## Freedom's Price

### Prologue

As usual, Gage Worthmann was late getting to his office. He was a night person, no question; waking up in the morning was something akin to hell for him. That had been the hardest thing, though, about his work. His cybernetic engineering skills had been top-notch when he was first hired, and he had soon discovered a talent within himself for playing the corporate game. The bargains, the dealmaking, the betrayals, and the ruthlessness of office politics came easily to Gage. His rise through the ranks had been swift, until he could no longer be troubled by early mornings. Gage was important enough now to set his own work schedule; he stayed until late into the night and came in no earlier than ten or eleven.

Generally, Gage found his office empty when he arrived. This morning he did not. When he entered, his high-backed chair swiveled around to face him. A man sat there, behind Gage's own desk, not a superior in the company but one of the managers in his own division. The man's name was Eric Stephens, and he just sat there, fingertips pressed together, smiling like a Musk Cat that had cornered a mouse.

"There had better be a good explanation for this."

"Oh, but there is," Eric replied slyly. "I was just trying it out to see if I like the feel."

"Don't get any overblown ideas. You're not that far up the line for promotion yet."

"Well, actually...I am."

Gage looked coldly at his underling.

"You appear to have acquired new confidence, Stephens. Would you care to enlighten me as to its source?"

Eric turned the chair slightly. Silver-hued threads woven into the fabric of his dark gray carbonsuit glittered with the motion. His clothing was an expensive Tajian design that must have cost a month's salary. Clearly he was serious about the supposed change in his fortunes.

"I'm acquiring a new patron as of today. Someone, Gage, who will look after my interests and assist me in obtaining the status I deserve."

"Who?" Gage replied bluntly.

"Why...you," Eric said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Gage regarded him calmly. It was a crazy thing to say; Eric was a petty man with far more ambition than skill. He had the necessary ruthlessness and cutthroat attitude but lacked the most important part of what made a top executive: talent. He could plot and scheme but did not have the capacity to do the work at the level he aspired to. Obviously, then, he had something up his sleeve. The question was, did he have something real or only a delusion? Blackmail was not a game for the amateurish or the unskilled.

Eric smiled, and ran a hand over his close-cropped black hair.

"I can tell you're curious," he said. "I'm sure you thought your secrets were buried so deeply no one could find them."

"Not true," Gage countered. "Any action strong enough to change the world, even just a small part of it, will leave traces. Those traces can be hidden, but never completely."

"Then you must have expected this to happen sooner or later."

Gage shrugged. He wished Stephens would get to the point; all this verbal dancing was amusing enough but not very productive.

"You did surprise me, though, Gage. I knew that you'd have some kind of secret worth my while to find out, but this isn't at all what I thought I'd find."

"Oh?" He went over to a well-stocked sidebar he kept for entertaining clients and fellow execs and took out a bottle. He poured a small glass of wine, making sure to set the bottle back exactly where he wanted it.

"Quite. I expected a personal weakness that could be exploited. A mistress, a gambling habit, metachem addiction--anything a man might turn to in order to keep up the facade of the perfect corporate warrior. Never in a thousand years did I expect to find that you were siphoning corporate funds."

Folding his arms across his chest, Gage stood and waited calmly, denying Stephens the shocked reaction he'd no doubt hoped to elicit.

"You should be more careful, Gage. You may run this division of the company, but that doesn't mean you can turn it into your own private bank. There's a lot of competition among section managers like myself for funds; I routinely check to see what more might be available out of the division budget. You've done a good job of covering your tracks, but I always keep an eye on my rivals. I know what they're doing and how much it costs. I found out how you've been slipping money through ordinary channels under false project assignments, fees paid to consultants who were never hired, and so on."

Gage's lips were set in a thin, flat line.

"You're a thief, nothing more."

"And you're a blackmailer."

Eric shrugged, spreading his hands.

"Personally I consider it more along the lines of a leveraged buyout. The strategic use of influence."

"How droll. Not unlike the spontaneous privatization of financial resources."

Stephens chuckled.

"That's very good. Then again, when you consider the millions of meseta you've been draining off into your fictitious Project Nuada, perhaps it's the best possible description.

Gage sipped his wine.

"So, you've managed to trace the flow of meseta to Project Nuada."

"It took some doing to arrange it, but yes."

"Apparently my traces weren't as well-covered as I thought."

Eric shrugged magnanimously.

"Well, I must admit that having a gamma-level passcode did make things easier. Your own files may be beta-level, but you couldn't help but send the funds through lower priority channels."

Stephens was only supposed to be a delta-level employee. Apparently, his in-house blackmail had pried someone else's secrets loose in the past, and the payoff was a higher level access code. Regular snooping with that would have let Eric catch glimpses of what Gage had been doing, and by using that code as an entry point a quality gridrider could have wormed his or her way into beta-level files. There were plenty of those available for hire, so Eric couldn't have had too much trouble finding one to do his computer work if he couldn't do it himself.

Come to think of it, he had almost certainly used outside help, because he had said that he had "arranged" to find Project Nuada. So, at least one other person knew about it, even if that person might be no more than a hired hacker without any idea of its significance. Trouble, Gage thought.

"I suppose it couldn't be helped, but I still regret it," he remarked. Sullenly, he added, "Let's get down to business, then. I assume you have certain demands that you want met?"

Stephens flashed perfectly polished teeth as he smiled, leaning back in Gage's chair.

"I'm glad you're not resisting the inevitable. That would be so tiresome."

"Get to the point."

"Very well. What I want from you is a promotion. Section manager is nice, I suppose, but I believe that division sub-chief is a position better suited to my talents. As division chief, you could arrange for that. Needless to say, as I'm clearly being groomed for the higher ranks, my promotion will carry a substantial increase in salary as well as benefits and stock options."

"I suspected you might see it that way. I'm surprised that you aren't asking for part of the Project Nuada funding, though."

"No, no." Stephens waved his hand dismissively. "That would be all too shortsighted of me. On the one hand, if I'm taking your profits, you lose your incentive to cooperate with me. Let the company pay my price for you. On the other hand, I don't want to be connected to your activities by any kind of recognizable data trail. I'm not going to expose myself to the risk that a third person might come along and do what I've already done. If you do go down for this, I have no intention of accompanying you. No, I'll tie my fortunes to yours only while they're on the rise."

"You can be happy then, because they are."

"Well, I'm glad to see that my little proposition hasn't dampened your spirits. That's the way it should be."

"My success has nothing to do with you," Gage stated flatly.

"I wouldn't quite say that. Not when--"

Gage raised his hand, cutting off his ambitious underling, and told the empty air, "You can come in now."

The door swung open and Nash Garrett, Security Division Chief, entered the room, accompanied by one of his lieutenants. Both of them wore military-style carbonsuit uniforms augumented by titanium armor plates protecting the shoulders and torso. Each carried a heavy, studded steel mace and a sonic gun. The Poleziax robot that followed them, in contrast, carried no weapons. Its mini-vulcan and neural paralysis inducer were built into its blue-sheen, Palman-shaped body.

"You heard everything?" Gage asked.

Garrett tapped his earpiece.

"Avery linked me into the audio feed."

"What is this?" Stephens protested, suddenly unsure of where he stood.

"I turned on the room's security monitors when I poured the wine," Gage told him. "Your blackmail threats have been observed and recorded."

"But that's insane! You've hung yourself as well!"

Gage smiled at his overambitious underling.

"Try to follow along, Eric. There is a Project Nuada. The only catch is that people like you aren't supposed to know about it, so we don't just put it out in the open budget where anyone can see the details. You blundered in without taking the time to examine the situation fully, which is the kind of mistake that's kept you a section manager all these years."

Stephens jumped from his seat, wild-eyed. The Poleziax's response was immediate; its arm raised and the humming bolt of its paralyzer surged into Eric's body. The would-be blackmailer lost control of his voluntary muscle functions, and he slumped to the carpet.

"Take him to Holding, on seventy-four, not thirty-two," Nash ordered. Obediently, the robot hefted the stunned man and left, accompanied by the Palman subordinate.

"What do you want done with him?" the security chief asked.

"Ordinarily, I'd order him fired for disloyalty and that would be that. He found his way to Nuada, though, and worse yet he's involved outsiders. It's absolutely necessary that we learn what he knows and how far that information has spread. Then we'll take steps to contain the situation. I'd suggest you employ third-party contractors, but use your best judgment. Mine has apparently been shaky of late."

"I wouldn't say that, Gage," Nash told his longtime friend.

"I would. If someone like Eric Stephens could learn about Nuada, then my security protocols were sadly lacking. Words like inept and superficial come to mind. For all I know, the whole project has been compromised."

"Leave it to me. I'll finish the job."

"No, I have to be part of it," Gage stated with a sharp shake of his head. "Funding Nuada was my responsibility, so cleaning up the mess will be mine, too."

### Chapter 1

The wild roar of the aerojet's engines was reduced to a low hum by the nearly soundproof fuselage, so that the voice of the robotic pilot could be heard clearly over the intercom.

"We are now descending towards Camineet aeroport. Those of you on the right-hand side of the jet will be able to see the Camineet-Parolit archopolis beneath us. All passengers should return to their seats and fasten belts for landing; we should be arriving at the gate in twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes, thought Tyler Jorran. Twenty minutes and he would be in Camineet again. How long had it been? Three years? No, it was AW 1278 now, so it had been four. Sometimes it felt like yesterday, and other times as if it were an eternity ago, but never any kind of concrete, identifiable period of time like four years. Memories were like that, fresh or stale with the turns of the mind but never an orderly progression from one to the next.

Through the viewport, Tyler could see the twilight vista of the capital of both the planet Palm and its colonies throughout the Algo solar system. Brilliant lights in a myriad of colors glittered from the cityscape as the teeming millions, unsatisfied with the day nature had provided, created their own artificial noon. Camineet had swelled over the past millennium until the city, its industrial parks, residential suburbs, corporate districts, and slums filled the old residential area that had insulated the towns of Camineet and Parolit from marauding creatures in olden times. Parolit, once a city-state with a long history of its own, had been utterly absorbed into the growing capital, swelling the body of the archopolis.

In the air below, Tyler could make out the form of another, much smaller aerojet, its half-moon-shaped wing and trailing fuselage much the same as the transcontinental he rode in.

"Hey, that's one of those new Wrens, isn't it?" the man sitting behind Tyler said to his traveling companion.

"Wrens?" a woman's voice replied. "I thought that Wrens were androids."

"They are. The newest version of Wren-type, the Shiren, can change itself into an aerojet, an aquaskimmer...something else too, I forget what."

"Really? They must be huge."

"No, just Palman-sized. Of course, their vehicle forms can only carry, say, four or five people, but it's still amazing. They're incredibly expensive, of course. Only big government honchos and corporate execs can afford them."

Which, Tyler reflected, wasn't surprising. Wren-type androids were all equipped for combat in addition to their individual specialties. With their logical and analytical but quick-reacting personalities they made first-rate bodyguards. Add to that the ability to become various forms of transportation, which negated the possibility of, say, dynamite charges being planted in an executive areojet, and the rich and powerful would be lined up, begging to own a Shiren. Luveno Industrial Mechanisms was probably making meseta hand over fist--which, of course, they had been from the entire Wren series.

Thinking about LIM, inevitably, brought Tyler's thoughts nearly full circle to Melora. The past was never truly gone, he had found, and that homily was never more true than when dealing with an old love. He hadn't seen her for four years, either, but the feelings were still there, still strong. Strong enough that when he had received her letter transmission he had chosen to fly back from Abion to Camineet, back to a life he thought he had left behind.

Tyler, I know we parted on bad terms, but I'm in real trouble and there's no one else I can trust to help me. I've gotten into something bad, something I can't handle alone. I can't explain any more than that in a letter; if our past still means anything to you, please come to Camineet. I live at #17, 893 Fenton Avenue, in Neroton. Melora.

No, they hadn't parted on good terms. It hadn't really been a fight, more of an exasperated surrender after having the same argument for the hundredth time and getting nowhere with it. Neither one of them had liked the corruption and venality of Camineet, but Tyler had lost the ambition to stop fighting it. He had dropped everything and run away from the archopolis, from Luveno, and from his love.

They had been the best, once, captains in LIM Corporate Security, Special Enforcement Division. Tyler Jorran and Melora Nain had fought against industrial espionage, battled saboteurs and anti-corporate terrorists, and gathered information for nearly a decade. He had started as an idealistic nineteen-year-old, defending the honor of his job, but had steadily come to see LIM as no better or worse than any of their rivals. Too often, there was no difference between one side and the other--both were immoral, deceptive, ruthless, manipulative, and even brutal. Idealism was replaced as a motivation by professionalism, and at last, for Tyler, it hadn't been enough. Melora had quit too, but she had decided to freelance. She was sick of being beholden to Luveno, wanted the freedom to make her own decisions, but the job itself had never bothered her the way it had him.

"What's the point of quitting, Tyler?"her voice echoed in his mind.

"I'm not going to do this any more. I'm not one of LIM's androids, programmed to do whatever they say."

Her green eyes had flashed at him.

"If you think that way, then stay and fight. We can work together, take on jobs that work against Luveno and the other corps."

It had been an appeal to stay together, he understood now. Melora had never shared his ideals, but she had been willing to adopt them for his sake. Only he hadn't seen it then. All he had seen was that he was too damned sick of his way of life to keep on any longer.

"Fine, Tyler. Go and run away. Just remember, so long as you're sticking your head in the sand, everything you've said is nothing but hot air. If you won't stand up for what you believe, you're not an idealist, you're just a coward." She had spun on her heel and stalked away, then. Perhaps she had wanted him to stop her, call her back, but Tyler hadn't moved, and so the words became Melora's parting shot.

He remembered the way her eyes had glimmered wetly as she said them.

The sharp jolt of the aerojet touching down, followed by the scream of brakes bringing it to a stop, broke Tyler out of his reverie. He waited for the jet to park, then unbuckled himself, collected his fibercoat from the overhead compartment, and shrugged into it. The longcoat not only provided protection from attack with its armored fiber lining, but also helped to conceal possibly illegal weapons that could be stored underneath, weapons that had been the tools of the trade for a corporate agent. A blue-haired attendant with a bright smile wished Tyler a good evening, then stepped aside to let him enter the transit tube that led to the aeroport. Tyler let the moving walkway carry him along as he watched the lights of the aeroport, the shapes of the large, sleek jets through the clear walls.

He stepped off the walkway at the far end and headed for the regional government's customs center, passing as he did so the tunnels leading to and from the teleport stations. Instantaneous transport was still hideously expensive, far too much so for the common traveler, but corporate officials used them more and more, especially for return trips. Supposedly they were in full use on the planet Mota, where the government subsidized their operation at reduced rates to encourage acceptance of the technology. Tyler didn't like the idea of being transmitted from one side of the planet to the other via electronic signal, but he supposed the time was coming when it would seem as normal as flying.

The customs agents proved to be typical of their sort: a young woman in a black and gold carbonsuit uniform with a sonic gun holstered at her hip and a Polezi robot in the same colors. Additional robots, the conical, waist-high Whistles, sat about almost unobtrusively in case any of the teams of agents required backup. The archopolis was nearly a nation in and of itself, and just like other regional governments, Camineet's tried its mostly futile best to keep out undesirable people and cargoes.

"Your identification, please," the woman asked. Tyler handed her his identity card; she inserted it into her computer, which read the information coded electronically into it. "Tyler Jorran, age thirty-two, resident of Abion."

She looked him over, comparing him to the image her computer screen was displaying. Tyler was a fairly striking individual, an inch over six feet tall with a lean but broad-shouldered build. He was handsome, and the slim, attractive planes of his face were given character by a square jaw that didn't quite fit with the rest of his features. His blond hair was cut close and there was a scar running diagonally over his left eye from an old wound he'd never bothered to have biosculpted away.

"Visual examination complete; appearance verified within acceptable limits," droned the tinny, mechanical voice of the Polezi. Despite its manlike appearance, the Polezi could by no means pass for human, having only a rudimentary intelligence, which was why it could not be classified as an android.

"Yes, appearance verified," agreed the human official. She tapped a few keys and her eyes widened. "Your checked baggage contains dangerous weapons, Mr. Jorran!"

"For which I have a license. My ticket was logged with the proper permits for one sonic gun and two ceramic knives."

"Oh, yes, I see," she noted with a relieved sigh. "You can collect your baggage at the red counter. Welcome to Camineet!"

By the time Tyler passed through customs, collected his suitcase and haversack, and made it outside, velvet darkness had fallen over the city. He hailed a cab, then told the driver to take him to the Red Circle Inn in Lordan, the district north of Neroton. The landskimmer, a small, light version of the massive landrovers designed for urban terrain rather than the wilderness, melded easily with the traffic on the multileveled highway that passed above and through the city. Brilliantly lit billboards displayed repeating cycles of holographic advertisements as they moved past. In the distance, the mile-high towers of the business and financial district downtown rose up through the nest of roadways. The cab slowed for a toll gate, where the cab's electronic roadpass automatically reacted with a signal informing the gate that it had been paid up for this month.

"Stinking road taxes," the driver cursed. "The government knows it's next to bloody impossible to get across the city by the groundways"--that was the local term for Camineet's surface-level streets--"so they hike the roadpass cost every year. Bet it wouldn't be this way on Mota. Mother Brain wouldn't put up with that crap."

Mother Brain was the supercomputer that acted as Palm's chief executive. On the second planet, though, it was much more. Mota was naturally a desert world, but Mother Brain's ability to monitor the myriad of environmental systems that controlled its weather had enabled Palmaforming efforts that had transformed it into a paradise of green. The civilian government of Palm worked with the support and advice of the artificial intelligence, but on Mota, technically a military colony, it was Mother Brain who controlled planetary life. The network of robot-run farms, combined with biogenetically engineered animal species, regulated food distribution, and managed health care all but made it possible for Mota's citizens to live without working. Some people considered that to be heaven incarnate; others, with whom Tyler was inclined to agree, figured it was more like hell.

"Yeah, but as far as I know, they don't have taxi-skimmers on Mota, either."

"Eh?"

"No cabs, so you'd need a different job."

The driver laughed.

"Good point. 'Least this way I've only gotta pay part of my income instead of not having one."

The city lights began to blend together as Tyler stared out the cab window. Abion was a peaceful, quiet resort town, barely more than a village. The buildings were sprawled out, not packed tightly together; few were more than two stories tall. Camineet was a different world by comparison. There was beauty here, like the sea of glittering points of light against the dark sky Tyler could see through the window, and a good deal of ugliness as well, but all of it was manmade, the work of Palman hands instead of nature.

He wasn't sure he belonged in this world anymore. He had worked--some--on dangerous assignments in Abion, but they had strictly been small-stakes, favor-for-a-friend deals which matched the small town's size. His reflexes, both physical and mental, couldn't help but have slowed in the four years he had been away from the game. If Melora was in over her head, then what could he do to even the odds? She was as good as he was, and had stayed in practice besides.

Stop that, Tyler told himself firmly. There was no point in getting ahead of himself. First he needed to see what was going on, and then he could worry.

"Yeah, it's really something, isn't it?" the cabdriver said, mistaking Tyler's fixed gaze for a tourist's amazement at the cityscape. "First time in Camineet?"

"No; I used to live here."

"Really? Couldn't get me to move away," the driver replied, his complaints of a few minutes before apparently forgotten. "Screwed-up place sometimes, but there's nowhere like the arch' on Palm or anywhere else."

"That's the truth," Tyler agreed wholeheartedly.

Lordan, like Neroton, was a lower-class district. It wasn't quite a slum, but was only a step above at best. The stone and brick tenements were dirty with pollution, but the streets were clean and law enforcement reliable, if not enthusiastic. The Red Circle was just like the dozens of other inns in the chain across Palm, simple and generic. The graying clerk registered Tyler without the slightest interest in his business for forty meseta up front. Inns like this were useful because they encouraged anonymity, merging their patrons into the mass that were the thousands of Red Circle guests each night. The small room had a double bed, a nightstand, a sink, and a toilet, all of which were at least clean.

Tossing his gear onto the bed, Tyler unpacked, removing his weapons from their cases. Buying weapons in Camineet was easy, smuggling them in by land almost as simple, but getting them in by air was almost impossible. The shock and atavistic horror created by an aerojet disaster created extraordinary paranoia about air travel: someone who tried to slip dangerous weapons, especially restricted ones, onto an aerojet was considered more than an ordinary criminal, he became somehow a monster. That was why Tyler had chosen to travel under his own name, and use the weapons-transit permit he had been issued when he worked for LIM and which he had kept active since then. He might have been out of the business, but giving up an asset had always seemed foolhardy. It was almost as if he had known that eventually this day would come--or subconsciously hoped that it would.

Tyler slipped on the sonic gun's shoulder holster. The fall of his long fibercoat would conceal it from view but could be swept aside with the same motion he used to draw the pistol. Sonic guns, probably the most common long-range weapon in Algo, fired small, concentrated pulses of sound waves that inflicted damage to physical objects, including living flesh, by setting up vibrations in the target's structure. On paper that sounded curious and esoteric, but the fist-sized hole Tyler's Redfield Marksman could put in a Palman body was neither.

One of the two ceramic knives went on his left hip, at a slight angle to make a cross-draw easier, while the other went into the top of Tyler's right boot. The advanced ceramic alloys invented generations ago on Palm were both harder and more flexible than steel and titanium. Ceramic armor and weapons were usually very expensive, but also worth it. The only better blades were those with built-in laser or plasma emitters, or those made of laconia.

Tyler checked his reflection in the small mirror over the sink, verifying that he wasn't obviously armed, then left the hotel room. He left nothing behind of particular importance; his travel gear was all replaceable and unincriminating in case it became unsafe to return to the inn. In ways like this the ex-agent could feel his old instincts functioning, but it was a laborious process. Tyler was a machine left idle for too long; each move he made knocked some of the rust off but until it was all gone he wouldn't be working at full efficiency. Things that ought to have been reflexive still needed to be thought through.

When he took another cab into Neroton, he almost gave the driver Melora's address before he realized the mistake--rust at work again.

"Nero Park, please."

"Yessir." This driver was a rare member of his breed, silent and uncommunicative unless spoken to. That suited Tyler just fine; it gave him time to pull his thoughts together and stop berating himself for almost leaving a direct chain of witnesses from the aeroport to Melora's door. That was amateur stuff, but he had to get through it, find the even groove again that once let Tyler slide through trouble with his wits about him.

Nero Park and the Neroton district were both named after some historical figure whose legend had been forgotten. Even his likeness had been lost; there had been a twenty-foot statue of Nero in the center of the park but all that was left was the pedestal and Nero's feet. Tyler assumed Nero had been a king, a hero, or a martyr, because those were the three classes of people who were honored by later generations, but he knew nothing else. He pushed these irrelevant details aside as the cab left and concentrated on business.

The major difference between Neroton and its neighbor district to the north was the attitude of the people. Lordan was a poor sector of the archopolis, yes, but it was a sector of the working poor. Lordanites worked long hours for low pay, and when bad times came their solution was to work harder. The people of Neroton, on the other had, sought easy answers. Petty crime and organized gangs were both rife in Neroton, and there was a thriving black market. Dozens of under-the-table deals were negotiated at bars and restaurants in the district; it was a perfect site for a hunter like Melora to make her base of operations at, with its easy access to underworld contacts but a higher safety level than out-and-out slums like Rendak.

893 Fenton Avenue was within easy walking distance of the park, and Tyler moved swiftly through the dingy streets, refamiliarizing himself with the environment. More than once, hard-eyed passerby sized him up, asking themselves if this was a potential victim, but wisely stayed away. The building was typical of its type, a solid, plain, six-story block, a stone facade over a steel framework. There didn't appear to be any watchers, so if it was under surveillance those doing it were competent. Tyler really hadn't expected any, though; if Melora feared danger at this address she wouldn't have told Tyler to meet her there. Nonetheless, the back of his neck tingled as he walked up to the door.

