks" that sets my pulse on high.

Oh, God.

I only allow myself a moment to grasp what's happened before I stumble out of my costume, into some decent clothes.

Then I leave for Elena's, stumbling along the corridors, eventually making it to her door. I knock; she answers, looking like I woke her up, but lets me in anyway.

"Jesus, Elena," I weep. "The kid fucking killed himself."

* * *

He'd drugged me. A hallucinogen, some downers, and something else—quite possibly a batch of good old fashioned hypnosis—that had made me highly susceptible to suggestion. Otherwise, my doctor assured me I was fine. Well, first he launched into his usual speech about the evils of excessive alcohol consumption, then he assured me I was fine.

And now here I am, sober, clean-shaven, three days back on good, solid Earth, sitting in my office and wondering what to make of a chance meeting gone bad. In the cold light of day, there was no magic, no meaning to my meeting with Chronos. He'd just been a troubled young

man, chaser or not, looking for attention.

I'm thinking this is what happened: Storm Anderson was born into a life he didn't much care for. Glamorous, yes, but not for him. His parents pushed too hard in one direction, and so he rebelled, partying, doing drugs, floating his liver, fucking every pretty ass that crossed his path. He was in his early twenties when he decided that maybe he wanted to go straight, and so stuck with Trudie a while—but his old habits caught up with him. He slept with someone behind Trudie's back. Morgan, perhaps (though I'm fairly certain she's not an Elite, nor was she ever a countess). Rather than come clean about it, Chronos decided to construct an elaborate tale involving time chasers and the meaning of life and a whole bunch of other bullshit.

I don't feel much like writing, but deadlines being what they are, I have to do something akin to what writers do.

I go online, decide to do some background research before delving into the actual story. A preliminary search brings up several hundred thousand web sites regarding the Chronos mythos. Many of the webmasters behind said sites claim to be Chronos, Chronos' reincarnate, or Chronos' fuck buddy. It's a mess, but I keep at it, connecting whatever dots I find—this eventually brings me to a Timewise record, with a name and an address for Storm.

I jot it down, and browse on, coming across a little something called Streaming Audb—the Streaming Audible Database. I can ask an animated physicist with big boobs questions about time streaming and she will answer them to the best of her ability.

TIME CHASER

I try to think of questions that will make her jiggle the most: “What happens to a person when they stream? How does the process work?”

The animation looks thoughtful for a moment before giving her answer. *“Commercial streaming requires special equipment capable of following the quantum mechanical theory of ambient energy amplification. A stable field is created around the client inceptor, or ‘helm’, in which an overlay is produced, effectively aligning an individual’s molecules with those of the desired time period’s residual energy . . .”*

She could go on forever (besides, it’s mostly gibberish anyway), so I tap the “Stop” button before asking, “Can a person stream without the aid of specialized equipment?”

“There have been no documented occurrences of a human being successfully streaming without the use of specialized equipment.”

“If there’s an accident, if the, er, protective field is ruptured during a stream, what happens to the person inside?”

“The overlay is terminated, and the individual ceases to receive feedback from the stream.”

“So in other words, he’s fine, no physical or mental abnormalities?”

“That is correct.”

A sigh escapes my lips. I do a little more digging until I come across a message board that hosts a rather intense (and lengthy) discussion on who or what Chronos is. The messages range in demeanor from casual interest to insistent knowledge to frantic statements about the truth in

what must be the most out-of-control urban legend in the galaxy. The general consensus: Chronos is real, he is alive and well, but only if you are a time chaser will you have the chance of meeting him. Possibly. If he wants to meet you. And afterwards, unless you're an Elite, there's no guarantee you'll remember your meeting with him. More likely, it was seem like an elaborate dream.

I almost feel honored—or betrayed. I can't decide which.

* * *

Taking an extended lunch break, I go to Chronos' apartment. The landlord is nice, frazzled, but cooperative enough as I ask about Storm.

"C-12," he says. "You mean the modeling guy?"

I nod. "Yeah. You know him?"

"Sure do. Sure did." The landlord shakes his head. "Such a shame. Beautiful kid. Both of them, him and his girlfriend, Trudie. Such a match made in heaven. The wee lass has been done up in tears ever since she heard the news. She's in the process of moving back in with her parents. If you're lucky, you might catch her."