The security wasn't elaborate, just a simple buzzer plus visiphone system for getting past the building's front door. Tyler thumbed the button for apartment 17 and waited for Melora's face to appear on the visiphone screen, her voice over the intercom. His heart was in his throat; old feelings damped down for years threatened to overwhelm him.

The visiphone remained dark and silent. Was it broken, or was something wrong? Tyler's instincts hinted at the latter. He reached up and covered the vid pickup with his hand, and ran his finger down the row of buttons.

"Palm Couriers. Gotta package here," he mumbled into the intercom. Predictably, someone--or several someones--buzzed him in without further thought. Some people were like that, the kind who would rely on electronics without wanting to lift a finger to help themselves.

Number 17 was on the third floor; Tyler took the stairs, looking around cautiously. He didn't see anyone, though, which was curious. There were plenty of ways to watch a building without being seen, but relatively few to go unnoticed within one. If something was wrong, why weren't there signs of it?

Tyler was starting to think that rather than being in trouble Melora had just stepped out for a minute. She wasn't expecting him at any particular time, or on any particular day for that matter. She could be attending to business, or for that matter getting dinner. Tyler wished he had more details, some idea of what the trouble was so he'd know what to expect.

A knock on the door got no answer, so he tried the knob. It turned, far enough to withdraw the latch. Now Tyler was sure something was wrong; no one left their door unlocked in Neroton if they were away from home--and usually not even if they were. He drew the Marksman and opened the door cautiously. A pale light filled the living suite, cast by the city lights outside the window. Tyler saw a sofa, table, chairs, entertainment suite, but nothing out of place. He kept his back to the wall as he inched around to the kitchen, but saw nothing there either. He turned back to the living room, and shock exploded through him as he saw steel claws gleam in the eerie light as they slashed at his chest.

### Chapter 3

If Melora's apartment had looked neat and well-kept before, it certainly didn't now. Tyler and Risa had reduced at least two-thirds of it to disaster status in the course of searching it from top to bottom.

"Tyler," Risa asked as she carefully examined a kitchen cabinet, "why did you ask me to help you? You don't know a thing about me."

"I know you're a good fighter, and that you care about Melora. That's enough." The cupboard under the sink, he found, contained only ordinary cleaning products. No false backs, no packages taped out of sight above the door or among the pipes.

"Yes, but why would you want help at all?"

"It's always good to have backup," Tyler told her. "There's a few jobs--most undercover stuff, for example--that work out better for one person alone, but for anything else, you want a team, preferably one with complimentary skills. A good team, one that works well together, is better than just the sum total of its parts."

"Sounds like a marriage."

Tyler stood up, shrugging as he did.

"I haven't got any experience in that field, so I can't really say."

The street girl got a glass tumbler down from the cupboard she was checking.

"I figured a guy like you would be a real lone wolf type."

"Live and learn." He decided that a little more explanation might be in order. "One lone hero taking on a horde of bad guys makes for a good story, especially if you can sign someone like Nick DeHaviland to play the lead in the holovid version, but it's bad policy in real life. At the very least you should have a partner, so you can watch each other's backs. From that point you bring in more people as the job demands them, filling out what skills are needed: soldier, tech-user, gridrider, driver, pilot, mechanic--take your pick. In the business Melora and I used to be in, going it alone was something you did only when you had to."

He was thinking of Melora's apparent capture, and how different it might have been if he had come a day earlier. It had taken him too long to wrestle with his feelings, to convince himself to come back, and it opened up a whole string of what-might-have-beens.

"You want one?" Risa asked.

"One what?"

She held up the glass.

"A drink," she told him. "You look like you could use one; I know I could."

She opened up a tall, square-based bottle of whiskey.

"Yeah, sure--" Tyler suddenly broke off in mid-sentence as he realized something. "Risa, where did you get that?"

"In the cabinet here, over the sink."

"Give it to me."

Confused, she handed it over. He held the bottle up to the overhead light, but the label covered too much.

"Get me a strainer, a narrow one."

Risa handed one over, starting to get the idea.

"Of course! Who'd suspect a whiskey bottle, unless they knew she didn't drink!"

"I might be jumping to conclusions," Tyler cautioned. "Maybe she keeps it on hand for guests."

He set a large mixing bowl in the sink just in case the liquid itself was important--a sample of some new chemical instead of whiskey, for example--then began to pour out the bottle through the strainer into the bowl. It looked and smelled like whiskey.

"Or, you might just be right," Risa observed. Two slender, honey-colored datachips glistened in the strainer's mesh. Each was about the same length and twice the thickness of a toothpick, and was capable of containing large amounts of data. "Wouldn't being soaked like that damage them, though?"

Tyler shook his head.

"Extreme temperature, strong magnetic fields, or just smashing them, sure, but a little water is harmless, so long as you dry the chips off before you put them into a dataport. Now, the computer itself, dumping that into Scion Bay might be a bad idea, but the datachips would be fine until an ammonite ate them." He frowned unhappily. "What I haven't seen so far is a computer."

"Melora had one," Risa provided. "A little IMVE Paradigm."

"The guys who grabbed her must have taken it. One of those notebook-sized computers is easy enough to snatch up, and if they were looking for data its internal memory would be a good place to start.

Finding the datachips told Tyler that, more than likely, it was information the kidnappers were after. Almost by definition that meant they'd be keeping Melora for interrogation. Since LIM's training had taught her to resist most methods of questioning, it would take time to break her down. It provided a superficial timeframe for estimating how long they would keep her alive.

"All right, now that you've found what we're looking for, what's next?"

"First, we finish the search, just in case there's something else to find."

"And then?"

"Then we go figure out what's on these chips."

\* \* \* \* \*

Predictably, the search of the apartment turned up nothing else of note, though Risa did take the opportunity to appropriate a sonic gun from the cache of combat equipment they found behind a loose panel in the bedroom closet. "After all," she had said, "it's not doing Melora any good in there, is it?" Tyler had to admit that it wasn't, though he also didn't know if it would help Risa. From the way she handled the weapon, he suspected she'd had a lot more experience with close-quarters combat than with guns.

Reading the datachips, then, was the pair's only lead. Accessing them, Tyler assumed, would be a two-step process. First of all, they'd need the equipment to read them. That wasn't tough; any computer would do, including a palm-sized pocket secretary if need be. The problem was, neither of the two had one. Risa of course didn't; she wasn't a gridrider and anyone from the streets who wasn't would have sold any computer they laid hands on for ready cash. Why keep something that wouldn't do her any good? Tyler, meanwhile, did own a computer, but it was back at his home in Abion.

The second step, once they had the equipment, would be beating the encryption. If the information on the chips was as important as it seemed like it was, then there would be at least some security protecting it. If Melora had done it herself, that security would be basic at best, but if the chips merely stored downloaded files or had been stolen as is, they could be heavily encrypted. Of the two of them, Melora had always been handier around a computer than Tyler, so whatever the situation turned out to be, Tyler and Risa would need help getting past the security.

That realization lead to an answer to the first problem, because any gridrider or even a run-of-the-mill data crusher would have plenty of computing power on hand. The next move was therefore obvious.

"So who do we ask?" was Risa's question. A light, steady rain had begun to fall, and both Tyler and the young woman beside him pulled their coats tightly around themselves as they stepped out of the building.

"That's the question, isn't it? My contacts are all four years out of date."

"I know a few people, but I'm not sure I'd trust any of them. Most are just wannabes anyway. You know the type; pull off one dataswipe and they're sure they're the next Angel Red."

Tyler knew the type all too well. He had narrowly avoided becoming one himself in his own youth, a hotshot kid whose illusion of invincibility was much tougher than any skill he happened to possess. It happened a lot on the streets, where the punks who ran with the gangs mistook survival for competence. That was why so many of them wound up gravestoned in the trash bays.

Angrily, the ex-agent shoved the depressing thought out of his head, or at least out of his conscious. Too damn much introspection--and most of it a heavy downer--when he should have been thinking about biz was likely to get him killed if he didn't quit it. Schooling his thoughts into a more productive format, he ran through his mental list of old contacts who handled data work, checking to see if there were any who were likely to be both alive and accessible (as in, could they be reached without using a complex series of relays and passwords that got changed a hell of a lot more often than once every four years). Tyler surprised himself by coming up with a name.

"Hamdak," he said aloud.

"Who?"

"Rhys Hamdak, Ham for short. He ran an electronics store and did a little hacking on the side. He's not even that far away, about ten blocks, unless he moved." Since he had a permanent place of business, he was as likely to still be there as anyone else Tyler remembered from the old days.

"Sounds about right. Let's get going."

The street predators had given Tyler a wide berth before, and now that he had backup they stayed even farther out of his way. Muggers and footpads were a lot like carnivores in the wild; they plucked the sickly and weak from the edges of the herd. Gangs could be different, more like a dog pack that would try to drive off any rival hunters that entered their territory, but Neroton's gangs were limited to its worst sections and the main streets were considered strictly neutral turf. Coincidentally, this almost exactly matched the pattern of DLE patrols in the area--a tacit agreement that kept cops and gangers from getting into a shooting war that wouldn't be good for anybody. "High profile" was about the worst label you could stick on someone in Neroton. All in all, therefore, Tyler and Risa had a pleasant evening stroll to Emmison Drive, the major street in the district. After four years in Abion, Tyler could taste the faint tang of the polluted city air.

"This the place?" Risa asked, looking at a storefront with a red neon sign in the window reading Ham's Circuit Stop.

"Uh huh. Same sign. Same cracked window, for that matter."

Risa rapped her knuckles on the pane and heard the dull thud of manmade materials.

"Some kind of armored panel?"

"Yeah, like the stuff they use in landrover windows."

"I wondered why the displays didn't get swiped."

Tyler nodded in agreement. Even on the main drag, the window display of portable visiphones, chipreaders, and audivis systems was an open invitation to a snatch-and-grab.

"Guess the armored glass cuts down on the 'spontaneous inventory reductions,' as the corp types would put it. How'd it crack?" the girl asked him.

"Some guy went crazy six or seven years back and shot up the street with a pulse vulcan. The DLE had to call in military help to take him down--a couple of Army Eyes flew in and snared him with plasmarings but not before a stray round cracked the window."

Tyler glanced at his chronograph. It was 23:39, almost midnight. He was surprised Ham's was still open. As if reading his thoughts Risa said, "We'd better go in before he goes to bed," and pulled open the door.

The shop's interior wasn't well-lit; dim fluorescent tubes ringed the room at the juncture of wall and ceiling, producing a greenish haze not entirely unlike being underwater. It was hard to imagine anyone logically considering the merits of this or that visiphone in here, but maybe that was the point, Tyler thought. Give the shop a little of that cutting-edge, neo-anarchist feel that let the customer imagine she was a red-hot neon angel picking out the latest mod for their gridlink instead of a tired wage slave bringing home a new holovision to her husband and two kids.

"Hey, Ham!" Tyler called out to the man behind the counter. "Don't you ever sleep?"

Rhys Hamdak looked at him oddly, trying to place the face, then memories clicked into place and his jaw sagged.

"Tyler?" he exclaimed. "Damn my eyes, it is you. Hell, man, I thought you were long gone from this scrap heap. It's been years since you dropped off the map."

"I thought so too, but it turned out to be just a long vacation."

"Well, you still haven't lost your taste in company," Ham said, sizing up Risa. She tossed him an idle "look but don't touch" expression as he got down off his stool and came out around the counter.

Four years hadn't changed Hamdak much. His dirty blond hair was still worn long, his shirt and pants were still ragged, and he still wore his beat-up tan fibercoat with its symbols of colored braid woven onto each of its dozen or so pockets. The small, round tinted glasses he affected were still in place, although they were blue now instead of green. The only noticeable effects of the transition from early to late forties were that his hair was a little thinner on top and his broad frame was starting to lose the battle against his appetite, developing a bit of a gut. Rhys stuck out a hand and Tyler shook it, tensing his fingers against the strong grip.

"So what brings you to me? I figure it's not just to yak about old times, so lay it out for me, man."

"These." Tyler took out the two datachips. "We want to know what's on them."

"Locked down?"

"Couldn't tell you; I haven't had a chance to look them over at all. I figured if there was a problem, it's better to have them in the hands of someone who can deal with it."

Ham grinned.

"Sounds fine by me; let's get to work."

"Uh uh. First we talk price. As you recall, my knowledge of your working rates is four years out of date."

The big man hooked his thumbs through his belt loops.

"Inflation's a bitch, ain't it? Fifty meseta if all I've got to do is slot the chips and open 'em up. Three hundred if I've got to crack one of 'em open, and five hundred if I have to do both. And...let's call it an even thou (?) if there's any really nasty surprises, firetraps or that kind of thing."

"Let's say fifty, two-fifty, four hundred, and seven-fifty," Tyler haggled. "Inflation isn't that bad."

"Nine hundred on the major stuff, and I'll let you have the rest at your numbers for old times' sake."

Tyler chuckled.

"You drove a hard bargain back then, too."

"Well, a man's gotta have some kind of rep, and if I'm gonna be a bastard, at least I'm not a cheap bastard. Let me lock up and we'll go on back."

Ham not only locked the door but slid two heavy bolts into place as well, then turned off the window sign and display lights. Tyler gave him the datachips and the storeowner led them into a back room that served as a combination office and workspace. He flipped open a notebook-sized computer which was plugged into a collection of other modules and peripherals. Ham was one of those hackers who preferred to tinker with his system and customize it rather than simply buy the newest, sleekest machine on the market, so his base unit wasn't fancy--a Nakagaki Wolf, only a couple of steps up from Melora's stolen Paradigm. If it was a Wolf, though, then it was more like one of those genetically engineered Burnwolves used by the military for security with all the mods Ham had built into it. He cued the machine up and slotted one of the chips.

[UNKNOWN #1 PRESENT]

"Hope you can pay cash, Tyler, because this baby's locked tight."

"Is it bad?" Risa asked. She sat in a battered wooden chair, facing the wrong way and folding her arms on top of its back.

"No way to know, yet."

Ham popped the chip out and inserted it into one of the small, boxy devices connected to the computer.

"Now, let's see how tough you really are." Sensing his audience's curiosity, he explained. "I keep most of my codebreaking software on this unit. Its processing speed is way over the Wolf's so it's got more power."

"Why not use it from the first, then?"

"The thing's set up for anti-security work, not data transfer. The interface is kind of slow if all you want to do is read an open chip."

He typed in a few commands and watched as the scanning programs went to work.

Around a century ago, there had been a big craze over virtual-reality computer interfaces that let the user actually "step inside" the programs, becoming one with the flow of data. All the major computer corporations, the futurists, the technology elite had sworn up and down that this was the next thing. Only the military and government resisted the rush to change over to the new interface, on the advice of Mother Brain. As was almost always the case, Mother Brain knew what she was talking about. Ordinary people, from word processors to database managers to shopowners to homemakers preferred a computer they could get up and walk away from, to maintain their distance from while using it. The incredible reaction time made possible by VR, almost speed-of-thought, wasn't useful or practical for most comp users. That was why Hamdak was sitting in front of a screen rather than wiring himself into the network.

The one notable exception to the rule, Tyler knew, were the gridriders, high-end hackers who could and did use the extreme responsiveness of partial or full-immersion virtual reality to navigate the datanet and defeat online security measures. For most people, though, even some hackers, VR was a cumbersome if intriguing toy.

"Hmm, not too tough," Ham mused. "Delta-level encoding, I'd say."

"Delta-level?" Risa asked. "What does that mean?"

"Computer security is rated based on its complexity and difficulty to break," Tyler explained. "Alpha is top-flight, serious business, the kind that gives even the neon angels fits. Beta is close to it but not as good, then down through gamma, delta, and epsilon-level. Anything below that is just an open file, unsecured. Accessibility is rated the same way--alpha-level passcodes, for example, would be held by CEOs, generals, security chiefs, those kind of people." He glanced down at Ham. "Did I leave anything out?"

The big man shook his head.

"Nope, that basically covers it. Like, if to access this chip I needed to enter a six-letter password, that would be epsilon level. This is a little nastier--dual passwords, ten characters each, alphanumeric and case-sensitive. Sixty-two to the twentieth power combinations. What makes it delta is the lockout, though. Enter five wrong combinations and it stops taking input and spits out a virus code to try and crash the system. That keeps me from simply grinding through all the possible combinations."

"Can you get around that?" Risa looked impressed.

"'Course I can, girlie. See, I don't screw around with passwords." He typed in a few commands. "I've got some hot programs here that'll go right after the chip's encoding itself--reprogram it to lower its own security, basically. No sweat."

"He began to type faster, issuing commands as status reports showed themselves on the screen. In less than five minutes he stopped and looked up with a broad grin.

"Hell, Tyler, you'd think that after four years you'd at least have brought me a challenge."

"You're in?"

"Look for yourself."

Ham pointed at the display, which showed [CONTRACT FILES] as the chip's name and beneath that, [DIRECTORY AVAILABLE].

"I knew I could count on you."

"Just remember that warm, fuzzy feeling of gratitude when you're reaching for your money." Ham ejected the chip and handed it to Tyler. "I took the security out permanently, so you can read it any time, now. You can use that machine over there if you don't want me reading over your shoulder." He jerked his thumb in the direction of a chipreader sitting on a side shelf.

"Thanks; we'll take it out front."

"All right; I'll go after the other chip while you're reading. I'm hoping it's no harder than the first one."

"Me too; it's not much good to us if we can't see what's on it."

A chipreader could access and copy text, audio, or video files on an open chip, but not one that had even the slightest security. Its basic use was for reading books, listening to music, or watching holovid shows and movies, making it a key component of most audivis systems. The one Ham offered had a small fold-out screen and speaker system, and retailed for two hundred and twenty meseta.

"Nice of him to give us some privacy," Risa said. "Then again, I ought to expect professionalism from your contacts, not like the skags I know."

"He's being paid to break the security, not pry into our business," Tyler agreed, turning the machine on and inserting the chip.

"So what's on it?" Risa asked as Tyler looked through the directory.

"I think these are Melora's job records."

"Records?" the girl exclaimed incredulously.

Tyler nodded.

"Yeah; it helps her keep things straight, especially if there's fallout that doesn't show up until a year later, or if she needed to arrange a data 'insurance policy' against being set up."

"Isn't it dangerous, though, to leave information like that out where people can get at it?"

With a shrug, Tyler said, "Honestly, if Melora ever got to the point where her own chips could be used as evidence against her, she'd already be in way too much trouble to worry about it."

Risa didn't look like she bought it fully, but then again, neither did Tyler himself. He turned his attention back to the files.

"Let's see; Melora's done bounty hunter jobs, surveillance, item recovery, a couple of courier runs, package protection, and industrial espionage. No bodyguard assignments, though, which isn't surprising. Melora always hated that when she and I were partners."

"You worked for Luveno, didn't you?"

"That's right. I'm surprised Melora told you."

"We talked a lot," Risa said, a bit wistfully. "I think she saw me as a kind of kid sister, or a younger version of herself. She used to run with the Steel Wind, you know, when she was a teenager."

Tyler nodded.

"Yeah, one of LIM's people hired some of the gangers for muscle work and was impressed with Melora's talent. Nevin Dall of LIM Security agreed. The same guy who trained me." He plucked a file from the menu and called it up. "Now, here's something."

"What?"

"Records of Melora's last job. He pointed at the screen. "Here's her client."

Risa chuckled softly. "Adam Smith? That's so damn generic it's funny." Tyler opened up a note Melora had flagged the name with and the girl read, "Aha! They met at the Gray Lion; Melora let Smith pick up the tab with a credit transfer, then she tipped the waiter twenty meseta for a look at the record. The mysterious Mr. Smith is actually Eric Stephens, finance section manager in the Robotics Division, Luveno Industrial Mechanisms."

"Old home week," Tyler said, though in truth he'd never heard of the man. The name of his employer was quite enough. First Melora, now LIM; was everything he thought he had left behind going to come back to haunt him?

"I guess this Stephens guy went to Melora because he needed reliable talent for some under-the-table job? The kind of thing that official corporate agents couldn't touch?"

Tyler skimmed the rest of the file; it was written diary-style instead of being some kind of standard form, but he quickly got the gist of it.

"Good guess, but no. It seems that Mr. Stephens caught a hint of some dirt on his boss and wanted a pro to back his play. Office politics as usual, I guess. If you can't earn a promotion, blackmail your way to one."

"Typical corp games." There was a world of meaning in the street girl's sneer.

"Apparently, Stephens gave Melora a passcode to LIM's system to help her through the security." Tyler frowned, looking at the screen. "The first meeting was a week ago. Melora's message was three days ago, so during those four days, she learned something she hadn't expected. At least, that's the most likely scenario. For all we know, the trouble she told me about is something completely different."

"For that matter, the goons that grabbed her might be a whole different bunch, but thinking like that doesn't give us anything to do."

Tyler nodded.

"I know; we've got to work with what we've got. I just like to remind myself every so often that I shouldn't get locked into my first idea that I miss things."

"So what did she find out for Stephens?" Risa looked over his shoulder, trying to see for herself. Her breath tickled his cheek.

"No clue. It isn't here."

"Probably on that other chip, then," she concluded. "When's Ham gonna get done with it anyway?"

"It ain't gonna be anytime soon," Rhys' voice came from the open door. Risa and Tyler turned as the burly hacker came in. Ham tossed Tyler the chip. "That baby's locked up so damn tight it could take me a year to get inside."

### Chapter 4

"Exactly what are you saying, Ham?" Tyler asked.

"Just what it sounds like. Someone's got that chip locked down so tight you'd need Mother Brain to crack it open, or at least someone a hell of a lot better than me. Whoever did this up was a damned artist."

"How so?" Risa asked. She didn't know much about the world of computers; Tyler suspected her closest encounters with high tech had been with DLE robots and building security systems.

"Well, most people who set up security, at least high-level stuff, put in nasty traps. Firetraps, for example, utilities that tell your equipment to slag itself down, not just crash the system or crud up your software, but actually melt down the wires and chips and stuff inside the box. This doesn't have those. It's just a wall, a big, smooth, seamless wall. It's also a mirror--completely reflective. If you try to crash or degrade it, whatever you put out comes right back at you."

Tyler nodded, impressed.

"Would you call it alpha-level?" he asked.

Ham pursed his lips in thought, then shook his head.

"Nah, I don't think so. Beta, though, definitely. You can't really put alpha-level encryption on a storage chip; the hardware isn't there. Can't fly with the angels if you ain't got wings, you know?"

Whatever else Tyler knew, he was sure that it hadn't been Melora who had put that security in place; she just didn't have the skill. She had been given a passcode by her client, though, so it was likely she had subcontracted with a gridrider to snoop inside Luveno's system. That same person was probably the one who had encrypted the data on the chip--why let a second hacker look if it wasn't necessary? The data almost certainly hadn't been encrypted that way by LIM; Luveno's CompSec preferred more aggressive security measures.

"We need to find the person who created this," he stated. "Not only will he or she definitely be able to get past the security, but also there's a good chance they know something more about what's going on than just what's on this chip." He explained his reasoning, filling in the gaps for Ham and Risa.

"Hey," Ham said, holding up his hands, "slow up a bit, Tyler. You're telling me more than I really need to know here."

"Not really. You see, there's more I need from you, and you can't be totally blind for it."

For a moment, Hamdak looked nonplused. It was after midnight, he was tired, and he didn't want to get in too deep. He thrived by knowing his business and sticking to it. His curiosity got the better of him, though.

"Lay it on me, Tyler, and we'll see what we can do."

"I need everything you can dig up on a guy named Eric Stephens. He's a section manager for LIM."

Ham goggled at the ex-agent.

"Tyler, are you asking me to hack Luveno? Let's grab some reality here."

"Not the system core. At worst, you just need to have a look at his personnel jacket. Plus the usual general trace--news reports, hospital admissions, arrest records, city directory, you know the drill."

Ham wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

"You had me going there for a minute. It still won't be easy."

Risa snorted derisively.

"Maybe someone who isn't scared of their own shadow could do a better job."

"What the hell do you know about it?" Ham rounded on her angrily. "Just because gridriding sounds like it's some kind of game doesn't mean it is, get me? A VR interface hooks your brain up to the computer, and the people who build security systems know that. You put a foot wrong and you get feedback that can do everything from singe a few brain cells to make your heart stop. If you get away from that, then there's other security code that can trace where you're accessing from, sometimes even identify you. Then the corps send out people like him"--he pointed at Tyler--"to deal with you. Or to put it in your terms, would you try to take on a DLE troop with a couple of Eyesores backing them up?"

"Chill out, Ham; I think she got the point," Tyler said. Despite the rage and the reddening color of the man's face, Tyler had a feeling that Rhys Hamdak was suffering from a solid case of doth-protest-too-much. Gridriders as a group fell by and large somewhere between foolhardy and suicidal on the bravery scale. Those who were cautious or who evaluated their risks with cold professionalism were relatively few and far between. Odds were that even though Ham wasn't a coward he sometimes felt like one next to his fellow hackers.

Risa, meanwhile, looked like she was caught midway between hey-I-didn't-know-that and I'm-gonna-ram-that-lecture-down-your-throat. Tyler gave her a look that said "calm down; we need this man's help." She knew that helping Melora had to be their first priority, so she didn't push the argument. It must have been tough for her, as Risa clearly didn't enjoy backing down from anything. Displaying weakness wasn't a good idea on the streets; it marked a person as a potential victim. That, Tyler had always assumed, was the reason most gangers put such a high priority on saving face. Their lives were a constant show of strength.

Only the best, the ones like Melora, shook that off. They replaced the image of strength with the real thing.

"How much?" Tyler asked, trying to get past the moment.

"Two K," Ham told him. "Five hundred now, plus the two-fifty for reading your chip."

Tyler had the feeling that the price had gone up about five hundred meseta from what it might have been because of the incident with Risa. He started to reach for his bank access card, then stopped as he realized how foolish that was. Paying with an open credit transfer would leave an electronic trail, "footprints" in the datanet that could be traced.

It was a rookie mistake, something so obvious it shouldn't have come up at all, but it had. Time couldn't do that much damage to Tyler's professional instincts, not alone at least. He couldn't stop to think about the psychological whys and wherefores, either, not when Melora's life was at stake. He needed to get his edge back and get it back fast.

He didn't have any untraceable credit, but he at least had had the foresight to bring cash. Electronic transfers of meseta that existed only in the computer files of some bank were not the only way of doing business. Sometimes, a few hundred-meseta notes was still best.

Ham stuck the cash into one of his brightly decorated pockets. Tyler often had wondered what the symbols done up in beadwork and woven thread meant, but he had always held back. He realized that his only contacts with the long-haired hacker had been in the course of business, and the thought brought an unpleasant taste to his mouth. Now that he thought about it, Tyler saw that the life he had walked away from hadn't been much of a life at all, little more than an extension of his job. Maybe that was part of why Melora kept at it, because she was better at separating out the work.

"So," Ham said with a grin, his burst of temper apparently forgotten, "are we gonna ride or what?"

They went back into the office, where Ham swiftly changed the connections on some of his equipment. He took off his glasses, slipped them into a pocket, and pulled on a pair of close-fitting gloves, their matte-black finish contrasted by the steel-bright filaments that flowed through them, the metal framework designed to follow the movement of his hands. Cords ran from them to a pyramid-shaped module, the main interface unit that translated hand movements and electric signals into computer commands. A cord also ran to a light framework that resembled a crown, as women's combat helmets were called. Hamdak put this on, too, fitting it so that electrodes pressed against his temples and the back of his neck. He then proceeded to strap himself into his chair, which Tyler saw was made of solid steel, though cushioned, and was bolted to the floor. An X-shaped belt across his chest, plus ankle and wrist cuffs, held him securely in place.

"What's that for?" Risa asked, curious in spite of herself.

"While I'm riding," Ham explained, "the computer sends back signals to tell my body not to move even while it translates my brain's commands into computer code. Problem is, if someone or something breaks through the defenses on my interface, or sometimes even if too much is happening at once in my area of the datanet, that signal can shut down, and I'll be flinging myself around the room. Knew a guy who killed himself that way once; he tried to hack the IMVE mainframe and tossed himself out a fifth-story window while dodging pulsars or some such crap."

"Fun with full-immersion," Tyler said dryly.

"Hell, I heard rumors of another gridrider that actually got his brain hacked and shot himself. That one sounds like pure spew, though."

He nodded at the computer screen.

"If you want, you can watch there what's going down. Don't get too worried if it blanks out, though; I've got the system rigged so maintaining the display is the first thing that shuts down when I need extra memory or processing power." Ham grinned up at them. "Well, time to fly with the angels."

He clenched his fists, pressing both thumbs hard against the first knuckle of the corresponding middle finger. Tiny probes extended from the crown, shining light directly into his eyes, overriding the view of the room with the images they projected. The computer came alive, the swirl of lights and colors on the screen showing Tyler and Risa what Ham saw.

"How can he make sense of that?" Risa said, confused. She had heard her gridrider wannabe friends talk, but never gotten a chance to see one in action.

"Well, the way it was explained to me," said Tyler, "the interface translates computer code into sensations of sight, touch, and sound. If Ham, say, reaches out and grabs something, he's really telling the computer to access whatever the item represents. Every action he takes is reduced to a fraction of a second's time."

The swirling colors resolved themselves into a kind of tunnel of bright, glowing green circuitry. A heads-up display appeared on the screen.

[LOCATION: RFC-A6 #4]

"He's entering the datanet now, logging on through the visiphone network."

The image spun, as if Ham was turning to see where he had come from. A chrome hand raised into view, made a gesture, and a curtain of video static blocked the tunnel.

"What's that?"

"I think it means that Ham's activated an anti-trace program, to keep any hostiles from following him home to this real-world location."

"Will it work?"

Tyler shrugged.

"It depends on how good a program this is and what kind of power the trace software has, plus the skill of the user at the other end if it's not automated."

Ham's flight down the tunnel continued. He burst out of the end and his perspective changed. He stood on a gigantic plain, a grid of glowing wire in a dozen different colors. The tunnel had become a hole in the plain's floor, and other holes opened in the circuitry, or out of the "air." Lights and shapes moved in and out of these holes, filling the sky with traffic.

"This must be why they call it 'gridriding,'" Risa decided. "Is that the datanet?"

"A visual representation. Everything moving is data, programs, even people."

A dodecahedron tumbled by Ham's virtual face, its facets strobing red and blue. Ham raised his chromed hand again, and an eight-sided solid like two pyramids stacked base to base shimmered into being. It spun in place for a split second, then shot off into the datanet. Ham followed it, flying through the neon terrain at incredible speeds.

"Search program," Tyler explained, "tracing the location of LIM in the datanet. You can't see it, but Ham is routing his 'travel' through several computers, following the route to one linked to Luveno.

A shining tower of golden and emerald light seemed to appear before Ham. He flew towards it, slowing as he drew near. He extended his hand again and sent tiny pulses of light towards the tower. Two winked out as they neared it; one did not. He veered away from that one; apparently it was some kind of warning beacon. Setting up more warnings as he went, Ham moved towards a point where shimmering streams of data flowed in and out of the tower.

[LOCATION: LUVENO INDUSTRIAL MECHANISMS]

Ham gestured, and a blue mist seemed to envelop him, obscuring his vision.

[FOG ACTIVATED]

He then stepped into the datastream and flowed inside.

Risa shook her head in confusion.

"I can't tell what the hell is going on, Tyler. What's fog, and why is it making it so hard for us to see--and you can spare me the puns, by the way."

“I don't know for certain, but I think that he used some kind of program that makes LIM's security think that he has the right to log on to the Luveno network. It restricts his activities, though, including the scanning programs that let him 'see' what's around him." Beams of light strobed across Ham's form, but were obscured by the mist.

[SECURITY CHECK PASSED--ACCESS GRANTED]

Tyler guessed that had the security been stronger, the light would have shone straight through the fog, revealing Ham's true self.

Now that he was inside, Ham began to navigate the mazework of narrow corridors that made up LIM's system. Small chambers and twisted passages made up the corporation's systems, many of which were sculpted to specific imagery rather than the generic shapes seen thus far. Some of the areas pulsed with an angry red light; Ham deliberately stayed well away from those.

"Why is this even possible?" Risa suddenly wondered. "I mean, why does a big corporation like LIM put all their files where anyone with enough skill can just wander in and take them? Why not just have it all on a private system that you can only access from inside the building?"

The screen's frame of reference rotated ninety degrees, so that the gridrider was now moving in a direction that had been "up." Mirrorlike cubes covered with a confused welter of letters and numbers tumbled past him.

"Efficiency."

"Huh?"

"LIM's got thousands of employees worldwide who need to access and share data, as well as accessing the public datanet. Oh, there are some isolated systems--security mostly, and a few scientific research systems, and datafiles may have to be physically carried from one location to another rather than being sent over the public datanet on occasion, but largely the meseta they gain from easy access to information outweighs what they lose from 'leakage.'"

Risa shook her head, basically amazed that there were people who actually went through the calculations that determined which option cost less. She paused to watch Ham whip down the left-hand passage of a Y-intersection. The misty veil was still intact around him, but it was thinning.

Hamdak came to a blockage in the datastream that looked like a chain-link fence woven out of bright white light. He looked at it, a series of code scrolling across the heads-up display. Ham raised both of his chromed hands and violet flames erupted from each palm. Slowly approaching the fence, he pressed his palms against the barrier and the fire steadily ate a hole in the gleaming fence until it was big enough to pass through. This act, though, had worn the fog around him down until it was little more than wisps.

Beyond the barrier, the data channel widened into a spherical "room" whose walls were made up of black hexagonal panels. Electronic worker bees, system search programs sent out by LIM employees, flew to various panels, touched them with their front legs, and flew out through the opening. Ham slowed to examine this room, sending out more pulses of light to strike at the walls. One panel glowed when a pulse struck it; Ham swiftly flew over and touched the panel, downloading the file.

Instantly, more lights speared down from several directions. The gridrider flung himself out of the way of several, barely dodging the security code. Bees suddenly turned into armored soldier wasps, barbed stingers bristling, and flew towards him. Ham made a sharp gesture, and a field of red static surrounded him. Words flickered up on the heads-up display, but the screen shut off before Tyler could read them.

"What's happening?" Risa exclaimed.

"Ham must have set off some kind of alert," Tyler told her, unable to keep the tension from his own voice. "He needs everything his comp can give him, and can't afford to stop to tell us about it."

Risa looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"What can we do?"

"Wait," Tyler answered grimly.

They waited. Time seemed to flow by like molasses, the only movement in the room being the flexing of Hamdak's gloved hands and the spasmodic twitching of his head. As many as ten minutes could have passed like that, or as few as one or two. The worst of it, for Tyler, was knowing that there was nothing he could do. Forcibly disconnecting Ham by ripping the electrode crown off his head could cause nasty feedback and would leave the still-open datanet connection completely vulnerable to trace programs. During his tenure with LIM, Tyler had been sent after hostile gridriders before. "Capture for interrogation" was the usual directive, but in truth no one minded much when the target got gravestoned trying to resist.

Suddenly, a spasm ran through Ham's entire body, and he thrashed once in his seat. Then, the computer screen came to life again. The ankle and wrist cuffs popped open, letting the gridrider free to remove the crown and gloves and unstrap himself. He put his tinted glasses back on, slumping heavily into the chair with a sigh.

"I'm getting too damn old for this," he groaned.

Risa all but flung herself into his lap, wrapped her leather-clad arms around his neck and kissed him full on the mouth. Bouncing back to her feet, she said, "I take back everything I said, Ham."

Ham looked up, confused.

"Did I miss something here? Not that I'm complaining, but I still don't get it."

Tyler just grinned, amused by Risa's reaction as well as, admittedly, relieved just like her that Ham had made it back without incident.

"Did you get the file?" he asked.

"Yeah. I didn't get a chance to look at it though. That place was mined with heavy code. It looked all nicey-nicey on the way in, but the moment I touched that file it set off a load of reactive crap. Tracers, alarms, even a damn impaler. I threw up a full-on shield and ran for it. Lucky I didn't get my brain fried, or at least half my comp gear."

"That must have been a good shield."

"Oh yeah. Cost me eighteen-K meseta, but it's top of the line, the best my system can handle. Cuts off everything, even can bounce a killshot, for a while at least. Of course, I can barely see what I'm doing and it's so obvious it probably sets off system alarms in the next mainframe over, but if I need it it's not like I'm gonna stick around. Cyberdueling's fine for the hotshot neon angels, but as gridriders go, I'm a cherub."

He leaned forward and tapped a few keys.

"Funny; the file's not encrypted. If it was so important as all that, you'd think it would have been locked down hard."

"That is odd," Tyler agreed, suspicious.

Risa snapped her fingers.

"Not necessarily," she said. "I don't think the file's important for itself; I bet Luveno just wanted to see whomever came after it."

"Bait for a trap," Tyler mused. "That would explain why the security didn't go off until after you snatched the file, Ham."

"Makes sense to me," the gridrider agreed.

"So that means it's not Luveno that sent the goons after Melora."

"Not necessarily, Risa," Tyler noted with a shake of his head. "Most likely you're right, that the trouble is an in-house rivalry and the LIM brass just wants to know what's going on. It could be that they did take Melora, though, and expect her to have some outside help. Or, it might not have been the corp's CompSec that installed the traps, but Stephens' personal enemy, if he or she has the right kind of pull." Too many options, he thought. He wasn't ready to follow the twisted possibilities of corporate intrigue yet; Tyler wasn't getting any feel off what he said.

"We need more information about what Stephens was into," he said. "If we had some specifics..."

"Too bad Melora didn't put more about the job on the chip we can read."

"Well, we do have one file at least." Tyler turned to Ham. "Or do we? Is it just a garbage file?"

"Nah; they needed to have a fairly clean one. A hot enough gridrider could pick up on the file's status without tripping all the nasties. Can't lure in the fish with rotten bait."

"Let's take a look, then," Risa urged.

Hamdak obliged her, hitting a few keys which caused text to spill across the screen.

"Hey, far be it for me to tell your guys how to do this, but the thing that kinda jumps out at me here is that your boy Eric died two days ago."

### Chapter 6

Tyler came to with the morning sun beating down on his head. The boards nailed into place over the tenement's windows hadn't been lined up right, probably because the amateur carpenter had been crazed out on booze, metachems, or both when he nailed them up. Either that or someone had been bright enough to realize that the narrow slits made decent gunports and the boards soft cover if things ever came down to a siege. Those weren't all that uncommon in Ossale Court. The big, sprawling slum had once been a suburb of Camineet, built right up against the two-hundred-high wall of the residential area that had once enclosed Camineet and Parolit both in addition to many acres of greensward and a fair-sized forest, and which now was filled to bursting by the archopolis. It had started out as an industrial park with convenient living space for its workers, but when Rydell Engineering had been bought out by IMVE and both Global Envirotech and Eppi Products decided it was cheaper to build new plants elsewhere, the economic bottom had fallen out of the district. That had been in 1012; the arch' had just swelled south around it, leaving Ossale Court to be little more than a garbage dump for the rest of Camineet for over two hundred and fifty years.

Tyler had dragged the battered foam chair pad off the beat-up recliner someone had scavenged, wrapped himself in his coat, and slept on the floor with the pad as a pillow. Risa had slept in her clothes, too, unwilling to let her skin touch the stained and dirty bedding spread over the room's single, narrow cot. It was a toss-up as to which had spent the more uncomfortable night, but on the other hand, they had been able to wake up in the morning.

That counted for something.

The ex-agent stood and stretched, working the kinks out of cramped muscles with a few simple exercises. When he was feeling more like himself he went over to the room's only amenity, an InstaCaf coffee maker that someone, somehow had seen fit to stock with packets of crystals. Tyler rinsed out the pot and set the machine to work. One might have expected the water to be as dirty as the air in the district was, but the city's water systems, like its electricity, were maintained by Mother Brain and her robots, and imperfection wasn't a word one associated with her. Tyler figured the computer would probably blow a circuit just from the suggestion.

Tyler ducked into the tiny bathroom alcove, and by the time he came back the smell of strong, hot coffee was starting to rouse Risa from sleep. He poured the coffee into the only cups in the room, their own leftovers from the fast food meal they had grabbed after leaving Ham's the night before. The polyfoam cups had originally held cola, but they worked just as well for hot drinks.

"What time is it?" Risa moaned.

"Nine," Tyler told her after checking his chronograph.

"Six hours. Not too bad under the circumstances."

"Coffee?"

She took the cup from his outstretched hand, then managed to sit up without spilling it and took a long drink. Risa's scowl reminded Tyler of the expression she had sported while trying to kill him.

"Gothic Regal this isn't."

"Expensive tastes for Ossale Court."

"Hey, I don't take metachems, so I've got to do something with all my meseta." She ran her hand through her sleep-tangled green hair. "Don't you have any vices?" Tyler shrugged.

"The occasional ale, once in a while something harder."

"Try again," Risa said, sipping her coffee. Tyler let his cool, watching the thin plumes of steam rise through the irregular sunlight. "That's not what I mean and you know it."

Tyler shrugged again.

"Nothing I can think of."

Risa looked at him oddly, as if she'd just been taken by a strange thought and wasn't sure where to go with it.

"What?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing important."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's nothing." She got up and walked over to the window, peering out through the slit. "Do you have any ideas about what to do next?"

"Find Melora's gridrider."

"To read the chip?"

"Partly." The polished rings and buckles on Risa's jacket glittered in the strong sun, sparkling as she shifted posture. "We'd need either a first-rater or a middle-class one plus time to crack the security, and we're not flush with time. The person who set up that security can crack it faster than anyone else possibly could. There's more, though. I want to know more about what's going on than just what's on the chip, and the gridrider may be able to fill in the blanks, depending on how much Melora told him or her about the job. Besides that, we know that we'll need a top-notch neon angel if we need to hunt around inside LIM's system again and we already know the quality of the one Melora used. It's not our only option, but this is the one with the biggest potential payoff."

Risa tapped her fingertips idly on the planks.

"All right, I buy it." She turned back to him. "Let's get going."

"Just like that?"

"You've got something better to do with your time? Let me freshen up and we can ditch this hole."

"Okay, I'm going to step outside and wait for you."

"Prude," she teased.

Tyler descended the narrow flight of stairs and went outside the building. The street in front of the run-down tenement was dark for midmorning; the district's proximity to the old wall made Ossale Court one of the most dismal parts of the city. The wall was cracked and run-down in places, such as the twenty-foot-wide hole that let in the shaft of morning sun spotlighting the front of the building. In another half-hour, Tyler estimated, the sun would have moved and the block plunged back into near-night. There weren't many people about, a squatter sleeping in an alley across the way, a tired-looking thrill calling it a night--or a day, as the case may be. As much of the Court's life went on at night as it did in the daytime, probably more.

The four of them seemed to come out of nowhere, flowing out of the alleys flanking the tenement. Three boys, one girl, none older than seventeen, all wearing sleeveless vests, tight pants, and crude capes. Thorn-vine tattoos gave their faces some ornamentation in place of the usual piercing. Surprisingly, all of them carried stout wooden canes, three in hand while the fourth's was tied at his belt so he could free up both hands for using his loaded bow gun.

Tech-gang, Tyler assumed. Their weapons and appearance suggested these four belonged to a gang which pretended to be wizards of centuries ago. No one used true magic any more, but the power of techniques, scientifically defined as the manipulation of mystic energy by an act of will, was close enough for Tyler and most everyone else besides. Almost every Palman had the potential to use at least a few techniques, though most never bothered to develop that potential.

"This is Curse Kings turf, big shot," the one with the bow gun challenged. "You got a reason for being here?"

"Watch it, Robin; he looks like he can handle himself," the female ganger cautioned. The boy next to her cackled.

"Tough guy or weak, they all burn just the same."

Tyler didn't feel tough. In fact, he felt stupid. He should never have allowed the four punks to sneak up on him, without even drawing his gun in return. He was reacting like a tourist, not a professional, and the fact was starting to really bother him.

"So," he said coldly, his displeasure with himself carrying over into his words, "we've established that this is your turf and I'm on it. Where do we go from here?"

"You get a lot of pain, man," sneered the one who had talked about burning.

"Maybe," Risa cut in, "but you're not going to be the one dealing it out." She had apparently seen what was up and exited the building by a side door so she could slip up on the tech-heads from behind. The points of her claws were pressed against the back of the hothead's neck. "Just when the hell did you skags start claiming neutral territory as your own, anyway? You think you can take on the Red Wheels, the Slicers, and the Bladelords all at once?" She grinned derisively. "Or does Warner even know you're here? That's it, isn't it; you four got a little too high and decided you were going to carve out a big chunk of rep for yourselves."

Tyler smiled icily. He didn't know the dynamics between the local street gangs the way Risa seemed to, but he could follow along with the story she told easily enough. From the nervous looks on the faces of the four Curse Kings, she was right on the money or close to it.

"So how about you pack it in and nobody gets hurt, nobody has to know that you were throwing your weight around."

"Up yours!" the loudmouthed one snapped, throwing his body forward, away from her claws, as he spoke.

A half-second faster than everyone else in reacting to the lunge, Tyler dodged to his left to get his chest out of line with the bow gun. His left fist lashed out, connecting with the previously silent ganger's jaw while his other hand reached for the Marksman. His move came just in time; Robin reflexively pulled the trigger and sent the arrow whistling through the space Tyler had just vacated.

The female Curse King extended her hand towards Tyler and cried out, "FOI!" The burst of fire summoned by her technique exploded against the ex-agent's back. Fortunately, she was strictly an amateur at tech-use, so while the impact staggered Tyler, knocking him off-stride and scorching his fibercoat, it did little real harm. She tensed herself for a second try, but the point became moot as Risa's claws slashed into her, the steel bars inflicting a fatal wound.

The hothead who had started the brawl only then managed to roll to his feet. Desperately, he summoned up whatever will he had, thrust both hands forward, and screamed, "ZAN!" Whirlwind columns of air burst up around Tyler and Risa, slashing at their bodies while sucking the oxygen from their lungs. The punk's powers of mental concentration were greater than his late companion, or perhaps panic gave him strength, but for whatever reason his technique had a much stronger effect than the girl's. Tyler felt the wind razors cut through his coat in several places, lightly scoring his arms and things, while the general buffeting effect left him battered and dazed.

Not wanting to endure another such assault, Tyler forced himself to bring up the Marksman and fire three times. His aim was shaky, but he managed to stay on target with two of the concentrated soundbursts, which punched through the ganger's meager chest protection, sprawling him out across the tenement steps.

The Curse King Tyler had punched was slowly regaining his senses, meanwhile; it had been a good, hard blow that had taken him completely off-guard, but hadn't been quite enough to take him completely out of the fight. The one called Robin jacked a second bolt into the bow gun. Risa was still dazed and reeling from the ZAN technique, leaving Tyler at a disadvantage.

On the other hand, the odds had gone from two to one to dead even in the space of a few seconds. The gangers were pack animals, and when the pack was thinned out, its members reacted invariably with fear and shock. They were on their heels, off-balance and desperate, as stunned by their losses as Tyler and Risa were from their injuries. Perhaps more so; by the time Robin got his bow up and in firing position, Tyler was on him, crashing the butt of his sonic gun against his head.

The last ganger dropped his cane and threw up his hands.

"Please, man, lemme go!" he pleaded.

Tyler raised the gun, sighting it in on the punk's forehead. He's just a kid, part of him thought. Another part countered with, A kid who was willing to kill me a second ago, for whatever money I'm carrying or maybe just to feel the rush. It was so easy for greed and hate to burn the humanity out of a person, especially on the streets of Ossale Court.

"Go away," he told the Curse King. "If you so much as think about a threatening move, you're dead."

The kid believed him; he bolted.

"It would have been better to kill him," Tyler mused. "For all I know, he's gone to get a pack of his friends and come looking for payback."