The elevator is out of order. I take the stairs, two at a time, huffing and puffing my way to the tenth floor. At the door, I wipe the sweat from my brow and ring the buzzer. A minute or passes, and I'm about ready to leave when the door clicks open. A young woman—Trudie, I'm presuming—steps forward, arms folded, face somber (even in mourning, she is as gorgeous as Chronos was handsome).

TIME CHASER

I introduce myself: “My name’s Demis Matheson. I’m a reporter from SkyOne. I . . . I spoke with Chro—Storm shortly before his, er, passing.”

“So, you’re the reporter dude,” Trudie says. “He told me he was looking for the media.”

“I only wish we’d met under better circumstances.” I clear my throat. “Has he always been . . . out there?”

Trudie shrugs. “I can’t tell you why he did half the things he did. Maybe you should talk to his parents.”

“Would you happen to have their address?”

She nods, steps back inside for a moment, then returns with the address scribbled on a piece of paper. I take it, thanking her.

“Are you going to write a story about him?” she asks.

“Probably.”

“Then I guess it wasn’t a total waste.”

I thank her for her time.

“You’re welcome,” she says, and closes the door.

* * *

I’m sitting in the Andersons’ parlor, sipping tea and nibbling at a handful of complimentary croissants, when Mr. and Mrs. Anderson walk into the room. Both are tall, straight-backed, he handsome, she elegant. Middle-aged models, athletes, barely touched at all by the passage of time.

They sit across from me.

“Hello,” Mrs. Anderson says.

I wipe my hands on my jacket, pull out my multi-unit to

take notes; I launch into a condensed version of what Storm told me back at XTC, then wait for illumination.

"We only wanted the best for him," says Mrs. Anderson. "He could have been anything. A model."

"A sports star," Mr. Anderson adds.

I look from Mister to Missus. There's a tension between the two—it's obvious they had opposing plans for Storm's template from day one. Daddy wanted his son to follow in his footsteps; mommy wanted her son to follow in her footsteps. One beautiful, perfect child being torn in half by bickering parents.

Addressing Mrs. Anderson, I ask, "He was a model, then?"

She nods.

Facing Mr. Anderson: "A gymnast?"

He nods.

"How did he take it?"

"He was a good, hard worker," Mr. Anderson replies. "He could focus when he wanted to."

"And," Mrs. Anderson says, "it wasn't as if he was lacking in the looks department. Without half an effort he could've gotten steady work."

Mr. Anderson nods, holds his wife. "He wanted what he wanted, though. Stubborn . . . so damned stubborn sometimes."

The question's sneaking between my lips before I can even think it: "Did you ever wonder if maybe you were pushing him too hard?"

Mrs. Anderson looks uncomfortable.

"Sorry," I say. "Just trying to grasp all the angles—"

TIME CHASER

"No, no, that's quite all right." She wipes a rogue tear from her cheek. "It's a competitive world. In that sense, yes, I suppose you could say we pushed him to give his best—but we never beat him, never denied him food or clothes or a home."

"Still, he found it necessary to rebel."

"It's funny . . . he indulged quite heavily, but only in his certain specific cliques. The sex clubs, the women, occasional drinking, and, of course, the constant streaming—but he never smoked, never ate red meat, never did drugs."

Mr. Anderson frowns. "I suppose we should have seen it coming. They say excessive streaming can mess up the brain, but we never thought it would happen to us, much less to our son. We always assumed it was . . . just a phase. The rebellion, the wild parties, with his friends. He acted like he was immortal, but, alas . . . he wasn't."

Mrs. Anderson breaks down, unable to continue any further as the truth dawns on all of us: Storm Anderson had been nothing more than a turbulent youth, a streaming junkie, spending every dollar he made on the club scene, and every minute he had in a time booth. He must have sensed his demise early on and come to me to make that one last impression on the world before kissing it goodbye.

"Near the end," Mrs. Anderson sniffs, blinking at me, "he kept talking about changing the world. Make a difference."

Mr. Anderson looks at his wife. "'If I've reached just one person, I will have done things right,' he always used to say."

JESSE GORDON

“Maybe,” says Mrs. Anderson, a tear welling in her eye, “this story you’re doing . . . maybe it will touch someone.”

I nod. “It has, Mrs. Anderson. It has.”

I leave shortly thereafter, stepping outside the Andersons’ front gate and sighing as I tuck away my multi-unit. Chronos is still an urban myth, parents still seem utterly oblivious as to the wants and needs of their children, and truth remains an ever-elusive dark smudge on the human tapestry—I’m only slightly jaded, though.

After all, the rest of the afternoon awaits, and I have a story to write.