"Why didn't you?" Risa asked in a flat monotone.

"I'm willing to kill. In self-defense, or to stop greater violence, but I'm not going to kill people because it's damned well expedient."

He thrust the gun under his coat savagely and turned back towards Risa. The green-haired girl was standing stiffly, her muscles unnaturally tensed. Blood dripped from the tips of her claws.

"Was this...the first time you've killed someone, Risa?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Not the first."

She cleaned off the steel bars and retracted them into place, then took a deep breath.

"It only hurts when it's all over," she said with a sigh. "Then I feel sick. No, more like...detached. Like I'm not real anymore."

She sighed, wrenching herself back from the realization of what she'd done with considerable mental effort. Her feelings reminded Tyler of his own, the first few times he had been forced to take a life in the line of duty.

Melora, he remembered, had never been like that. Or, more accurately, by the time he'd known her, she had already gone past that point, experienced the process of coming to terms with the act of killing during her years on the Rendak streets. She'd already learned that while it was never a good thing to take a life, there were times it was the best choice offered by this imperfect world.

"What was all that about this place being or not being neutral turf, anyway?" Tyler changed the subject.

"This part of Ossale Court is called the Down Zone. It's about a dozen blocks that the four big gangs bordering the area agreed to leave as neutral terrain. It's a buffer zone, and a meeting place where biz gets set up." She jerked a thumb at the run-down tenement they had spent the night in. "That firetrap, for example, is owned by the Red Wheels. They use it as a kind of hotel and crash pad, but the rooms go for five meseta a head to anyone who wants to hole up, no questions asked. I grew up here in Down Zone; it's why I'm not wearing colors now. 'No forced recruiting' is one of the rules."

"These rules being enforced by the threat of the other three gangs getting together to kick the crap out of the one that steps out of line, I assume?"

She flashed him a grin.

"Hey, it's not a really complex system, but at least there aren't any lawyers to screw it up."

Tyler chuckled at that.

"C'mon, let's get going," he said. "I've got to put the word out that I'm in the market for a gridrider."

"You really think you can hook up with the one Melora hired?"

"I think so. Presuming, of course, that the people I intend to ask haven't gotten themselves killed while I was out of town."

### Chapter 7

"You have no idea how irksome this is going to be, Tyler."

Ironically, the first person Tyler tried to reach really had been killed in the four years since he'd last talked with her. The second had been a straight-up dead end, no use at all. At that point, Tyler did what he should have done right from the start; he consulted Melora's datafile. That had brought the ex-agent and Risa to Syclone, a well-known Motavian restaurant in the heart of the city. Jac Norbridge had been holding court there in the corner booth for seven years before Tyler had left LIM and he was still there now.

Put politely, Jac was a consultant, and for a man who didn't have an office he did quite well at consulting. The lithe-bodied beauty in skimpy but expensive clothing draped across one shoulder testified to that without even opening her mouth. So did the top-of-the-line Oldoran carbonsuit, woven with glittering titanium threads that gave the designer businesswear the defensive qualities a man who could afford five thousand meseta suits often needed. Like all Oldoran garb, it was tailored to perfection; though Jac was a well-fed two hundred and thirty pounds it only showed in his pudgy fingers and filled-out cheeks. Unlike Ham, he didn't have a powerful build beneath the excess weight; he was simply a soft and indolent man who avoided physical activity.

"If it was easy," Tyler said, "then we wouldn't have come to you. There's plenty of people in Camineet who can handle the easy jobs."

For all his fancy ways, Jac was a fixer, plain and simple. He brokered deals, whether it was something as small as a street thug looking to add more dangerous hardware to his stash, or as big as disposing of a whole cargo of stolen Trimate. His rep was that he could get nearly anything or anyone for a customer--for a healthy commission, of course. Tyler had dealt with him twice in the past and had to admit that Jac was good at his business, even though he was too greedy.

A Motavian waitress brought a pot of hot, heavily spiced coffee to the table. Like the rest of her race she was short, about a foot below average Palman height, covered in blue fur, and possessing a snoutlike beak rather than a nose and mouth. She was the youngest daughter of the family that ran Syclone, though rumors suggested that the Motavians were merely a front and that Jac Norbridge was the restaurant's real owner.

Jac poured, a light sheen of sweat coating his brow, then sipped the strong-tasting brew. Tyler recalled that traditionally a Motavian host always drank first as an assurance of good faith to his guests. He didn't know enough about Mota's history to talk about the custom's historical roots, but it seemed to fit Jac.

"Ahhh, that's good," the consultant sighed blissfully, the jeweled rings on his fingers glinting in the light. "I love the coffee here; they make it the way it was meant to be, not like the watered-down imitation we Palmans have inflicted on ourselves."

Tyler picked up his cup and sipped. He'd been here before when Jac had offered Motavian coffee; Melora had boldly tossed back half her cup and nearly scorched her throat from the powerful blend of spices that laced the already strong brew. While Motavians had nearly the same nutritional needs as Palmans, their palates were very different, producing some very unusual taste combinations. Jac, Tyler remembered, had laughed himself silly over the episode.

"You're certainly right," the fixer told them, "in saying that my skills are unique. The problem is, to trace one person who--"

Tyler cut him off with a raised hand.

"We already know that when Melora needed hard-to-find equipment or wanted to link up with top-flight people, she came to you." That much her datachip records had told him. Unfortunately, she hadn't specified whether or not she'd gone to Jac on this particular job. "We're not looking for just any hacker here; this one is definitely first-rate. Either you put her in touch with the gridrider, or she did it herself, face-to-face. If it's the former, then you have a way of contacting the person we want. If the latter, then the odds are you know about the personal association, at least from rumors about who's working with whom on this or that piece of biz and probably from more reliable sources."

Jac chuckled softly.

"Well, Tyler, I can't say that you're wrong."

"Then you know Melora's gridrider?" Risa asked.

The consultant ignored her for a moment, instead beckoning to the waitress. The Motavian girl brought over a large platter of appetizers: sliced sandworm, young ammonites with ambira sauce, octopus Tonoe, fried vegetable dumplings, and a half-dozen other offerings.

"Go on, help yourself," Jac offered, taking a dumpling onto his plate. "I always find it's easier to do business when my stomach isn't snapping at me, demanding to be fed."

The food was no doubt wonderful, but Tyler didn't take any. To tell the truth, he didn't like Jac; he found the man's urbane ways and attempts at charm to be too polished, artificial. He was trying to lull his customers into a good mood, feeling mentally relaxed from eating, so he could slip some outrageous demand past them. Risa sampled the appetizers, and after a moment Tyler decided to follow suit. There was no point in deliberately antagonizing the man, so long as he was aware of what Jac was doing.

"This is really good," Risa exclaimed.

"Ah, you like octopus, then?" Jac said with a sly smile.

"I figure anytime I'm eating and not being eaten it's a good thing," she replied without the slightest squeamishness. A flicker of displeasure crossed Norbridge's face; undoubtedly he had been hoping to evoke the usual shock and disgust many people showed when first exposed to seemingly strange foreign delicacies. So much, Tyler thought, for one-upmanship.

"If we might get back to the business at hand?" he asked mildly.

"Of course, Melora's gridrider." Jac dipped an ammonite in the translucent white sauce and took a delicate bite to sample the flavor by. "Like I said, you're right; I do know whom Melora uses when she needs a real neon angel." He chuckled softly at that as if there was some joke only he got. "I could arrange a contact for you."

"Excellent; who is it?"

Jac waggled the first two fingers of his left hand back and forth at Tyler.

"Tut-tut, Mr. Jorran. I said that I could arrange a contact. At no point did I mention giving you a name."

"What?!" Risa exclaimed. "You're holding out on us?"

The fixer laughed heartily.

"Please, my dear, don't be so melodramatic. I don't have any assurances that the gridrider in question has any desire to talk with you. I could hardly put one of my clients in potential danger.

"If we were that much of a threat to them, then what's to keep us from getting the name out of you the hard way?"

Not the least disturbed by Risa's attitude, Jac replied, "I am quite capable of taking care of myself, my dear." His gaze flicked over her head to meet that of a burly Motavian bouncer who lingered in the background, a heavy two-handed axe slung across his back. "Besides which, if your intentions are peaceable, then why not simply allow me to arrange a meeting, as I offered?"

"Because time is a factor," Tyler said. "I do know, though, that you're not going to give up your commission for putting us together, so we'll play it your way for now."

"It's so good to meet a rational businessman," Jac said. Another flick of his eyes and the Motavian axeman visibly relaxed. He turned to Risa and said, "Do try one of the ammonites; they're especially good today."

"Shellfish make me puke," she growled.

"Well, suit yourself then. As to the business, I gather that you would like the meeting to be as soon as possible?"

"Today," Tyler stated flatly.

The fixer's thick fingers drummed on the maruerawood tabletop.

"That is a bit less notice than I prefer. There are various factors to take into account and--"

Starting to get fed up with Jac's oily manner and thinly-veiled greed, Tyler cut him off in mid-sentence.

"Today," he repeated. "That's nonnegotiable. If you can't make it happen then we'll find someone who can."

"I suppose it can be arranged," Norbridge conceded. "It will cost, though."

"How much?"

"Two thousand meseta."

"Let's go," Tyler said to Risa and started to get up. Jac spoke quickly before he had gotten to his feet.

"Now wait, Tyler, be reasonable. I have to postpone deals that have been in the works for a while on your behalf. That's going to cost me."

Tyler wasn't in the mood to be reasonable, not with Melora's life on the line.

"I don't like being held up."

"That name," Jac observed, "is a marketable commodity. You may be able to find it elsewhere, but I have it now, and you did say that time was important to you."

"Urgency and importance aren't always the same thing." Of course, this problem was both urgent and important, but Tyler saw no point in telling Jac that.

"Whereas I'm not going to lift a finger if it's not worth my time to do so."

The two of them watched each other across the table, outwardly calm, faces expressionless. Jac's gaze flicked over to Risa, catching the nervousness that she was trying to hide.

"All right, then, Tyler. You make me an offer. What are you willing to pay me to broker this meet for you?"

"One K," he said. "Two hundred up front, the rest if you get it set up."

"Three-fifty up front. Your party may say no, and I do not intend to lose money on this affair."

Tyler studied the other man thoughtfully. He didn't know how far Jac was willing to push things. Norbridge didn't care in the slightest about Melora, Tyler, or anyone besides himself. He'd help because it was profitable; arranging contacts was part of his regular biz. The ex-agent didn't mind paying the going rate for services rendered; he just disliked being played for a fool.

Another thought crossed Tyler's mind then. Jac's fees were usually arranged on a percentage basis. That is, someone would offer a price for whatever job they needed help for, and the parties would bargain it out. Whatever they arrived at, Jac got a fee equal to a percentage of the hiring price, usually 5%. Since Tyler didn't necessarily want to hire Melora's gridrider, Jac had quoted him a flat fee instead--and if a thousand meseta was five percent, then the gridrider's average was around twenty thousand a job. For that kind of meseta, he or she had to be every bit the artist Ham had described.

Then again, who else was going to successfully run LIM's systems? The corporations weren't stupid; they found up-and-coming high-talent hackers and put them on the payroll designing security to stop their former colleagues. All the amateurs and hotshots got from a grid-dive against Luveno CompSec were busted systems, fried synapses, and occasionally jail time.

"All right," Tyler agreed. "Three-fifty up front." He took out two hundreds and three fifties, handing them over.

"Cash? How curious; I would have expected a credit transfer from a man like you. Untraceable, of course."

"A surprise now and then helps keep our lives from getting dull."

"Perhaps so. Now, how shall I contact you with the details of the meet?"

That was something Tyler had been thinking about for a while. Without a permanent base of operations or a portable visiphone, he was almost impossible to reach. He could have called Jac at regular intervals from public phones, but constant reminders like that could get aggravating for the fixer. A basic rule of biz was that you only went around getting people mad at you if you couldn't help it or you had a reason to want it that way.

"Do you know the Intra-Metro message board on the visiphone system?"

"I do."

"Leave a message, text only, telling me the time, place, and any conditions of the meet."

Jac nodded. "That will be easy enough. What names should I use?"

"Hmmm...make it to Alis from Odin."

The fixer laughed heartily at that.

"Ancient history, Tyler? I never knew you were so interested in the past."

Funny he'd mention that, considering that Tyler had been thinking of little but the past over the last couple of days.

"The way things are going, maybe invoking a few heroes will draw on a little divine aid."

Smirking, the fixer said, "Yes, from the looks of your coat you haven't had an easy time of it lately."

Tyler shrugged noncommittally, rising from his seat. Risa took the opportunity to wolf down one last piece of roasted crawler, then joined him.

"A pleasure doing business with you," Jac called out as they left.

"That's one sworm-kisser who really needs to be cut down to size," Risa muttered as they emerged from the quiet of the restaurant out onto the busy sidewalk. Skimmers, trucks, landcycles, and the occasional rover roared by them. Downtown Camineet didn't have the tense, watching-eyes feel of Neroton or the war-zone, urban wilderness atmosphere of Ossale Court, but it had an aura all its own. With people and vehicles rushing to and fro, the dazzle of color from electric-lit signs, it was a single living organism, generating titanic amounts of energy and expending just as much, never moving yet always in motion.

"He's as greedy as they come, I'll admit," Tyler noted. "He does his job, though, and he's in the best position to find that hacker for us."

He wondered where Melora was, and what she might be enduring right then. There was a chance her kidnappers might have only taken her to a more convenient location for murder, or that she had been killed trying to escape. For all Tyler knew, he was chasing the ghost of a dead woman.

"Besides," he said glumly, "we're short on leads."

Risa looked down at her boots, hands thrust into her jacket pockets. People moved around the two of them like a river flowing past a rock. The crowd seemed just as inanimate as water, too; they weren't a collection of individuals but one large, single entity. To it, the two people standing in their midst might not have existed.

"Tyler," the girl said quietly, "there's something I haven't told you."

That was, Tyler supposed, only to be expected. He looked up at a sky which had grown overcast since the morning and reflected that he'd been back in Camineet for less than twenty-four hours and he was already distrusting people, even those who were his friends and allies.

"What's that?" he replied, keeping the disappointment he felt out of his voice.

Risa looked up at him in surprise, his reaction not what she had expected.

"I--I saw the men who took Melora," she told him.

"You were there?" Tyler asked.

She nodded.

"Could we go somewhere a little more private?"

Mindful of the fact that neither one of them really had gotten anything to eat that morning, Tyler pointed to a small family-style diner.

"How about there?"

"Good enough."

The neighborhood was sufficiently upscale that Tyler's battered coat and Risa's street garb got a second glance from the hostess who seated them, but no more than that. Still, she guided them to a booth in the back, out of view of most of the customers, which suited Tyler perfectly. They put their conversation on hold while a civilian-model Polezi robot took their orders. Only after it had gone did Tyler mention the topic.

"Now, how did you come to see the kidnapping?"

"Most of what I told you was true. The only thing I lied about was me being there."

She toyed with her water glass.

"I went there to visit Melora. I wasn't invited; she's been like a big sister to me, though, so I've come and gone pretty much as I pleased over the last year. It's not like she does any real biz out of her home, just recordkeeping and some phone calls." She said it defiantly, as if daring Tyler to disbelieve her. He had no reason to, but he could see it from her point of view. The grubby street kid, maybe one step better than a typical ganger--no doubt Risa still had to convince herself now and again that she really was more than that--allowed to run tame in the home of a first-class ex-corporate agent? Yeah, there were people who wouldn't buy that scenario.

"Go on."

"I was coming up the street when two men brought Melora out of the building and loaded her into a landskimmer. She wasn't fighting, but she looked out of it, like she'd been drugged or frozen, something like that."

Tyler nodded in agreement.

"The 'drunk friend' routine is an old one, but effective, though it works better in public than at a person's home."

"There was already a driver in the skimmer; it started up and drove off before I could figure out a way to help."

She was clearly feeling guilty about it, too. Rationally, she probably knew there was nothing she could have done in time to stop the kidnappers from getting away, but that did nothing for gut-level emotions brought on by watching a friend kidnapped before her eyes.

"I went on upstairs, then; I knew Melora's door code. I wanted to see...no, I don't know what I wanted. I guess I just went up because it was the only thing I could think of. That's when I saw the other two guys. They'd left her door open and had just started to look through the place. I shrank back into the alcove at the top of the stairs and tried to figure out a plan to ambush them, but then one of the other doors opens and this kid comes out. His eyes go all wide, he jumps back into his apartment, and the next minute I hear the alarm go off. The two skags run right past me to the elevator, and I beat it too, because I have a record for petty theft from when I was a kid. Cops see an open apartment, catch a girl with a rap sheet, and I can kiss my freedom goodbye."

"The police mind gets trained to accept easy suspects because most of the time that's who's guilty," Tyler agreed.

"I did get a good look at the two guys who were rifling the apartment, though, good enough so I'd know them if I saw them again. One was a real muscleboy--no shirt, just a leather vest and jeans so he could show off his build and his tan--with a bright green six-inch Mohawk. The other guy looked more like a corp wannabe, with a black suit, fibercoat like yours except it was black too, and black-lensed sunglasses."

"He sounds more like someone from an organized crime syndicate," Tyler commented, wondering if this business was about to get that much more complicated.

"Corp or cutter, he was a wannabe either way," Risa replied, cutting that line of thought off before it got anywhere. "If he was a syndicate goon, his boss would have gutted him rather than sending him out on a job wearing heavy boots like mine. Those skags keep a tighter dress code than the corps do."

"True enough."

They stopped talking for a moment while the robot server brought their orders. It set generous platters in front of each of them, then left efficiently.

"So why didn't you tell me about this before?" Tyler asked.

Risa picked up her sandwich, eyed it cautiously for a while, and took a bite. Knowing she was concentrating on the food to give her time to sort through her answer, Tyler didn't press the question. She'd speak up in her own time.

"I guess it's about trust," Risa decided. "One minute I'm trying to kill you, the next you're an ally--it's a little much. I mean, I believed you, but...well, you never know. So I held something back."

"And now?"

"Well, I don't know that I trust you any more than I did, but you're not a stranger."

Tyler liked the sound of that.

### Chapter 8

Conn Derrek's sleep was shattered by the insistent beeping of the visiphone. One of the problems with working night shifts was that everyone else insisted on doing business during the day, then bothering him with it. The uninterrupted bliss of eight hours of sleep wasn't something DLE agents were too familiar with anyway, but it was an even more endangered animal on the night shift.

"Wake up, Derrek," the voice of Captain Nile snapped when Conn's groping fingers found the Receive button. There was a theory going around the office that Nile never slept at all.

"Wha--?" he mumbled dully.

"There's been a breakthrough on the LIM datatheft."

Sleep retreated instantaneously from his brain as he sat bolt upright in bed.

"What's up?"

"I'll download the details to you."

"All right, hold on." Conn pushed a datapak into the slot in his visiphone terminal. "I'm set."

"Downloading."

The information transfer took mere seconds, most of that being the hardware telling itself and the datanet what it was supposed to be doing. A soft ping indicated that the transfer was complete.

"Got it, Captain."

"Good. Here's the upshot: Luveno's computer security has managed to trace last night's intrusion."

"Uh huh," Conn remarked, losing enthusiasm. "They did, did they?"

"That's correct. The gridrider apparently used a powerful shielding program to escape the LIM system once an alert was raised, which blocked their initial attempts to trace him. They went back into the system, though, and found that before the alarm went off he'd left electronic 'footprints' which they were fortunate enough to find and trace back to their source."

"And they just decided to give us this information out of the goodness of their hearts, I assume?" Conn snorted derisively. "Since when does a major corp like Luveno share its internal security findings with the DLE?" The usual corporate reaction to an official investigation was stonewalling and obfuscation. It was understandable; on the one hand, there were millions, even billions of meseta worth of sensitive information that they didn't want leaked, and on the other most corps played fast and loose with the law when it suited them. A cop looking into corporate affairs might stumble across evidence of some gray or even black operation. Going to the DLE and Telling All was no more Luveno's style than for them to give to charity without getting a tax break.

"Since they started working on a major military contract. Remember what issues are at stake here," Nile told him flatly.

"Yeah, all right, that makes some sense." Conn ran a hand through his sleep-tousled purple hair. "Did our own cyber-teams come up with anything to verify their information?"

Nile shook her head.

"Nothing specific, though we do have record showing that the suspect, Rhys Hamdak, was under suspicion of being a minor hacker and dealer in black market data." The Steel Hawk fixed Conn with one of her frozen stares. "Go out, bring Hamdak in, and question him. If we're being fed a line, find out. If not, learn everything you can. We've got an apparent murder and a major datatheft to solve, and you're not going to do that lying in bed."

The visiphone screen blanked out as Captain Nile disconnected. Conn hauled himself out of bed, reflecting that his cold-hearted and iron-willed superior might well have been an android herself.

He regretted that thought little more than an hour later as he pulled his unmarked DLE landskimmer some distance up the block from Ham's Circuit Stop.

"That's the place, then?"

"According to the data your captain provided to us, yes," Abren stated in his flat, emotionless voice. Where Nile's directness and lack of emotion exuded iron-hard willpower and emotional control, the Siren's was so pure, so completely unchanging that it seemed utterly alien to the cop. Conn vowed to himself that he'd never compare Nile or anyone else to a machine ever again; the metaphor was simply inadequate. No one could match the icy demeanor of the android next to him.

Derrek didn't contact his backup by radio. This Rhys Hamdak was a gridrider and technical expert; he might have some kind of scanner in place that could pick up cop frequencies nearby. The communications channels the DLE used were fairly secure, but it wasn't like the cops used military-grade encoding.

That thought touched off another question in Conn's mind. Why had the military and LIM turned to the DLE at all? Corporate security divisions always had a black-ops, intelligence section of invariably high quality. The government, for its part, had the original espionage and counterintelligence bureaus the corp ones were based on. They didn't need to risk exposing knowledge of this top-secret Project Nuada by putting it into the hands of yet another agency. The DLE's huge size meant that there were invariably information leaks from time-to-time, dirty cops, nosy reporters, datatrades with informers, and so on. It was good at its job, but keeping secrets wasn't one of its missions.

"Shall we proceed?" inquired Abren, cutting into Conn's chain of thought.

"Yeah, we'd better."

Conn wasn't dressed like a cop, though his black carbonsuit was augmented with the military-styled chest, back, and shoulder plates that both the DLE and private security forces wear. Conn's armor was ceramic, the top of the line in protection unless one could afford the very rare, very expensive plates made of laconia. Laconia was found only on the third planet in the Algo system, Dezo, where it was mined and refined. The refining process itself was extraordinarily expensive, resulting in a finished product that while harder than any known substance yet light and flexible, bore a price tag even more astonishing than its qualities.

The schematics of the city block Conn had found included with Nile's download showed that Ham's Circuit Stop had a back door that let onto an alley behind the building, so he had taken steps to close it. His backup, two cops assisted by two Whistle robots, was waiting in the alley. As for Conn and Abren, they went right in the front door.

"Good afternoon, Hamdak," he said as he walked into the shop. Conn could see the man's eyes go wide even behind the tinted glasses--the armed man and the Siren were clearly bad news even if Hamdak couldn't identify precisely what type yet. Two customers were in the small electronics shop, apparently ordinary citizens. Neither looked anything like the pictures of Tyler Jorran given to con.

"What do you want?" Ham challenged him. The customers edged towards the door.

Conn pulled out his badge and laser shot simultaneously.

"DLE, Hamdak."

"You are impeding an official investigation," Abren told the customers. "Leave, or you will be arrested on charges of obstructing justice." They left. Armed Sirens could be exceptionally convincing.

"Rhys Hamdak, you are under arrest for unauthorized computer system intrusion and datatheft," Conn told the gridrider. "Those charges are just for openers, though. We've got all kinds of interesting alternatives waiting in the wings for their chance. Treasonous conspiracy, grand theft, industrial espionage, possibly even a friendly dose of murder. So, are we going to do this the long way or the short way?"

"Go to hell, cop."

"The long way, I see. Abren, take a look in back."

"Hey, you can't do that!"

"On the contrary," Abren stated. "In accordance with Palman Law 874-C, proposed by Mother Brain and ratified by the civilian legislature in AW 1164, when arresting a suspect with probable cause, law enforcement officers are permitted to conduct a search of said suspect's residence and/or place of business without the need for additional authorization or a warrant."

Conn glanced curiously at the android.

"I didn't know you were familiar with civilian law."

"In anticipation of this assignment, I added the Palman Laws, both substantive and procedural, to my database."

He went into the back, then returned a moment later.

"There is a moderately elaborate computer system installed here. The majority of the base components are themselves legal, but they have been customized in a number of ways. The setup includes a full-immersion virtual-reality interface, and superficially corresponds with what is to be expected from a low-level gridrider."

Conn grinned without humor.

"Looks like we're in the right place, then. Now, Mr. Hamdak, while my partner is assessing the evidence, would you like to change your mind about talking to us? Trying to slip into the LIM mainframe was just a little out of your league, wasn't it?"

In spite of himself, Hamdak's jaw dropped.

"LIM? Damn it, why would LIM call the cops on me? Not saying I did anything, just thinking it sounds off."

"Get in line. Here's the situation: yesterday, you snatched the personnel file of a man who may have been murdered in connection with the theft of military data. We've got the proof we need to send you up for that. I just thought that maybe you'd like a chance to explain now how you were set up, how you never knew that Tyler Jorran was using you to check up on how well he'd covered up the murder he committed."

The scruffy-looking gridrider continued to look at Conn as if the DLE lieutenant had somehow morphed into a manticore in front of his eyes.

"Tyler? He didn't even know the skag's name until last night!" Ham blurted out. Presumably, the shock had surprised him into talking--although, Conn knew, it was also possible that the outburst had been carefully staged to lead the cops down the garden path.

"So you admit to working for Jorran?"

"Yeah, but it had nothing to do with any murder. He just wanted me to help dig up some dirt on this Stephens suit."

Conn was halfway surprised that Hamdak hadn't assumed Conn was the one leading him on, making wild threats in the hope of luring out an admission. It was a trick he'd actually used in the past with varying results, but not this time. Who needed to bluff when he had a real club to use?"

"You realize it could have been a put-up job for your benefit, right? A guy like you isn't dumb enough to get involved in something this big, so Jorran spins you a story to sucker you in."

Ham shook his head.

"No, man, I'm serious. Look, come on back and I'll show you. You've got it all wrong!"

He turned to head into the back room, but Conn stopped him, quickly spinning the big man to face the wall and efficiently patting him down. The DLE agent removed a broad-bladed dagger from one of Ham's copious pockets and tucked it away.

"All right, now we can go."

"It's like I said, he had no idea who Stephens was when he came in here," Ham repeated as he led the way towards the back room. He went over to his computer and tapped a few keys.

Suddenly, an electric grid blazed up, filling the doorframe, cutting the two rooms off from one another. As Ham bolted for the other door, Conn and Abren reacted instantly.

"Garrick! Payne! He's coming your way!" Conn ordered over his radio. "Stop him." At the same time, his gun ripped into the doorframe with blue-white beams of energy. Abren's Flare Shot unit did the same, the energy weapons quickly reducing the security system to a smoking but inert mass of circuitry. The two of them ran after Hamdak, who had gone through the back door into a short hall which, Conn knew from the schematics, led to the back alley. Ham's move had gained him only a few seconds' advantage, so Conn actually saw Garrick draw his silentshot while Payne moved in with plasmarings ready to lock into place. The Whistles were about fifteen feet away, one blocking each end of the alley. Ham's shoulders sagged as he realized he was trapped.

The stutter of vulcan fire cut like a knife-blade into Conn's senses, taking everyone off guard. Ham's body shook as the rounds from the two Whistles' mini-vulcans slammed into him. The boom of Abren's shotgun came next, cutting off the lethal fire from one conical robot by the simple expedient of blowing it to bits. Only a moment later, the scream of Conn's laser shot signaled the destruction of the second robot.

"What on Palm just happened?" Conn cursed. "We've got to get a med-team here now."

"Don't bother, sir," Payne said, kneeling by the body. "He's gone."

Conn looked down and winced. The robots had aimed high, scoring with several head shots.

"It is likely that brain damage will be too extensive to successfully generate an active-memory clone," Abren deduced. "Whatever Hamdak had to tell us, it is lost now."

"What's going on?" Garrick said, wide-eyed. He was a young cop, not yet used to the violence of Camineet's streets. Not that the lieutenant was handling himself any better; DLE robots were supposed to use lethal force only if given specific orders to do so. They even had a second internal magazine equipped with non-lethal gel rounds for self-defense and other situations where some force was needed but killing was not.

"Did someone switch the ammo?" Payne asked, her thoughts going in the same direction as Conn's but not quite so far.

"No," he told her, "At least, that's not all that was done."

"Why?"

"The Whistle-type robot, excepting the Tracer, which featured a laser cannon rather than a vulcan, are capable of assessing the type of ammunition present in their magazines," Abren informed her. "Therefore, even if these Whistles were loaded with improper ammunition, they should have detected the same and refrained from firing. In addition, the prevalence of head shots indicates an attempt to avoid ballistic armor such as this fibercoat. A Whistle does not do so when employing non-lethal ammunition. These robots intentionally fired in lethal mode."

"Either someone gave these Whistles instructions to shoot to kill, or someone tampered with their programming," Conn concluded.

"In their present condition it will be difficult to ascertain precisely what was responsible."

"Let's have the lab look over what's left, anyway; maybe they can salvage something that'll give us a clue." What Conn couldn't get out of his head, though, was that Whistles were manufactured by Luveno, and that it was also LIM which had provided the information that had brought them here in the first place. He pulled out his palm-comp and scanned the data Captain Nile had downloaded to him less than an hour and a half ago, looking for the name of the contact person at Luveno who had reported Hamdak's name to the DLE.

"Garrick, Payne," he instructed the junior agents, "you two take care of things here. Abren and I need to have a talk with Mr. Gage Worthmann."

### Chapter 12

"So what did we get out of that?" Risa said after the three goons had left and their skimmer was gone from the street outside. "We already know it was some kind of power game inside LIM; though this confirms it, we didn't learn anything more."

"We got a description of the guy who's doing this--probably the man who Stephens wanted to blackmail. That can be checked; Melora's file said it was Stephens' boss whom he was after, and since Eric was a section manager that probably means either the division chief or sub-chief." Knowledge of Luveno's organizational structure came in handy. "If this is a counter-blackmail operation he wouldn't farm out the recruiting job to some aide."

Tyler's face fell suddenly.

"Something's not making any sense here."

"Oh? What?"

"We know Stephens had something on his boss. We're assuming that what's on the encrypted chip is the specific incriminating data, right?"

Risa nodded.

"That's right."

"And that it's this 'boss' who killed Stephens or had him killed, ordered Melora's kidnapping, and is trying to recover the chip, all to cover up whatever he's done?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then what's he doing with a couple of sec-agents backing him up? When you're trying to hide blackmail material, you don't invite extra witnesses along. To say nothing of the ones in the white coats. That sounds like doctors, nurses, or researchers, something like that. That means three more people who could learn that he is staging an illegal operation in order to cover his own personal weaknesses."

"Doctors?" Risa said. "I thought the point was to interrogate her?"

Tyler nodded.

"That's a little odd, but not completely out of line. Drugs are a part of the questioner's arsenal, and trained medical staff are often needed to regulate dosages and monitor the subject's condition. It's standard--but, again, the problem is loyalty. The first rule of cover-ups is that you don't put anyone who's out of the loop in a position to learn the truth. The bodyguards I can accept; they're probably used to their boss being involved in various gray-side projects and don't need to be told the details of any particular job, but the interrogators...I really didn't expect him to be using professional resources for this. I half-assumed the rat pack there was holding Melora, since they don't have the inside data to make use of anything they learn and are, from their client's point of view, completely disposable."

Risa folded her arms across her chest.

"Maybe they do have her. Maybe they sold us a bill of goods and are off laughing at us right now." The idea was clearly not one she liked to think about.

"I don't think so," Tyler disagreed. "I didn't get a hint any of them were lying."

"Are you saying you can't be fooled?" Risa challenged him.

Tyler shook his head.

"No, I'm not infallible. Under those circumstances, though, with that class of thug, I'm fairly confident that I'd have picked up on it if they were lying, at least from one if not all three. Unless they were professionals who pretended to be street muscle and let themselves be captured to feed us disinformation." Tyler shook his head, amazed that his brain had twisted itself around enough to come up with that last thought. "Paranoia may practically be a job skill in this business, but there are limits."

"That did sound pretty crazy, Tyler. All right, I didn't think they were lying, either, until you started talking about it, so I ought to believe you know what you're talking about."

"Thanks," he replied dryly.

"Don't mention it. Now, where does that leave us?"

Tyler dropped into a chair, wheels turning in his head.

"Not much farther along than before. If that pickup went down the way those goons say it did, though, then we're missing something. It doesn't feel like one exec covering his backside against a blackmail scam. It almost had the taste of a sanctioned operation."

"Are you sure it's LIM at all? That skag might have flashed a fake card on purpose to lay a false trail."

"You're getting good at this," Tyler remarked. "That would explain everything, if some other corp kidnapped Melora over something that had nothing to do with Eric Stephens and his blackmail job."

"Do you believe it?"

"Maybe. Probably not."

Risa's dark eyes looked him over appraisingly.

"Why not?"

"Hmm." He paused thoughtfully, trying to articulate what he was only now starting to realize. "It's those alarms Ham tripped on Stephens' file. Someone had to set those up, almost certainly someone in LIM's CompSec. We know that Stephens worked in Robotics, so either the one he was trying to blackmail is an angel supreme capable of hacking the system and setting up private traps that somehow leave no record when they're triggered, or..."

The green-haired girl had followed his train of thought exactly.

"Or it's something other than blackmail--something about which he's not afraid to go to security and get help."

Tyler nodded.

"Not a coverup, but a company-sanctioned shadow op," he said. "But why? What did Melora fall into that would make Luveno circle the wagons like this?"

Neither he nor Risa had an answer to that, but they both knew where one could be found: recorded on a tiny crystal cylinder that, with luck, the upcoming meeting at Shadowedge would lay open for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

To say that Captain Alana Nile was not pleased was grossly understating the situation. She was furious, positively irate. Most people in her state of mind would have been screaming and pounding the table; by contrast the Steel Hawk's control was such that her voice became a bit more curt, a little tighter than usual, but that was all. It didn't matter, though. The force of her anger filled the office like a living, breathing thing. Conn Derrek could feel it, and somewhere in the back of his mind he was on his knees begging whatever gods were out there that she wouldn't let that emotion out. At least not at him.

"You were given a task, Lieutenant Derrek. It was not necessarily simple, but it was well within your capacity. I thought it was, at least." She folded her hands on the desktop. "For the past hour I have been on the phone with various members of the top brass. I have spoken with my superiors in the DLE, with military authorities, and with the Executive Director of LIM herself."

"I presume this concerns my visit to Gage Worthmann?"

"It does," she said flatly, not bothering with sarcasm. "That may have been the dumbest thing I've ever heard of."

"Captain, he knows something he's not telling--"

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Nile cut him off flatly. "I came up the hard way, through the ranks, and got used to rousting suspects. You, on the other hand, are supposed to be some hotshot designated for top-level status, which means that you should know when to exercise tact."

Conn winced painfully as Nile continued speaking, snapping off each word like a bullet.

"I've examined your report on the Hamdak incident. I agree with your conclusions as you spelled them out to Worthmann. Sabotage from within is the only reasonable explanation. What I cannot comprehend is how you could go storming up to LIM headquarters, dropping heavy-handed hints that you suspected him of being involved--suspicions that, I may add, I do not necessarily agree with."

"He knows too much. He knew that Hamdak had been killed."

"Did it ever occur to you that LIM is hardly going to sit back and wait for us to dole out whatever facts we care to? Worthmann is heading the corporation's share of this investigation; of course he has his sources. There's nothing incriminating in his knowledge; frankly, I'd be more suspicious if he didn't know. That would mean someone was deliberately keeping him out of the circle of information and point directly to a conspiracy."

The captain's eyes burned with cold fire as she looked at Conn, her stare unwavering.

"Putting all that aside, let's say for a moment that he is involved somehow in these crimes. What good did confronting him accomplish? Even if you were on to something, all you've done is to let him know you're a threat. Now, he can throw so many official roadblocks in your path that you'll never get close to him. You aren't some storybook detective, Derrek, who solves crimes for the intellectual challenge of it. Your job is to catch criminals with enough evidence that they can be convicted and jailed. There's no point to it otherwise."

"A point of correction," Abren stated. "Under authority of current statutes, it would be possible to construe the theft of data relating to Project Nuada as treasonous espionage. As such, there would be no need for a criminal trial with the benefit of the legal rights and protections afforded by civilian law. The suspects would face a military tribunal instead, where power and influence could not shield them."

Conn glanced at the android in surprise. Abren was defending him?

"I'm quite aware of that," Nile said. "I'm also aware that the news media are extremely vocal when the government takes end runs around people's legal safeguards. Do you know about the Venkler scandal in 1263? Those four were guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt, and there were still almost riots in the streets because of how things were handled. The people don't want to see death sentences come out of closed trials and star-chamber sessions. That's why the DLE was assigned to spearhead this investigation, to make sure that things were handled in a way that wouldn't cause more harm than the original crime did."

"That is an accurate assessment. I merely wished to point out that should Gage Worthmann be guilty in this matter, there would be a remedy available."

"Admittedly," Nile granted, "it can be hard to balance various goals." She was always fair, Conn had to give her that. "That doesn't mean you have carte blanche to act stupidly. Do you understand? You gained nothing and have enraged the executives at LIM. Cooperation from a major corp--the major corp--is rarer than laconia, and you may well have cost us that advantage. Meanwhile, Tyler Jorran--the man you were actually sent out to catch--is still out there, killing, stealing, or just covering his tracks."

"I'm not entirely sure we should be after him," Conn stated. "He's beginning to look more and more like a false scent, a shiny, attractive lure dragged through this investigation by Luveno to confuse us."

"The best way to find out is to take him into custody and interrogate him. You should have been confronting every contact you have, trying to track this man, instead of playing games with LIM."

Conn wanted to lash back, to defend himself, but the problem was that she was right and he knew it. He should have listened to Abren's advice and not tipped his hand. Yet he was, at least on some level, glad he had done it. Nile was wrong about Worthmann's motives, he was sure of it, and Conn now knew what kind of game he was caught up in. It wasn't just the chase for one terrorist band, but the power games of corps and government ministries, and Conn was determined not to be a pawn. Pawns in that kind of games were often sacrificed.

"I have received one piece of good news," the captain continued. "One of our informants reported that there's going to be a meeting tonight at a club called Shadowedge. Tyler Jorran is going there to recruit new talent. You'll be there."

"An informant?" Conn asked. "This didn't come from LIM?" Stupid question, he thought almost as soon as he had asked it. He didn't need the sharp shake of Nile's head to tell him it would be no one with a connection to Luveno who had passed on this lead. If the corp was responsible, they would work through third parties, now that they knew Conn suspected them. Of course, the tip might also be legitimate, in which case there would certainly be no LIM connection. "What time is he supposed to be there?"

"Apparently this Jorran had a taste for the melodramatic. The meeting is supposed to be scheduled for midnight."

"In that case, I'd better not keep him waiting."

### Chapter 13

A throbbing, pulsing music surged through the club, the techno-pop melodies filling the mind and lending their own unmistakable tint to every sight and sound, while the underlying industrial beat hammered out a rhythm that pulsed through the bones and drew the heart into synchronicity with its patterns. Shadowedge had its own pace, a self-generated atmosphere that drew everyone inside the club within its sphere. Whether a person was dancing, talking, courting, drinking, or conducting business did not matter. The music swept them all up in its embrace, consuming their spirits.

Standing just outside the doors, Tyler could sense that atmosphere's presence. He knew its name, it was loss of control, it was excess, but also joy and even pride. It was exhilaration, something the former agent was not used to feeling. Yet, he was just like the patrons in some ways, too. After all, he was there for a major breakthrough that would, he hoped, be a turning point in the search for Melora.

Shadowedge had been constructed in a building of positively antique design. It was a large domed warehouse on the outskirts of Old Camineet, the part of the city that had been Camineet before the capital swelled into the modern Camineet-Parolit archopolis. The building could have been a thousand years old, or at least the outer walls could have. The interior, Tyler knew, had been gutted to make room for the new design. Trendy retro style was one thing, but it was modern tastes that had to be satisfied inside.

At that moment, though, the ones who had to be satisfied were the bouncers. Like most club bouncers, these two were large and massively muscled, wearing sleeveless shirts and tight-fitting pants that showed off their build. Unlike most bouncers, Shadowedge's were armed. The club was a major moneymaker, and its owner kept anything that would disturb that profit to a minimum with a security team that while not up to the caliber of elite professionals were definitely a cut above common thugs.

Their eyes surveyed Tyler and the girl beside him assessingly. Of the two, Risa definitely looked more like the kind of person who ought to be admitted. She had raided Melora's closets before leaving the apartment and now wore flat-heeled longboots that came to mid-thigh, green tights and a sleeveless red leotard-style top under her own leather jacket. Tyler, on the other hand, had worn his carbonsuit for two days now and it showed, while the dark coat he had taken from the muscleboy fit a bit snugly across the shoulders.

"We've got biz to discuss with someone inside," he said, cutting short the assessment process.

"You got a name to go with that?" the bouncer said, pulling out a palmcomp that no doubt contained his list of who was expected.

"The girl's name is Alis. We've got business with Odin."

The big man's eyes flicked down the list and stopped when they found the arrangements Jac Norbridge had made.

"Awright. The cover charge is fifty meseta."

Risa's jaw dropped.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"Unfortunately," Tyler told her, "he's not." He paid the fifty meseta, uncomfortably aware that his supply of cash was running low. He had quite a bit more, carefully saved from his years at LIM, in his bank accounts, but accessing that money would leave a data trail obvious to any competent gridrider or the DLE. After paying Jac's fee, he would be all but tapped out, and if the gridrider wanted an up-front payment too, he would be completely screwed. There was time enough for that worry, though, if it actually came to pass. He had enough on his slate at the present without taking on future problems as well.

The heavy steel warehouse door swung open, and the music reached out to surround them. As Tyler and Risa stepped inside, it was as if they had been swallowed by a great beast.

The club was built on three levels, the entrance on the lowest and widest floor. The ceiling above was a metal grillwork sealed inside transparent plastic, as was the one higher up. Ghostly pale lights in a dozen different hues swept through the club, piercing through all the levels. The decor was a kind of pseudo-industrial look with metal tables, support columns made to look like pipes, clouds of steam, and a raw, unpolished appearance generally. Men and women moved on the dance floors, stood at one of the several different bars, or sat at the tables and booths. Some watched each other, some were interested only in themselves, and others talked in low voices. They wore the latest fashions, from military-styled carbonsuits to close-fitting garb that revealed more than it hid to expensive designer imitations of street styles.

A red-haired girl in skintight crimson leather strutted up to Tyler, her posture and expression making it obvious she was interested in him. Risa fixed her with a glare before Tyler could chase the stranger away, and the two young women stared frostily at each other. Not surprisingly, the redhead backed down and slunk away.

"Poser," Risa dismissed her with a snort, then asked Tyler, "Where's Jac?"

"Probably on the second level."

They stepped forward and were swallowed by the chaos of light, noise, and moving bodies. A trickle of sweat ran down Tyler's back; the itch he felt there, though, was because he felt vulnerable and off-balance. He wished he had brought the Inverness, but while weapons weren't forbidden at Shadowedge--too many of the club's patrons didn't feel comfortable going unarmed for the management to ban them--there was an unwritten code of Thy Armaments Shalt Be Subtle. Even under his coat in a shoulder sling the shotgun was far too obvious, especially if Tyler had to sit down.

A pair of black-clad teenagers sporting tiger-stripe facepaint stepped into the elevator, which was a massive steel shaft in the center of the club. Tyler and Risa walked past it to the nearest spiral staircase and climbed up to the middle level. The ex-agent caught sight of another bouncer, who like the two at the door wore a headset radio, had a sonic gun in a low-slung holster on his right hip, and carried a two-foot mace, a steel baton with rows of studs along the business end, on his left. A robot waiter, apparently a noncombat version of a Whistle, brought a tray of drinks to a table where a rowdy celebration was going on. The music changed to the latest hit by the Evildead, and the lights turned scarlet in response.

"There he is," Risa said.

"Where?"

"Third booth along the wall there, on your left."

Sure enough, Jac Norbridge was there in the black-cushioned, steel-frame seat, a tall, narrow glass in front of him. His seat was against the wall; he had put his female companion between himself and the dance floor. The woman wasn't the same one he had been with before; though she was just as beautiful her close-cropped blue hair, serious expression, military-styled yellow carbonsuit with mesh titancape, and what Tyler recognized as spring-loaded forearm sheaths for knives all said "bodyguard" rather than "ornament."

A broad smile formed itself on Jac's fleshy face as Tyler and Risa approached. His bodyguard assessed them coolly, keeping herself ready for trouble.

"Ahh, Tyler, my friend. Do come and sit down," the fixer said expansively, once again playing the genial host. "Would you or your lovely companion care for something to drink?"

Tyler took the wall seat on his side, so that he was facing Jac.

"Let's just get down to business."

Jac spread his hands, indicating that whatever the customer wanted was all right with him.

"Fair enough. I've located the individual in question and she's willing to speak with you."

"It's nice to have some good news for a change. So, when, where, and who is she?"

Norbridge picked up his glass and took a long swallow of the brilliant indigo liquid.

"First things first, Tyler. There is the matter of my payment."

"So far I haven't gotten anything to pay for, yet."

A muscle in the fixer's cheek twitched sharply just below his right eye, and his hand tightened on the glass for a fraction of a second. That was enough for Tyler to see the anger Jac was forced to control. Then, the veneer was in place again.

"Very well. The meeting with her is set to take place right here, tonight. You surely didn't think I would waste my time having you come to this excessively chaotic den if all I wanted was to collect a finder's fee? I could have done that at Syclone."

Damn, Tyler cursed mentally. That had been pretty obvious, and he had missed it. That kind of thing he shouldn't have even had to think about, let alone make mistakes over.

"The day I figure out what you are or aren't going to do, Jac, is way far off," he covered coolly. "For all I know, you like to dance."

"I prefer other forms of entertainment," he replied. The glance he directed at Risa wasn't a leer, but the intention was equally obvious. She glared back at him, but he took the rebuff with a smile. No doubt Jac had been trying to provoke her and was pleased with the result. His good humor restored, he told Tyler, "If you'll be so kind as to provide the remaining balance of my fee, we can avoid any further waste of time."

The music changed again, appropriately enough slipping into a remix of Ustvestia's "Secret Ways." The lights became a mix of azure shades, fluctuating slightly to give the impression that the area within the beams was under water, with ripples causing the light to shift. Tyler counted out the meseta due Jac, wincing inwardly as he was forced to finish up with ten-meseta, then five-meseta coins. He didn't enjoy letting Norbridge learn how close he was to being out of money.

Jac scooped up the meseta and tucked it away.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Tyler. Wait here and I'll send her over." He paused, then added slyly, "Good luck."

The bodyguard slid lithely out of the booth, followed by Jac, and the two of them stepped into the sea of light and sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

The roaring drumbeat of the aerocopter's rotors was muffled somewhat by the main cabin's soundproofing, but it was still a loud, brash noise that roared through the DLE airship.

"It's about five more minutes, Lieutenant," the pilot's voice crackled over the intercom.

"Thanks, Ryan," Conn replied. He checked the action on his vulcan one more time, then reholstered it.

"Perhaps now," Abren stated, "you could inform us of why you've determined on this course of action?"

Conn shrugged, looking at the expectant faces of his android partner and the four members of the DLE tactical squad. Only the two Poleziax robots were impassive and uncaring.

"Captain Nile passed on the tip that our fugitive would be at the club, Shadowedge, for a meeting at midnight. I want to be there and ready well before that."

The copter flew between the towering skyscrapers as if the steel and glass spires were the walls of a canyon. Lighted windows showed corporate wage slaves hard at work; the business day of AW 1278 often extended well into the night.

"If we can get there first, scope out the ground, and establish position," Conn added, "we'll have a better chance of getting to Jorran and taking him into custody without a firefight erupting. We've already had one shooting in what was supposed to be a sensitive investigation. I'm not looking for another one." He couldn't help but glance at the two robots. At least the fact that they were Scion-Colesburg models gave him some level of comfort. "Especially not in the middle of one of Camineet's most popular dance clubs."

His gaze lashed over the four tac-squad agents.

"In other words, nobody, but nobody fires on Tyler unless he fires first. If you do shoot, then make some effort to shoot to wound. As for weaponry, anyone who so much as takes a vulcan out of its holster without a direct order from Abren or me is going to be back writing parking tickets!"

"Yeah, we know, Lieutenant," drawled Sergeant Dean Wrayburn, a twenty-year veteran of tactical operations. "It's standard protocol--no automatic weapons fire when there's a chance of hitting bystanders."

"I'm just making sure that we don't have any more creative misunderstandings, get me?" Conn said frostily. The four tac-squad members nodded in unison. Conn glanced at his chronograph. It wouldn't be long now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tyler was not a happy man. The taunting way in which Jac had wished him good luck echoed in his mind. A dig for being out of money? No, more than that. Probably the gridrider was one of those mercenary types who wouldn't give you the time of day without a ten-meseta advance--and Jac now knew that Tyler couldn't pay for her services. Norbridge would undoubtedly think that was a great joke.

Or...

"Down!" he cried, throwing his body into Risa's. She was knocked out of the booth and onto the floor by the impact, and Tyler sprawled prone on the seat cushions. It was just in time; a small pellet fired from a poisonshot zipped through the air where Tyler had been. It struck the wall instead, the small gelatin capsule breaking open and releasing its caustic liquid over the curved steel panel, eating into the metal.

"Hey, what are you---" Risa began to complain, but was cut off by the roar of a vulcan and the metallic squeal of its shells tearing into the table. Screams rang out as the crowd became aware of the violence in its midst. The girl cursed, rolling while snapping her claws into their extended position.

Tyler crabbed his way out of the booth, which though it gave decent cover against the poisonshot would be no protection against a vulcan and restricted his movements and visibility far too much. The panicked crowd was trying to escape, people racing for the stairs, the elevator, and the exits. More than one had pulled a weapon of their own. The music continued to roar out of the sound system, the latest song loud and angry, surreally like the background music of a holovid action show. More vulcan fire stitched the floor after Tyler and Risa, the shells ricocheting away.

Managing to get his sonic gun out, Tyler regained his feet, keeping his body low to minimize the target he presented until he could figure out exactly what kind of opposition he faced. Correctly gauging where the vulcan fire had come from, he saw two men and a woman coming towards him. Someone had clearly laid down a few bribes to get them inside, probably through the service entrance--Stop analyzing and act, Tyler!--because they were dressed strictly for business in sleek carbonsuits augmented by titanium armor on the men and a titanium cape on the woman. One man carried a small-frame vulcan, the other a poisonshot and knife, and the woman a long, braided-steel whip with an emel buckled to her left forearm for additional protection.

The high-pitched whine of the Marksman screamed out, and the pulse from it jarred the vulcan from the first man's hands. Tyler's second and third shots hammered into his armored chest, causing the plates to crack and buckle at the point of impact but not even bruising the man underneath.

By now, Shadowedge's security was taking a definite interest in the proceedings. Black-clad bouncers with their guns out were converging on the fight scene. The second male attacker spun and fired his poisonshot at the lead security man, hitting him directly in the face. The bouncer dropped screaming as the toxic chemicals ate into his skin.

Next to Tyler, Risa grunted as a burly man crashed a shoulder into her back, then tried to finish her off with an upward sweep of his ceramic knife. Reacting quickly to the unexpected attack, she managed to parry the knife blade with her claws, then lashed out with a low kick that caught him behind the ankle and knocked his footing off balance. She slashed at his arm, tearing rents in his carbonsuit and the flesh beneath, then drew back her hand, her fist cocked just behind her ear. Risa's jaw tightened, and a violet light seemed to shimmer around the claws on that hand. With a loud cry, she sprang directly at her assailant, thrusting her arm out, rigid, before her. The violet gleam left a trail through the air as Risa's claws, augmented by the same kind of power that provided for techniques, plunged their way through the burly man's armor and deep into his heart.

"Damn it, Tyler, who are these guys?"

"Hunters," Tyler replied tersely as he took down the second man with a shot that found the chinks between his headgear and the built-up neck of his armor. "Mercs like Melora."

The female hunter's whip lashed out, tearing the gun from Tyler's hand. Her second strike came in low, trying to entangle his feet, but he managed to jump in time to make the whip snake harmlessly beneath him.

At least two more hunters were closing in from behind Tyler and Risa, the companions of the one Risa had felled. Tyler wished for a fleeting moment that he knew any of the multiple-target attack techniques like ZAN or GRA, but there was no use wishing in the middle of a firefight. The blue-white beam of a laser shot ripped by him, answered by a volley of sonic gun fire from the club guards. Tyler tried to use a tech, but the whip slashed across his chest, disrupting his concentration. The futile wish had cost him the half-second opportunity he had had while the hunter readied her weapon between strikes.

The bouncers, meanwhile, were charging into the fight. Unable to know who had started the battle and probably not caring, they indiscriminately assaulted both sides. Fortunately, while they were tough and strong, they were unarmored. Tyler sidestepped a heavy mace and kicked the attacking guard in the groin before leveling him with three quick punches to the face. These men were only doing their jobs; Tyler had no desire to kill them. The hunters had no compunction about that, though; they lashed out with lethal force at the black-clad men.

Taking advantage of the distraction provided by the guards' hand-to-hand attack, Tyler called to Risa and they bolted out across the dance floor. Shots followed them; thankfully, most missed. The only one that didn't was a sonic gun hit to the back of Tyler's left shoulder which thankfully the fibercoat and the carbonsuit beneath stopped. He'd have a bruise there, but that was a lot better than a hole.

Their retreat towards the nearest stairway was suddenly blocked as a huge man seized two frightened customers and hurled them bodily to one side.

"Let's dance," the hunter growled, and drew a long-bladed sword which he held in the two-handed grip standard to Palman swordfighting styles. He was dressed like the others, except that his headgear was titanium rather than steel. The edge of his blade shone with the sun-bright beam of the laser emitters mounted on it.

Tyler drew his ceram-knives, barely parrying the first cut of the laser sword. Chips flew from the ceramic blade as the laser beam bit into the parrying knife. Risa cut at the attacker, making him turn away, then the sword flicked out again, making her dive aside. A second cut sliced off two of the claw bars on her right hand.

Tyler came in low, trying to thrust his knives under the hunter's titan armor, but the big man managed to sweep his hands back and crack the hilt of his sword against Tyler's forearm, numbing it. The hunter's strength and the reach provided by his long arms and three-and-a-half-foot blade was effectively neutralizing Tyler and Risa's two-to-one advantage. Combined with speed and reflexes that were unusual in a man of his size and his superior equipment, the battle was actually turning in his favor.

The roaring drumbeat of vulcan fire told Tyler that someone had grabbed up the dropped gun and reminded him of the urgency of his position.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lieutenant," Ryan's voice came over the intercom again, "we may have a problem. Take a look out the window."

Conn did, then cursed loudly and long. People were pouring out of the dome-shaped club, milling about in terror. The cabin's secure-line visiphone beeped, and Conn snatched it up.

"Are you at Shadowedge yet?" Captain Nile asked.

"We're over it right now," he replied. The aerocopter hovered in place, its whirling rotors keeping it poised above the scene. "What the heck is going on in there?"

"I was hoping you'd know. The local DLE branch station is getting calls about a battle in there. From the sound of it," she added sourly, "it's a minor land war."

"Is Tyler Jorran involved?"

"Unknown. I've put a hold on local agents responding in case he is. Get your team in there and sort that mess out."

"I'm on it."

The phone went dead.

"Well, ladies, gentlemen, and machines, you heard the Captain," Conn announced. "Our mission parameters have just changed. You're authorized to use force where appropriate, except on Tyler, if he's there. Anyone else either stops fighting or gets shot." He thumbed the intercom button. "Ryan, take us in. We've got a party to crash."

\* \* \* \* \*

The constantly moving lights that swirled through the club lent a weird and surreal atmosphere to the battle going on inside. Most of the ordinary customers had managed to get off the second level, where the fighting was taking place, but they still milled about above and below in a near-riot, their panicked forms clearly visible through the sheathed grillwork of floor and ceiling.

Tyler stumbled as the blade of one of his knives shattered while trying to parry a stroke from the laser sword. The big man reared back for an overhand swing, but Tyler was just able to regain his balance and leap aside. The sword crashed into the floor, shattering the transparent plastic and sending chunks of it flying. Risa lashed out, trying to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the missed stroke, but her claws only glanced off the hunter's titanium armor.

The exchange did give Tyler some breathing room, though. Leaping backwards, he leveled his hand at the massive hunter and unleashed his TSU technique. The bolt of energy snapped the man's head back, and Risa's claws found his throat.

The two of them stepped over the fallen body and headed for the stairs, only to have things go from bad to worse. Two DLE tactical troops and a Poleziax robot were pounding up the steps towards them.

"Hey, that's Jorran!" one exclaimed. The Poleziax acted at once, firing its neural-paralysis inducer. The shot was blocked by the higher stairs on the spiral staircase, but it was enough to illustrate the trouble that was brewing.

"What the hell do the cops want you for?" Risa exclaimed as they dodged around support pillars.

"Damned if I know. Do you still have that gun you grabbed at Melora's?"

"Yeah."

"Give it to me."

He flung himself behind a row of tables, pushing one over on its side for cover. It wouldn't do much good against lethal fire, but it was adequate protection from paralyzers.

The vulcan roared again as the female hunter directed a steady stream of fire at the DLE agents. She and a wiry confederate with two laser shots were the last ones standing after the fight with the club's security. More cops came darting up another staircase, and then the elevator pinged softly and the door slid open to reveal yet another agent as well as a lethal-looking Siren android.

The second group of agents had a Poleziax with them just like the first. Recognizing it as the most immediate threat, Tyler fired the sonic gun again and again at it. Two paralysis bolts struck his makeshift defenses before the sonic charges punched enough holes in the robot to reduce it to sparking, smoking wreckage. The first Poleziax wasn't so lucky; the wiry hunter's laser shots struck something vital and the robot exploded.

The concussive blast had leveled the Poleziax's two Palman companions, leaving the way clear for an escape. Tyler and Risa bolted for the stairs again, even as a searing beam from the Siren's Flare Shot cut down the laser-armed hunter.

Rolling away from her exposed position, the female hunter emptied the vulcan's clip in Tyler's direction. Despite the intermittent light and the smoke billowing from the destroyed shards of the Poleziax, she scored a lucky hit. One slug slammed into Tyler's side, and another found his knee. His leg buckled at once, and he dropped to the floor, pain burning through him. Additional shots struck just ahead of him, barely missing his head, while the DLE agents tracked Risa with laser shots; their near-misses cut into the railing that kept people from falling into the staircase pit.

Salvation came in the form of a glowing green shield of energy that sprang out of nothingness between Tyler and Risa and their foes. The ex-agent recognized it at once as an android's Barrier utility. The Siren would be equipped with that as part of its basic combat package, but the DLE Siren would hardly be protecting its targets, would it?

And just when, Tyler thought through a haze of pain, did the DLE start using Sirens anyway?

While the Barrier was effective in stopping energy weapons and techniques with similar attributes, it wasn't particularly useful against slug-throwing vulcans. That was probably why the last hunter became the first target of a brilliant white sphere burning with green flame that blew her armor and body apart. Two more of the flaming orbs struck just short of the remaining groups of DLE agents, detonating at their feet with stunning effect.

"All right! I found you in time!"

A small figure, no more than four and a half feet tall, placed herself between Tyler and Risa and their adversaries. Its face was female and cute, with inverted triangles apparently tattooed beneath her eyes. Her body was basically asexual; golden-hued armor plating, heavily built up, protected her shoulders, neck, and upper torso, while the rest of her body was plated in scarlet, close-fitting armor. A white cape fell down her back from the shoulder guards, and her hair was midnight blue, almost black. She was all but dwarfed by the massive plasma cannon she carried in both hands braced against her shoulder.

The two agents who had come up the other flight of stairs were content to merely lie down and remain quiet; the Siren was not. It rose to its feet, bringing its shotgun to bear. The small female released her gun and raised one fist, which glowed with a green aura. Emerald lightning played over the Siren's form, and it collapsed, inert.

"That ought to keep him out of trouble for a while. Come on, let's go! Who knows what they'll have for us next?"

The tiny woman grabbed Tyler and slung him inelegantly over her shoulder. Belatedly, he recognized her as a Demi-type android, the competition's answer to LIM's Wrens and Mieus. The Demis were largely technicians and computer androids; their combat proficiency was a shade beneath that of the current Wrens, about equivalent to a baseline Siren but unable to handle the wide variety of weapons units and combat upgrades that could be installed in a Wren-type. Inevitably, though, a Demi's most noticeable feature was the fact that it had a fully-developed personality with emotions, moreover one that could change and grow over time.

She started down the stairs, then glanced at Risa.

"Well, come on. Don't just stand there, we've got to get going!"

Mutely, Risa followed. She didn't know if the Demi was friend or foe, but she did know that everyone else there was definitely not on their side.

The Demi's progress down the spiraling metal steps was not smooth. The little android was strong, but its strength was designed for lifting small, dense items, not bodies that were bigger than she was. She lurched down the stairs, her balance thrown off, into the milling throng at the bottom.

Though people had been fleeing the club ever since the first shots of the fight, they hadn't all been able to get out in the surprisingly short time that had elapsed. The rush to get away had left many of Shadowedge's patrons bruised and battered by the crush, and most of those remaining were in a state of absolute panic. The Demi eyed the mass at the front door and shook her head.

"We'll never get through that," Risa said.

"Right; we'll have to try the kitchens," agreed the android.

Tyler groaned as his injured body crashed into several people while they fought their way through the crowd. He could feel the blood seeping from his wounds, along his side and down his leg, and it was getting harder and harder to remain conscious. His thoughts were becoming blurry and fragmented.

There were, he thought dreamily, three entrances to Shadowedge: the front door, the side door from the administrative offices, and the service entrance to the kitchens where deliveries of food and spirits were made. The service entrance had once been a loading bay when the building had been used as a warehouse.

The kitchens were deserted. No fools, the staff had gotten out as soon as the trouble had began; they wanted no part of it. If the hunters and the cops had been thinking, they'd have left people outside all of the exits in case of an escape, but apparently they had both taken their entire force inside on the theory that if you can't catch someone with eight people you certainly aren't going to do it with six first and two later. For whatever reason, though, the alley was deserted.

"No time to get picky," the Demi said, and headed for a compact landskimmer parked halfway down the side street.

"Is this your car?" Risa asked.

"Like I said, this is no time to get picky! We've got to get out of here before the whole DLE comes down on our heads."

A panel in the android's forearm popped open and a cable snaked out. She plugged herself into the door lock for a moment, then withdrew the cable and opened the door. Risa crawled into the back while the Demi loaded Tyler into the front seat and shoved the plasma cannon in with Risa. The technician android found it as easy to override the ignition computer as she had the lock; the engine hummed to life and she pulled away from the curb. As the vehicle slipped out into the streets of Camineet, Tyler let himself sink down into quiet, comforting darkness.

### Chapter 14

"Would someone please have the kindness to tell me just what the hell is going on?" Conn Derrek cursed angrily. The second level of Shadowedge had been ripped up by gunfire, tables sprawled everywhere, decor blasted apart, and corpses scattered all over the place. A rough count had turned up seven hunters and nine of the club's security staff dead. Amazingly enough, none of the DLE agents had been killed in the bloodbath, though the robots were no more than scrap.

Slowly, Abren got to his feet. The Demi's Spark attack had disrupted its electrical systems, but its self-repair capacity had managed to restore the military Siren to operational condition. A surge of green light pulsed through the android's body as its Recover unit hyped its diagnostic and repair systems to maximum, restoring Abren to full working order in a matter of seconds.

"These guys were pros," Conn said, nudging the body of one of the hunters. "Someone nasty wanted Tyler out of the way and didn't mind laying out some heavy meseta for it. Hunters like this...maybe one K a head for a single ambush job. More than that if they were a regular team instead of independent talent, plus extra for doing it in such a high-profile location."

Abren pointed to a security camera mounted on the wall.

"Perhaps a review of the video record will tell us more."

"Yeah, that's a break. One thing we do know; Jorran's not alone. That girl was definitely with him, and so was the Demi."

"Unless the Demi wanted Tyler for her own reasons," Abren suggested.

Conn shook his head.

"No, the girl went with her when she took Tyler. That says ally to me."

"I agree; that would be the more logical interpretation."

"I'd better put in a call to Captain Nile. Maybe trying to explain this mess to the Steel Hawk will help me somehow make sense of it. Besides which, we need a forensics team out here and she's still got a freeze on the locals." He glanced at his android partner. "Why don't you get to the security office and make sure the vid chip with tonight's fun and games doesn't mysteriously vanish?"

He started towards the elevator, then stopped.

"Hey, Abren, you remember how our tip was that the meeting would go down at midnight?"

"Yes."

"You don't suppose," Conn said, his voice dripping sarcasm, "someone wanted us to show up after the crap had gone down to pick up the pieces, do you?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Tyler groaned, eyelids slowly opening to reveal the brilliance of artificial light. Pain still filled him, but there was also energy; strength seemed to flow into him rather than drain out.

"He's coming to," he heard Risa's voice call.

"Thank goodness! Here, give him this."

"Another one?"

"No, that was just to keep him with us. This is a Dimate."

Tyler opened his eyes all the way. He seemed to be lying on a bed. The Demi who had carried him out of the club was flicking the cap off of a tube-shaped pressure injector. Risa took it, set the tip against his flesh, and pressed the trigger. Heat seemed to flow outward from the point, filling his bloodstream and flowing to every part of his body. Dimate, he knew from experience, was a powerful wound curative, similar to the "healing potions" of sword-and-sorcery legend. It stimulated the body's natural healing functions at a radical rate, so that weeks of healing took place in moments. In addition, unlike its weaker cousin, Monomate, Dimate also caused cell division and growth that ordinarily took place only once in a lifetime, so that injuries that would be permanently crippling were wiped away. The heat swelled in Tyler's knee, and he could feel his shattered kneecap all but regrow. Less than two minutes later, he smiled.

"Are you all right?" Risa asked.

"My head's a little sore, but I'm all right otherwise."

The android inspected Tyler's side and knee clinically, then nodded agreement.

"Yes, your wounds seem to be healed nicely. I'd take it easy for a while, though. I know that the Dimate contains the concentrated nutrients that your body needs to heal, but the effects of being injured, then rapidly healing, can be a shock to your system."

Tyler nodded, feeling his head throb as he moved it.

"I know; I've used Dimate before. The effects will pass in a few minutes." He glanced down at himself, then blushed as he saw that he was clad only in his undergarments, the shirt pushed up to bare his abdomen. Risa grinned at his embarrassment.

"Well, we had to check your wounds somehow, didn't we?" she said, unapologetic.

"Would you like to shower and change clothes?" the android asked. "I've noticed that the process has a mentally rejuvenating effect on most people, and we have lots to discuss."

"Yeah, starting with who you are and why you pulled us out of there. Not that I'm complaining; I deeply appreciate the fact that you saved my life and possibly Risa's."

"You're welcome."

"I just want to know why you did it."

"Well," she said brightly, "my name is Anje, and this is my apartment. Well, it actually belongs to Catherine Maycross, but she only exists in the computers I make believe in her, so it's really mine. The rest can wait until later."

Tyler nodded and swung his legs off the bed. He needed time to digest what had already happened, and a shower was always good for a few minutes of quiet thought, besides the fact it would get the dried blood off his skin. His bare feet landed on soft, plush carpet, and Tyler realized from the furnishings that the fictitious Ms. Maycross was very well-off indeed. The apartment was nothing more or less than a luxury suite.

Anje's bathroom gleamed like new--being an android, it was largely superfluous for her--and outfitted with a massive whirlpool tub as well as a separate shower stall. Tyler locked the door, stripped off his remaining clothes, and selected his water temperature. The cascading sluice of water felt good, helping him to wash away the tension of the past day and two nights. It gave him a warm, clean, centered feeling that was purer, more natural than the leftover buzz from the Dimate that had worn off right before he hit the water. When his brain and body had come to terms with the present, he reached for the gel-soap dispenser mounted on the shower wall. While Tyler washed, he began to think.

Beginning with the immediate, his thoughts started with his hostess. The generic face of a Demi was designed to be cute, rather than pretty, and the appearance was only emphasized by her diminutive size. Her voice was high-pitched, almost chirpy, and there was a kind of perpetual enthusiasm about her mannerisms that completed the resemblance to a ten-year-old child who happened to possess genius intelligence and adult maturity. The one nonstandard thing about her was her color scheme. Production-line Demis came with light green hair, roughly Risa's shade, and a green-and-gold color scheme. Tyler had always figured the colors were meant to be a subtle dig at LIM's corporate logo, a reminder by Scion-Colesburg that they, not Luveno, had created the first AI with a functioning emotional personality. LIM had tried to match their success with the Mieu-types, but the Mieus were combat androids first and foremost, and their personalities weren't as well-rounded as the Demis, though they were also less quirky. Luveno had turned back to pure-logic personalities with their Wren-types, and Scion-Colesburg had kept on churning out green-and-gold Demis. So why Anje's color change?

The bloodstains came off easily, scarlet vanishing down the drain. The last remnants of the firefight gone forever into Camineet's sewer system. Half an hour ago, Tyler had been wounded, maybe dying, and now the situation was completely different. He was alive, fully healthy, and ready to take action. Yet, what was his first order of business?

Jac Norbridge was one point. The lying bastard had sold them out. Maybe it was just to the hunters, and maybe to the cops too, but either way he'd collected a nice fee for handing over Tyler and Risa. Handed them over to whom, though? Who was willing to lay out the meseta for a team of hunters and Jac's "finder's fee" all to get hold of Tyler or leave him dead? He didn't have any old enemies lingering around Camineet in that kind of position, so it had to be someone involved in the current biz. Unless it was Risa and not him they were after?

Possible, Tyler decided, but unlikely.

Part of it was who she was; a street girl from Ossale Court wasn't likely to fall into two major operations simultaneously. Most of the reason, though, Tyler realized, was that he trusted her now to have told him if she had something that nasty hanging over her. Taking that assumption as a given, then the attack had to be connected with Melora's disappearance.

The obvious suspect was, of course, Stephens' boss, the potential blackmail victim, who was also probably responsible for the kidnapping. A well-off LIM executive with a secret to hide wouldn't balk at hiring outside talent to plug a possible chink in his armor. For that matter, it made more sense that way than the way the kidnapping had gone down. Professional, independent talent to take out a professional, not the weird mix of muscleboys, bodyguards, and doctors.

That was why Tyler distrusted the obvious explanation. The attack at Shadowedge and the kidnapping had played out so differently that they seemed like the products of two different minds. Corp execs and strategists, like criminals, had their own modus operandi, their way of doing things. They didn't change styles in midgame. Did that mean that someone else was calling the shots now, or had an entirely new player taken the field?

Too many questions, Tyler decided, toweling off. Jac would have some answers, that was for sure, but what Tyler really wanted was to know what was on the chip he had taken from Melora's apartment.

A sharp knock at the door cut short his foreboding chain of thought.

"Hey, Tyler, you done in there?" Risa called.

Tyler wound the towel around his waist.

"Yeah, why?"

The door swung open and she set a stack of folded clothes on the edge of the sink.

"Anje figured you could use some fresh clothes--unless, of course, you happen to go for the dirty, bloodstained, full-of-bullet-holes look." She grinned at Tyler to let him know that she had meant it as a joke, not sarcasm. Risa then eyed him up and down, taking in his muscular chest and arms and his hard, flat stomach. "I picked out the sizes; hope they're close," she added, then was gone, pulling the door shut behind her.

Wondering why an android would keep clothing on hand--at least it couldn't belong to an ex-lover!--Tyler investigated the stock. The undergarments fit perfectly, as did the matte-black carbonsuit. The two-piece military-styled suit felt odd to Tyler, though, as he straightened the sleeves. Taking a closer look at the material, he realized that it wasn't really a carbonsuit after all; the fabric was a fine weave of special graphite strands. He'd read about these; graphitesuits were supposed to be roughly equal to titanium armor in protective ability. Redfield had been touting them as being "as good as ceramics, without the weight!" but more seasoned arguments dismissed that as advertising puffery. They were expensive, and the material didn't lend itself to armored fashion as carbon did, but certain execs and politicos liked them. The boots matched the color and style.

Tyler took a glance in the mirror. He liked the look, and the protective qualities definitely appealed. This was biz wear, in every sense. He opened the door and walked out.

"Not bad," Risa said with a smile.

"That does suit you," Anje agreed.

"I'm not bleeding all over the furniture," Tyler replied, "which is the part that suits me best. Now, though, I think it's time for some of those explanations we discussed earlier."

Anje rose to her feet and held up the amber sliver that so much of this seemed to revolve around.

"We'll start with this. I found it in your coat; I presume you got it from Melora's home?"

Tyler nodded.

"Oh, good. I've been worried that LIM would have found it by now! Do you know what's on it?"

"No."

"Well, I do, because I put it there," Anje smiled brightly.

"You're Melora's gridrider?" Now that would be a titanic piece of luck, to meet by coincidence with the person they had intended to find at Shadowedge in the first place. "Can you prove it? Risa, do you know her?"

Risa shook her head, and the android sighed.

"I suppose a little suspicion is only natural," she admitted, then brightened. "Did you try to have Ham read the chip?"

"How do you know about Hamdak?"

"Later! I just want to know if you know what the security on this chip is like."

"Yeah, I know," said Tyler, figuring out where Anje was going with this. "He said it was beta-level, about as sealed off as chip files could be."

"So would you agree--"

"That if you could open it up with a half-dozen keystrokes, it would be proof enough that you really did set it up? Yeah, I'd agree to that."

Anje tipped her head to one side and regarded Tyler with curiosity. It was amazing, he thought, how her artificial face could so easily convey emotion.

"You know, you're being awfully rude, considering that I just saved your life. Twice, if you count getting you out of Shadowedge separately from healing your wounds."

Tyler ran a hand through his cropped blond hair.

"I guess I am at that. I'm just getting so damned tired of being jerked around on this thing. My friends are being hurt or killed, I've been betrayed, attacked, and nearly gravestoned, and I still don't have any idea what it's all about."

Anje nodded.

"Well, watch and learn!"

She sat down at the desk, on top of which sat an IMVE Aurora workstation. The model wasn't top-of-the-line, but then again, the base unit had probably been modified. Anje didn't use the keyboard, though; instead she plugged the same cable she had used to access the skimmer into the computer.

Of course, Tyler realized. She doesn't need a VR interface to translate thought into computer commands. She's an AI; her thoughts are computer commands! He wondered for a moment why LIM hadn't set an army of Wrens to work as gridriders, then realized that gridriding was as much an art as a science. A Wren had the basic tools it took to be a superhuman neon angel but only the Demis could step beyond mere "computer operation" to "gridriding" because of their feelings.

The data from the chip was scrolling across the screen in a matter of seconds. Tyler's jaw was sagging in shock several seconds as he stared at the crimson-armored android.

"You're her, aren't you?" he said, genuinely amazed. "Anje...you're Angel Red, aren't you?"

"Who?" Risa exclaimed, just as stunned.

"Some people call me that," Anje said modestly.

"Jac! That skag knew!" Tyler exclaimed. "That's why he was grinning so much back at Syclone.

"Angel Red is an android?" Risa boggled. "Though," she added with a grin, "I'm glad she's a female android, at least."

"It's really not that big a deal."

"Yeah, right," Tyler said, grinning. "Your street name is the reason they call gridriders 'neon angels,' heck, how all that angel slang for computer work came into being, and it's not a big deal."

"I've got hacker wannabe pals who'd give their right arm to meet you," Risa added.

Anje didn't exactly blush--her synthetic skin couldn't--but she did a good job of looking embarrassed all the same.

"I just want to help Melora," she said. "She's a good friend as well as a client, and since it was my hacking that got her into this, I want to help save her. I know she'd sent the letter to you, Tyler, but after you checked into your hotel last night you haven't been leaving traces in the datanet. I didn't catch up with you until the lurker I'd slipped into LIM's systems picked up a message about tonight's meeting. Then I almost didn't make it because of a silly traffic jam on the highway."

There were so many questions raised by that disclaimer that Tyler didn't know which one to ask first.

"Why don't you start at the beginning and run through the whole story?" he suggested. "I came to the show late and got bad seats, besides, so I'm going to need some background before any of this makes sense."

### Chapter 15

It all started with a straightforward corp-politics job," Anje began. "If you've looked at any of Melora's records you probably already know this, but she was hired by a man named Eric Stephens, LIM section manager for finance in the Robotics Division, to dig up the dirt on his boss. From the way Melora gave it to me, Stephens had been snooping around in the company system and caught a whiff of something underhanded called Project Nuada. Stephens thought it was some kind of embezzlement scam, a way to divert corporate funds to his boss' accounts."

"We found out about Stephens and what he wanted," Tyler said, "but not who he wanted it on or anything about this Nuada."

The Demi nodded.

"The target was the division chief, Gage Worthmann."

Tyler didn't recognize the name; he must have reached his current position after Tyler's departure.

"So, Melora hired you to go into the Luveno system and check up on Worthmann and Project Nuada?" Risa asked. She was sitting on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest.

"That's right. Stephens had given her a gamma-level passcode, so getting into the Nuada files was a breeze. Well, relatively; they were under beta-level security, but it's a lot easier to stage up from a lower level than crack it from scratch, especially in a system as powerful as LIM's."

The android frowned, though on her it looked more like a pout.

"Project Nuada, though, didn't pan out the way I expected it to. There were no files on what it was doing, which I did expect. Who keeps files on a shell project, after all? The weird thing, though, was that when I started to follow up on meseta transfers, resource diversions, and all the cover activity, it started to look more and more like there really was a Project Nuada. The money didn't go anywhere near Gage's private accounts!"

"Wait a minute," Tyler interrupted. "If Nuada is a real project, even an under-the-table one, there have to be records somewhere. LIM doesn't do anything that one person can just carry around in their head."

"I know, so I went looking for it, but there just isn't one unified project file. It's all in bits and pieces hidden throughout the system; collecting it all could take weeks. Especially given how much of that data is hidden away behind some of Luveno's nastiest datanet security! I admit, I'd love to take apart LIM's mainframe from top to bottom--what gridrider wouldn't?--but you'd have to be Mother Brain to actually do it." She pointed at the computer screen. "This is what I got. I gave the chip to Melora four days ago."

"That's the same day she wrote to me," Tyler said.

"I'm not surprised. It must have freaked her out badly to learn that she'd stumbled into a heavy black operation run by your old employers."

Tyler shook his head.

"Not Melora. She must have seen something in that data that meant something to her--something very big and very nasty. She wouldn't have gone running to me over just having a job turn out to be more than it appeared."

"That's right," Risa agreed. "Melora always told me that almost every job turns out to be more than you know up front. Sometimes the clients lie, sometimes they hold something back, and even when they tell the truth whatever they want has complications."

Anje looked over the two of them, assessing their opinions.

"Probably you're right; you know Melora better than I do." And, of course, there was the human factor. No matter how Palman-like a Demi's personality was, it was still artificial and therefore not always able to "read" the responses of living people.

"So what happened next?" Risa urged.

"Well, from my point of view, the next thing was that I checked in with Melora yesterday, or at least tried to. She'd told me that she might want to follow up later after I gave her the first report, so...well, okay, I admit it, I was trying to drum up some extra business."

Her smile vanished as she considered what had happened.

"When I couldn't find her, I started a datanet search. I found the record of her letter transmission to you, Tyler, so I sent out a few feelers looking for you, also. Then I went back into LIM's systems and found that Eric Stephens was dead, but also that someone had laced his personnel records with all kinds of alarm and tracing programs, and not bad ones either--one almost tripped me up! I planted a couple of lurkers--"

"What's a lurker?" Risa interrupted. Gridriding jargon tended to go over her head, but she was determined to follow Anje's story all the way through.

"A lurker is a kind of virus," the Demi explained. "It's a bit of code planted in a system that does nothing until it encounters some specific stimulus such as a particular name. It lurks in the shadows of the system for its prey, get it? Then it strikes, carrying out its instructions. The ones I left were to scan for fresh data mentioning Melora or Tyler, then copy that data to a drop point on the datanet where I could retrieve them. I also put another on overwatch to see if anyone tripped all the surprises waiting on Stephens' file.

"After that, I went back to looking for Tyler. I finally found him in the airline records, including his arrival time in the Camineet customs log. Then, a bit later, his name popped again when he used a credit transfer to pay for his hotel room."

Anje crossed her legs. One of the most alien things about most androids was their unnatural stillness when talking. There were ordinarily none of the little gestures that living people punctuated their conversations with. Apparently the Demis were different; they had been programmed to make otherwise pointless movements to help put people at ease.

"Last night, my lurker in the personnel files was triggered. I saw the intrusion by Rhys Hamdak, his triggering of the alarms, and his escape. That was a nice shielding program, by the way. It completely shut down all of the traces that were thrown at him. Unfortunately, he'd been a little sloppy on the way in and registered on a couple of passive security gates, so I was able to tap LIM's internal systems to learn who he was."

"Wait a sec," Risa broke in again. "I thought that fog thing was supposed to keep security from seeing him."

"The code that caught him is a different kind of security. It's like...well, if you're breaking into a building and you shut off the security cameras, but then you step on a pressure plate."

"He paid the price for his sloppiness," Tyler said dully. If he hadn't asked Ham to crack Stephens' file...Don't go there! There's no time for misplaced guilt!

"I know," Anje said. "I'm sorry."

Risa looked knowingly at Tyler, then pressed the conversation in order to get him past that point.

"What happened after that?"

"There were a number of communications between LIM and the DLE which mentioned Tyler's name. They were sent over encrypted channels, so my lurkers couldn't do any more than register their existence."

"Wait a minute," Tyler said. "It was Luveno who called the cops? That's crazy! If this Project Nuada really is some kind of black op, and they kidnapped Melora and killed Stephens in order to cover it up, why would they go to the DLE? The cops aren't idiots; they'll put two and two together fast enough."

Anje sighed.

"I was hoping you'd be able to explain that," she told Tyler. "It isn't logical or rational, and the major corporations always act rationally in pursuit of their goals. Immorally or unethically, certainly, but always rationally."

"Which means," Tyler said, "that we're missing some important pieces of the puzzle. First it looked like an ordinary job gone wrong, then it looked like some kind of under-the-table corporate business, and now..."

Risa flopped back on the bed.

"This is so damned confusing; if people weren't getting killed over it I'd laugh."

"How did you find out about us?"

"It was one of my lurkers; it caught the tail end of a visiphone call from Gage Worthmann about you. LIM keeps a record of incoming calls, so I hacked into the monitor databank and downloaded the information. That's how I knew that you were going to be ambushed at Shadowedge."

Tyler held up a hand.

"Wait a second. You said LIM monitors all incoming calls, but that it was Worthmann who placed the call."

"Right. They monitor outgoing calls, too, but Worthmann wasn't dumb enough to make a call on an open line. But, he made the call to an unsecured phone, though he didn't mean to. He dialed a secure number, but it was busy and bounced the call to the message-record system, which isn't secured."

"Couldn't you just have hacked the message databank?"

The android gridrider shook her head.

"Unfortunately not. It's in a completely different part of the system and walled up with alpha-level security to protect the executives' privacy. In fact, if Gage had just left a message outright, that wouldn't have been monitored and I'd never have known about it; it was the act of transferring from the busy number to the recorder that triggered the internal tap. Otherwise, if you leave a message from a secure or external phone--and by the way, employees' home and company-issued portable phones are considered internal--and it's retrieved the same way, the system won't snoop it. Basically, I took advantage of a system glitch!" She grinned broadly. Well, Tyler supposed, if anyone could fulfill the fantasy of the top-notch gridrider dancing nimbly around the gigantic evil corporation it was Angel Red.

"Nice work," he said. "Which just leaves the million-meseta question: who did Gage call?"

Anje's grin grew even wider.

"The one and only Nash Garrett, Luveno Industrial Mechanisms' Security Division Chief."

"The hunters were Luveno sec-agents?" Risa exclaimed.

"More likely freelancers hired by Garrett," Tyler told her. "He wouldn't shoot up someplace like Shadowedge with people who could be immediately traced back to LIM. It's too public."

Anje drummed her fingers on her knee, a natural-seeming action made unnatural by the sound of clinking metal.

"Or, given the apparent connection between Luveno and the DLE, it's possible that the hunters were sent by a third party and the DLE called by Garrett."

"A third party?" Risa groaned. "Isn't this confusing enough?"

"Maybe they both were sent by LIM," Tyler suggested. "One team, the hunters, is sent in to take us out, then a second team, the DLE agents, 'secure' the situation and puts a nice coat of whitewash over the whole affair. What I'm not sure of is why they want us dead; they can't know what we may have told anyone else."

"Well, maybe they figure you're more dangerous alive than anyone you might have told is."

"Or," Risa said dryly, "they figure it's easier to shoot first and question the clones."

"Except that ever since 1275 cloning facilities operate under government license," Tyler reminded her. "Then again, if the DLE is involved..."

Risa shook her head.

"One problem with that. The hunters and DLE were shooting at each other. That doesn't sound to me like they're on the same side."

"Would LIM necessarily have told them about each other?" Anje wondered. "The hunters might not have known that the cops weren't after them and so opened fire in what they believed to be self-defense. Or, if Garrett was feeling really nasty, part of the DLE's job might actually have been to remove the hunters and get rid of any links back to Luveno."

"Or," Tyler pointed out, "maybe the DLE agents were just doing their jobs. I mean, we were in the middle of a three-way battle, and Shadowedge is the kind of place the government likes to keep intact. Too many important people go there to party or do biz."

Risa punched a pillow.

"What's that--four theories we've come up with now? Do we really know anything?"

"Risa has a point," Anje agreed. "If we can generate this many hypothetical scenarios, we lack the information we need to judge the truth."

Tyler got up, stalked over to the far side of the room, and looked out the window, bracing his hands on the sill.

"When you get right down to it," he said, "does it really matter how it plays out? We know that LIM and specifically Worthmann and Garrett are after us because of Melora. We know that there's a connection between the DLE and Luveno, though whether the cops are crooked or being fed a line is uncertain." He looked back over his shoulder. "Hey, do either of you know if that Siren is standard with the Camineet DLE now?"

"Never seen one before," Risa said.

"It surprised me as well," Anje agreed. "No, they aren't used by the DLE as far as I know."

"Okay. It wasn't four years ago when I left town, but things do change." Tyler looked out the window again. The apartment was on or near the top floor of a high-rise, maybe six stories above the elevated highway that ran past then branched off into three spiraling ramps that descended another ten stories to the groundways below. Off in the distance Tyler could see the green fire of the three LIM towers, the triskelion shining in teal-blue radiance atop the Scion-Colesburg headquarters, and the crimson diamond logo that capped each face of the octagonal Redfield Arms building. If he remembered the layout of the three landmarks correctly, that put this apartment building somewhere near the south edge of Skyhaven, the highest-rent district of the city. Angel Red was doing very well for herself indeed.

Idly, Tyler wondered if androids could appreciate luxury, if Anje could enjoy one chair over another, or the beauty of a good view, or if soft carpet under her feet felt better than a bare floor. The kitchen was useless to her and the bathroom nearly so; how much of the rest of this apartment was solely for the benefit of living guests?

He turned around again, thoughts more or less in order.

"Let's have a look at that data. I want to know just what it is about Project Nuada that makes murder and abduction the flavor of the day."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Tyler looked away from the screen. He drank off the last of his third cup of coffee--the kitchen was at least well-stocked, despite being irrelevant to its owner--and got up from his chair. Risa had given up in disgust after a quarter-hour; she lacked the education and training it took to negotiate the twists of corporate finance. Anje did possess that, but not the familiarity with the way the corps operated--the Palman angle, as it were--so she was waiting to see what Tyler deduced from the file she had collected.

Risa yawned and took off the headphones connecting her to the audivid system.

"So what's the verdict?" she asked.

"Anything interesting?" he countered, indicating the holovid screen.

"'Terrorists attack Old Camineet club. Unverified reports indicate DLE agents broke up a skirmish between at least two factions of criminals at Shadowedge late this evening. An unknown number of gangsters were killed or taken into custody.'" She snickered wryly. "It looks like I'm finally earning a name for myself. Too bad I'll never get a chance to use this particular rep with both Luveno and the cops after us for it."

Tyler smiled in spite of himself.

"So," Risa asked again, "anything worth talking about there?"

"Yeah, Anje managed to track down what Worthmann was doing with the money. It looks like he's been diverting funds out of the Robotics Division budget for about a year now. The tricky thing is tracing where it's going. There are a set of shell accounts under the Project Nuada label--R&D;, marketing, administration, all the usual. The problem is, the recorded transfers of meseta out of them aren't going where they're supposed to. They're being routed through channels that don't match up with their supposed destinations."

Risa yawned and stretched, catlike.

"Maybe I'm just too damn tired, but that one went way over my head."

"Okay, here's an example. This transfer record says that five thousand meseta are being paid out of Nuada's R&D; budget monthly for laboratory costs. That's rent, power, datanet access, that kind of thing."

"I follow that."

"However, the money was sent through wire transfer channels that don't go to the same kind of account."

"That I don't follow."

"Money was sent to a personal account at a bank, not a corporation's billing/accounts receivable account."

Risa sighed heavily.

"All right, I think I see what you mean. That kind of thing looks different when you inspect the files?"

“It does. In fact, that's probably how Stephens got wind that something was wrong. These transfer codes aren't protected by the same level of computer security as the project records or even the specific destinations for the transfers."

Anje nodded.

"They're gamma-level at best, and Melora gave me a gamma-level passcode to use, which she'd gotten from Stephens. I had those transfers gutted in minutes; the hardest part was keeping security from noticing while I did it. That's probably what tipped Stephens off in the first place."

"Anyway, beyond that, Anje was able to crack open the destinations as well. What I can see here are two major groups of payments. One involves what's apparently some kind of transportation company called Lianora. Lianora Shipping, Lianora Facilities Management, Lianora Personnel...did you get a line on who these people are, Anje?"

The Demi shook her head.

"It's not a wholly or partly owned subsidiary of LIM's, of that I'm certain. When I couldn't find them in Luveno's systems I tried the public financial network, but there was no mention of them at all."

"You think it's another layer of lies?"

Anje paused, then shook her head.

"I don't see why there would be yet another layer of shell projects underneath, especially one which hasn't been set up to provide adequate cover."

"Luveno wouldn't be that sloppy," Tyler agreed. "There would be a real company called Lianora if it was just a shell corporation."

"It almost sounds like a place," Risa contributed. "I mean, you've got shipping to and from it, facilities management to keep it running, and personnel to work there."

Tyler and Anje's faces froze for a second, they looked at each other in surprise, then both smiled broadly.

"So much for us being the experts," Tyler said.

"It's not a place belonging to LIM, though," Anje cautioned. "I sent a few programs out to look for it and they couldn't find the name anywhere else in the mainframe. I'm less worried about that, though, than in not finding them on the business net. After all, we know they're diverting meseta out of their systems to Lianora, so it probably shouldn't be under the Luveno aegis if it is a place."

"I'd say Risa's got it right, then," Tyler agreed.

Risa yawned, interrupting her grin.

"So what's the other group? Anything more useful?" she said, sleepiness wearing away at her interest but not enough to completely exhaust her. Three in the morning was hard enough two nights in a row without the emotional crash that comes after a life-or-death battle.

"The other one is more obvious. Apparently, LIM is funding a hospital in Rendak through Project Nuada. There are funds going to the Hartling Memorial Free Clinic, to a Dr. Ewan Margolis, and to Rendak Collective Services. That last one is the landlord, by the way, including utilities."

There was a sour look on his face as he told them about it. Risa got the implication at once, but Anje didn't.

"Why would LIM support a free clinic with secret financing?"

"Medical experimentation," Tyler said grimly. "No corporation is big on anonymous philanthropy, particularly a planetwide conglomerate like LIM. If they were really trying to give out health care to the poor of Rendak, they'd do it with trumpet fanfares, buying tax breaks and good publicity with every meseta spent on charity."

"So it looks like they're hunting research subjects," Risa agreed.

"It happens every so often," Tyler stated. "The people of Rendak and Ossale Court are...expendable."

Risa got off the bed, folding her arms across her chest.

"The system barely even realizes we exist, so there's no justice for us," she said. "The only time the cops take notice is when one of us inconveniences someone important--mugs some guy who's on a slumming trip, busts up a corp landrover or industrial plant, squats in a building some developer wants to tear down. Then its all 'clear out the street scum!'"

"When there's a new drug that the corps want to test, for example, they're as likely as not to run those tests in the slums. Plenty of people are willing to accept a few meseta for getting pumped full of some new concoction, and since there's no one to stick up for their rights, the company researchers don't have to go through the expensive and time-consuming ethical protocols mandated by the laws on Palman testing."

"Is that what you think Project Nuada is?"

Tyler shook his head.

"Nah, this is too fancy. Besides, Luveno doesn't have a medical research section. A couple of their subsidiaries do, but the core company's too far removed. This looks more like they're recruiting test subjects."

"What?" Anje exclaimed.

"Some skag walks into the clinic, asks for a flu shot or something, and instead they're snatched and good old Dr. Margolis works them over with whatever crap he's doing. Then they get marked in the patient records as dead. Who's to know? Who's gonna question why someone bites it in Rendak?" Risa's voice was bitter, rising in pitch as she fought with her emotions.

"And whatever it is, this is important. Luveno is pumping millions of meseta through these Nuada accounts. No wonder Melora panicked," Tyler concluded. "She'd know at once how important it would be for LIM to keep this quiet." He paused to think, then said, "Stephens' death was listed as two days ago...no, three days now. Figure another day for interrogation and it tallies nicely with the timetable you've given us, Anje. If I was a gambler, I'd lay odds that Melora passed on a preliminary report and Stephens went to Worthmann and tried his hand at blackmail."

"Which would, of course, fail," the Demi stated. "Gage would have LIM security, at least those of highly classified levels, take Stephens into custody and extract everything Stephens knew about Project Nuada and whom else he'd told."

"That's why they were after Melora," Tyler reasoned. "Worthmann hired the rat pack to grab her when Stephens confessed whom he'd hired. He wanted her alive to find out whom she'd told in turn. LIM probably got on to me by having their pet gridriders in CompSec run a trace on Melora and finding the letter she'd sent, just like you did, Anje."

"Wait a sec," Risa cut in. "If Melora knew that people were after her, why did she pick letter transmission to use to call you? Why not some more secure method?"

Tyler shrugged.

"She had to. I was off in Abion, and she didn't even know if I could be reached by visiphone, which isn't secure either. And, to be honest...she might not have been sure I'd have let her have her say."

What would he have done if she'd called? Would Tyler have heard her out, or slammed the disconnect button and cut her off without a word? The feelings left between them were too close to the surface and always had been. Love, desire, anger, and fear all tied up in one unpredictable mess. It had taken him three days to chew over her letter and come to Camineet; he had no idea how he'd have reacted to a call.

"Norbridge," he said, turning the subject away from dangerous topics, "must have heard that LIM was after us. There must be some kind of buzz on the streets, in the circles he moves in. Not too loud, or it would make a public enough stir to destroy whatever it is they're doing with the DLE, but loud enough that the top fixers and rumormongers would hear. There's a price on my head, and probably yours now too, Risa. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm doing this to help a friend, not because of anything you said or did. Sooner or later I'd have either stumbled into a trap or had that same bounty put on me even if you'd have stayed in Abion."

Tyler sighed. He was tired too, which made it hard to think clearly about more than one thing at once.

"I think we need to get some sleep," he said. "Tomorrow we're paying a visit to that clinic, and we Palmans at least need rest. Anje, can you check the public records database, maybe try to dig up some schematics of the place? We've got to find some answers if we're going to get ourselves or Melora out of this fix."

"That'll be a plan," Anje agreed. "This can be your bedroom, Tyler, and Risa can have the one across the hall."

"Won't you need to use the computer here?" Tyler asked.

"No; I can access the datanet directly with my internal systems. I only used this workstation to show you the datachip. Interfacing through a computer would only slow my reaction time." Yet another reason, Tyler supposed, why she had such an edge on even the best of Palman gridriders. It was kind of ironic, really; Camineet's gridriders looked on Angel Red as a legend, almost some kind of a god, and in reality Anje was like a goddess to them because her abilities to enter and manipulate the datanet worked on an entirely different level. It was a level they had no hope of reaching, no matter how hot their systems were or how high their ability. They would always be one step behind the android, simply because they were Palmans and she was not.

Risa shrugged off her jacket and flipped it over one shoulder, showing off her bare arms and the snug fit of her clothing beneath. It was surprising how much the bulky leather coat concealed; Risa's body was slim and lithe, the well-defined muscles in her arms and back melding with her sleek curves. Tyler also noticed for the first time the head and tail of an ornate dragon tattoo whose coils reached from shoulder to shoulder in brilliant reds and greens. The eye seemed to wink at him.

"I don't know about you people," Risa said, "but I'm going to take you up on that sleep thing. I'm dead tired and have no desire to turn that into just plain dead."

Once the women had gone, Tyler stripped off the graphitesuit and turned off the lights. The bed was soft and comfortable, but he lay awake for a long time. Everything he learned about this business just made it worse. He'd left Camineet to escape the constant round of cross and double-cross, the sensation of being used as a pawn in a game he could never quite learn the rules of. He'd been back for less than forty-eight hours and was enmeshed in something worse than he'd ever had to deal with before. He'd run away from that, so how could Tyler know that he'd be able to stay the course?

He'd have to be at his best. All three of them would, if they were going to have any chance of surviving the mess they'd landed in. Maybe even that wouldn't make any difference. How many guns did Luveno have to send against them? How many did the DLE?

When sleep finally came, Tyler's dreams were filled with pain and fire and the pleading face of Melora.

### Chapter 16

Tyler slept late the next morning. His room felt cold, though he knew it couldn't be; the luxury apartment's climate control systems were too well-balanced to allow that. The view from the window showed dull gray clouds overhanging the city like a steel factory ceiling. The ex-agent dressed and began the process of getting ready for the day, eventually wandering out to the kitchen. There were plenty of free-standing houses in Abion with less floor space than this apartment. Gage Worthmann, he reflected, probably lived somewhere very similar to this.

"Well, well," Risa called from the kitchen table, "the sleepyhead moves at last."

Anje rose from her seat.

"I'm glad you're awake; I need to use the computer to print out a number of specifications and plans I found last night on the datanet." She grinned eagerly, and said, "The clinic definitely wasn't a tough nut to crack. A four-year-old with a toy could fly through its system."

"Anything interesting?"

"Somebody's been doctoring their patient records." She paused, receiving the expected groans, then continued. "People go in, but they don't come out--and then a day or so later, they didn't go in, either."

"I don't suppose you have names and dates?"

She shook her head.

"Sorry; that information is essentially irretrievable. It's been erased, then overwritten."

Tyler shrugged.

"Oh, well, I thought maybe there could be someone who had a family, a lover, even a gang to ask the same kind of questions we want to, but it was more of a side thought than any kind of plan."

"All right."

The Demi slipped out of the kitchen and Tyler sat down. Someone had fixed coffee, juice, fruit, bacon, eggs, and muffins, and Tyler dug into the food eagerly. Risa's plate indicated that she already had.

"Weird; an android who keeps a fully-stocked fridge," she commented.

"She's been looking for me, at least, for a day," Tyler said between bites. "Anje probably figured that since we were being hunted by LIM, we'd need somewhere to crash and hide out. This is as good a place as any, probably better than most since the building has its own security staff to help keep out any more hunter packs, and because LIM probably would assume we'd be hiding out in some hole in the wall, like last night. They wouldn't think of looking in Skyhaven for a group of fugitives, especially if Jac passed on how close to being out of money we are."

Risa scowled darkly at the double-crossing fixer's name.

"Sooner or later, Tyler, I'm going to take a piece out of that bastard for setting us up. I don't mind that he's a greedy skag, but once you've met his price, he should stay bought, damn it!"

She tossed her head angrily, iridescent green hair flowing down her back.

"It's surprisingly unprofessional," Tyler agreed, smiling wryly at the girl's outburst even though he, too, wanted to have a few harsh words with Jac. Or a few minutes of target practice. "He stays in business by being reliable. LIM must have laid out a lot of meseta to suck him in." He scowled too, then. "Four years ago I'd have known how much it was and whom else it had been offered to. Now I'm almost completely out of touch with the buzz on the street."

"Four years ago," Risa pointed out, "you'd have been working for Luveno, helping them with their cover-up."

"Take a look at this!" Anje exclaimed, bursting into the kitchen. The crimson-armored Demi laid out several long strips of paper side by side, making a complete map.

"The clinic?" Tyler asked. "Where's this from?"

"I dug this out of the architectural records of Leonelli Construction. They put this place up nine years ago on the order of the Jaeger Foundation, leveled the old, condemned building that had been there before, and built the clinic from the ground up. The foundation's archives show a security contract with Argus Protective Services which was terminated eight months ago and replaced by one with the Emerald Legion. This matches with the first known payments coming from Project Nuada."

Tyler popped a half-strip of bacon into his mouth and ate it before speaking.

"Emerald Legion Security is a Luveno subsidiary. Gage must figure that if anything goes wrong, he'll want his own people in place, people he can keep from spilling the beans about what's happening at the clinic. If he's really smart, the on-site Legion staff are really LIM sec-agents planted in the company."

"I have the old Argus security specs, but I assume there have been a few upgrades since then."

"Not bad, Anje," Risa said. "About all you haven't found is a key to the back door."

"Oh, they keep that under the flower pot."

"What?"

"Just kidding."

"An android with a sense of humor," Tyler marveled. "We live in strange times, Risa."

Anje stuck her tongue out at him.

"I also," she added, "broke into the clinic's personnel database and got the file on Dr. Margolis."

She handed Tyler and Risa each a copy of the doctor's record, topped by a color picture of a broad-faced man with tiny spectacles. His dark brown hair was cut short on top and brushed his shoulders in back.

"Camineet University, 1258, graduated from medical school in 1262 and went to work for Parolit MedTek under one of those corporate work-for-education contracts. He spent the standard five years with them, then moved up to a surgery position at Camineet MedCenter Hospital." Tyler's eyes flicked down the page. "Ah, now it gets interesting. In 1275, Dr. Margolis was caught up in a misappropriation scandal. Apparently, there was a nasty little bit of moonlighting going on at CMCH."

"A drug ring?"

"Probably. It doesn't say, though. All it says is, 'Suspected in involvement with 1275 black marketeering ring at CMCH; no criminal charges pressed. Resigned at conclusion of investigation.' Forced out, more than likely, and blacklisted so that he was finished as far as top medical jobs go. Free clinic, that's one step up from a street doc in somebody's back room unless you're in it because of the morality."

"I'm thinking that the urge to do good isn't something Dr. Margolis is known for," Risa said sarcastically.

"Right. On the other hand, he's an almost perfect candidate from Luveno's point of view. He's in a position to get them test subjects from the Rendak streets. Unlike many doctors at his level, he's not there either because he's a moral crusader or because he's fried his brain with metachems or alcohol. He's been known to take shortcuts around the law in the past for money. Plus, he's probably eaten alive with frustration because he knows his skills are better than where he's at and because he's had a taste of the good life and can't get it back. If I was looking to recruit someone, the only reason I'd hesitate is because he sounds too good to be true." He glanced up at Anje. "By the way, is Margolis the head administrator there?"

"No, only the highest-ranking doctor. The clinic's director is Mara Lathom."

"So she's either being bribed or blackmailed into going along. Dr. Margolis wouldn't be able to do things like change the security contract without her. I'd bet on blackmail; she isn't getting paid out of Project Nuada."

"Everyone has their little secrets," Risa commented.

Tyler polished off the last of a slice of melon and washed it down with coffee.

"Is the food all right?" Anje asked with an undertone of worry in her voice. "I don't have any kind of cooking utility in my core matrix, so I had to download the information from the datanet."

"You cooked this?" Tyler exclaimed. "I thought Risa had."

Risa leaned back, propping her feet up on the edge of the table."

"Me? Get real, Tyler. I can barely make a glass of tap water."

"Well, it's very good, Anje. Obviously you picked the right site to access."

The little Demi sighed with relief. She'd clearly been very worried about the impression she'd make as a hostess for her nonmechanical guests.

"Getting back to biz," Risa said, "What's our approach going to be? I presume we're going to bust into the clinic and search everything we can lay our hands on?"

Tyler shook his head.

"I don't think so. If I know LIM, they've beefed up the security considerably. There'll be a certain number of armed guards, but also alarms, cameras, and motion sensors, every one of which will be wired to summon more Emerald Legion troops, not the DLE. If Anje will oblige me by taking another jaunt into the clinic's systems, I think I have a better plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, the girl's image was in the criminal records," Conn mused, looking over the shoulder of the data technician at her terminal.

"Yep. Risa Terrian, age twenty. Convictions for assault and petty larceny; she served eight months in the South Camineet Correctional Facility in 1275."

"Hm," Conn murmured, looking over the file notes. The girl was from Ossale Court. That place bred gangers and gutterpunks by the hundreds, a group from which the best and brightest were culled to become the new blood among the crime syndicates, hunters, and even black-operations teams for more respectable groups like military intelligence or the corps. No surprise, then, that she should be working for Tyler Jorran. Regardless of whether he was a terrorist, a mercenary, or something else entirely, someone like Risa could provide muscle. "What about the Demi?"

"I'm sorry; the images from the security cameras aren't specific enough to find any kind of a match for her."

"Not specific enough? That was a pretty nonstandard color scheme," he told the datatek, Kara Mitchell. She was an attractive girl whom he'd dated a couple of times; their friendship had come close to becoming something more but neither had quite gotten there. "All Demis may have the same face and size, but there aren't a lot of red ones."

"Not as a standard model, no," Kara said. "They're easily customizable privately, though, and this one doesn't appear to have been reported when it was done. I also crosschecked the current appearance against criminal files and android registration, but nothing came up."

"Damn."

Registration, he thought, should be more often than only when an android was sold or bought. For all Conn knew, the Demi had last been sold ten years ago, or twenty. Hadn't Scion-Colesburg made the first one way back in AW 1255, anyway? Not to mention the fact that under-the-table purchases of robots and androids could and did happen, though it was less common with androids because their personality programs were often such that they would refuse to go along with such a suggestion."

There were ethical issues, too, with that. Androids were in one sense a manufactured item, in essence a highly complex wrench or saw, but as their personalities became more and more advanced they were more and more like people, entitled to legal rights. Conn shoved that thought to the back of his mind. It wasn't productive, insofar as his investigation went.

"That Demi is so distinctive, I'd like to put out an all-points bulletin for her. Maybe even a mediawatch over the holovid besides the APB. Someone, somewhere must have seen her, whether it's a beat cop, a janitor, a waitress, a passing motorist, someone." He brought himself up short. Complaining about the restrictions put on him due to the sensitive nature of the case wouldn't do any good, either. "What about the landskimmer that was reported stolen from Shadowedge?"

"It was found abandoned in Lordan. Someone had hacked the autodrive and instructed it to drive itself in random patterns around town, then shut down after three hours, not recording where it had gone."

"Another dead end."

He sighed heavily. Conn didn't like trying to hunt down an adversary who was experienced in the ways of the city streets without access to all his usual resources. Especially when he was sure that there was much more going on than there was supposed to be. If Gage Worthmann and LIM were running the DLE in circles to cover up their own misdeeds, were they also manipulating the military?

"Be funny if this whole show was just a fancy way to hide the fact that Project Nuada was a total bust," he murmured under his breath. "Pretend it's stolen and no need to lose face with Mother Brain and the commanders."

"What was that, Conn?"

"Ah...nothing. Thanks for your help, Kara, and make sure that girl's file gets downloaded for my access. Abren may be in later to get a copy of it for his internal memory, too."

Conn was almost to the door when Kara turned around and called to him.

"Conn?"

"Yes?"

"What's it like, working with an android?"

Conn rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel the tension there.

"Different," he decided. "Definitely different."

Kara frowned, her full lower lip turning into something of a pout.

"Different how, silly? We don't have any androids working for the DLE and I want to know what they're like."

"Well, Abren's no robot, that's for sure. It isn't just that he looks like a Palman or that his voice doesn't have that metallic, synthesized ring to it. He's clearly someone, an individual, even without emotional capacity. I mean a robot can only do limited things. Outside of its programmed range of tasks and orders, it can't function. Abren, though, can react to any new data and process it, then choose a course of action appropriate to both his general goals and immediate circumstances."

Kara chuckled.

"Conn, that sounds like my old comp-sci professor trying to define what an AI is."

"Cut me some slack; I'm trying to work this through in my own mind."

She made a big show of checking the wall clock, then teased, "I don't have another three hours, Conn." Showing the dignity and maturity of a high-ranking DLE agent, he stuck his tongue out at her.

"Nice taste buds," Kara remarked.

"Seriously, though, the emotions are the weird thing. At first, I expected Abren to be just like a robot, and he took me off-guard because he's got his own ideas and draws his own conclusions. Heck, he even makes guesses when he doesn't have enough data--though he'd probably call it speculation. The thing is, though, he'll never get mad at you. He doesn't like or dislike stuff--approve or disapprove on its logical merits, sure, but never on any kind of emotional level." He grinned at her. "Or, when he thinks I've screwed up he'll say so and not mince words, but he never gets angry about it!"

"Well, he doesn't laugh at you, either," Kara offered.

"Keep pushing it and I'm never taking you to Chaipietro's again."

"You've never taken me to Chaipietro's as it is!" she laughed. "The last time we went out, we ate fast-food perolymates and cola!"

"Oh? And who spent three hours getting dressed so we barely even had time for that before the concert?"

"That's not the point," she stated archly. Conn chuckled.

"Catch you around, Kara. I've got to get back to trailing the bad guys or the Steel Hawk will have me for birdseed."

His lighthearted mood evaporated after leaving the archive room. With some legwork, he might be able to get a line on Risa Terrian, hangouts, current associates, that kind of thing, and that might in turn lead him towards Tyler. It was too indirect, though, and there were too many "mights" in it.

Abren joined Conn in front of the elevator.

"Any luck with the hunters?"

"Each was wearing a cortical detonator, so cloning will be impossible, at least from an interrogation standpoint."

"Damn. We can't catch a break."

Since growing an active-memory clone was standard practice when there was a dead suspect whom the DLE wanted to interrogate, professionals like hunters and corp agents often wore cortical detonators when on a risky operation. The detonator was a broad collar, designed to fit neatly into the neck of most armor or cape designs. Sensors in the collar measured the flow of blood in the jugular vein and carotid artery, as well as the electrical activity of neurons in the brain stem and spinal cord. When the wearer's vital statistics flatlined, a shaped charge of explosive was triggered, blasting up into the wearer's brain. In other words, once you were dead, you stayed dead.

"Testing of fingerprints and DNA samples did, however, lead to the discovery of their identities."

Conn looked over at his partner.

"You know, Abren, if I didn't know that you don't have a sense of humor, I'd swear that you just did that on purpose."

"What are you referring to?"

"Saving the good news for last."

The Siren nodded.

"I see. You mean the tactic of psychological manipulation by which an individual presents a series of statements calculated to induce a certain emotional response, then provides an additional statement producing the opposite effect. The broad swing from one emotional extreme to the other is, I believe, the humorous part of such a sequence."

Conn gave him a dark look.

"You seem awfully knowledgeable on the subject."

"In seeking to increase my own efficiency, it is necessary to understand the behavior of the biological sentients with whom I work. This includes an analysis of the various ways in which Palmans satisfy their psychological needs, such as humor. In this way I can determine what behavior is inefficient but necessary, and what is merely a waste of time."

"Are you sure that you don't have a sense of humor?"

"Quite. Such a thing was considered unnecessary and potentially dangerous in a military android."

Friendly fire did seem a likely fate for those who made too many bad jokes.

"Did the identities of the hunters lead anywhere?"

"Yes. They were not a unified team, but apparently came from two separate groups."

"The sec-cam footage suggests they were working together, though."

"Yes. I would speculate that one group, a team of four known to work together, were hired to fill the personnel needs for a mission that the others had contracted for."

"Who were the others?"

"Mark Daystrom, a former captain for Emerald Legion Security, Elaina Garrik, and Norton Paul. The latter two are believed to have done undercover jobs for several corporations in the past, including Luveno, the Emerald Legion, and Grafenvolk Systems."

"Two LIM subsidiaries plus the main corp. Sounds like LIM called out the guns on Tyler themselves."

"We may be jumping to unwarranted conclusions," Abren cautioned. "Daystrom, Garrik, and Paul are independent contractors and their continued allegiance to Luveno is strictly a matter of speculation."

Conn stabbed the elevator call button with an angry thrust of his finger.

"What you mean is, we know damn well what just happened but there's no proof. LIM tried to use us to cover up their 'troubleshooting' efforts, only their good squad couldn't do the job and we showed up early."

"Did the security cameras yield any useful information?"

"We IDed one of Tyler's people. Here's something interesting, though. The entire firefight was caught on holovid. You can't always tell who's doing what to whom, but it's all there. The part before the battle, though, is mysteriously blanked out. Either there was a mechanical malfunction--not likely--or whomever Tyler was meeting with took steps to keep his or her face off the tape."

"Do you suspect the security network was compromised by a gridrider?"

"Either that or by a bribe to the guy running the camera."

"The steel doors swished open and the two stepped inside while a uniformed agent and a Whistle left the elevator cubicle.

"So where does this leave us?" Conn asked rhetorically as the elevator whisked upstairs. Abren missed the subtleties of Palman conversation, though, and answered him.

"We investigate," he said, "and we wait."

Unfortunately, Conn couldn't think of a better idea.

### Chapter 17

Dr. Ewan Margolis despised the slums of Rendak. The district was dank and filthy, its population little better than the garbage lining the streets. The densely packed, crumbling tenements were more often than not home to vicious packs of squatters, winos, metachem addicts, and prostitutes. Gang violence was a fact of everyday life in Rendak, as were the activities of organized crime syndicates. The place was a festering wasteland of urban decay where mercy, kindness, and basic human decency were mere weaknesses to be exploited. Just as Margolis and Luveno Industrial Mechanisms were exploiting the kindness of the Jaeger Foundation by using its clinic as a source of research specimens, Margolis supposed.

Certainly, when he had been a prominent surgeon at one of Camineet's best hospitals, Dr. Margolis hadn't had to think of his medical scalpel as a weapon, nor been forced to carry a "hot button" transmitter that would summon security guards to its location when activated. He hadn't felt the tickling feeling at the back of his neck whenever he left the building for a smoke or when walking to and from the locked parking enclave where he kept his skimmer.

He loathed the life he was forced to lead, barely able to keep himself in a middle-class apartment, working for wages he wouldn't have taken as an intern. Maybe, he thought, when LIM was done with their project he could approach them for a job, perhaps with one of their subsidiaries or in an out-of-the-way research facility. Even Gothic or Bortevo would be better than this.

The wall surrounding the parking area was thick although crumbling stone capped by twists of barbed, serrated wire. The enclave was run by one of the local gangs, the Violators, who fancied themselves a cut above the other gutterpunks. They ran the protection rackets in their territory, sold metachems for one of the syndicates, and hired themselves out as muscle. The parking lot was, for them, part practice (keeping out and roughing up the skags who thought they could slip in and swipe something) and part publicity statement (no one but them got to do major crimes on their turf). The leering punks with their purple-and-black facepaint and studded leather who worked the gate always scared Dr. Margolis. The sense of barely restrained violence they projected was undeniable, as if any wrong move or a misplaced word would bring on a sudden end to his life. Their smiles seemed particularly vicious as he left the lot, handing over his key tube and an advance payment.

Dr. Margolis crossed the cracked and pitted street, veering away from an unconscious form sprawled on the sidewalk. His lip curled as he observed the blond man's condition. Was he drunk, stoned, or the victim of some attack? It was all one and the same in Camineet's slums. The doctor turned and walked on. He was only a block and a half from the clinic, where the fight for survival in Rendak's streets would bring a constant stream of patients--and prey--to his door.

The grip on the back of the doctor's coat took him completely by surprise, as did the cold of a ceramic knife-edge against his throat. Where? How? He's been in Rendak long enough to be aware of threats like this. No one could have approached him on the streets without him being aware of their presence. So how--?

Inexorable force and the threat of the blade at his neck forced Dr. Margolis into a nearby alley. He cast a desperate look at the two gangers, but they did nothing but smile tauntingly. Apparently they had been paid off--or, since no one was bothering the cars, they just didn't care. Margolis was spun around and pushed back against the alley wall. His shoulder blades pressed against bricks still wet from the afternoon's drizzle, probably staining his coat.

For the first time, Margolis got a look at the one who'd attacked him. It was the "unconscious" man, his hard, deadly eyes showing no hint of alcohol or metachem use. That was it--he had feigned being in a stupor to let the doctor get close and within range of a surprise attack. Dr. Margolis' hand crept towards his pocket, but a cold voice cut him off.

"Don't try it."

The speaker was an android, a Demi, who was carrying the biggest monster of a gun Margolis had ever seen. There was a third person there, too, a girl dressed in streetwear who could have fit in nicely with the Violators. This wasn't a gang, though, or a band of ordinary muggers; the group was too diverse. They could have been from one of the syndicates, or possibly hired hunters.

"Dr. Margolis, I presume," the blond man said. "We've got some questions for you, which I suggest you answer truthfully. We don't have time to waste with stupid and facile lies."

Margolis nodded slowly. He was bright enough to know to keep his mouth shut. The wrong word, phrase, or tone of voice could trigger the three into an attack.

"Two words," the man continued. "Project Nuada. Ring any bells for you?"

Margolis blanched. No one was supposed to know that name. Worse, if they knew that, then how much else did they know? Reflexively, he tried to argue.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Look, if you want my wallet..."

His hand dropped towards his pocket again, but the girl's foot swept up off the pavement and pinned his wrist to the wall.

"No sudden moves, Doctor. That's a plasma cannon pointed at you, and if she fires it it's likely to take you out as well as the wall you're leaning on."

The girl flexed her left wrist, and four clawlike blades snapped out and locked into place. The clicking sound from the vicious little weapon sent chills down Margolis' spine. It was a crude intimidation technique, but that was why it was working. The infighting of hospital politics, the lies, the insinuations, the character assassinations, these he was experienced with. He understood subtle methods of intimidation, had used them, and knew how to counter them. Having a weapon thrust into his face by someone who seemed quite prepared to use it was another matter altogether. Lying and blackmail were no defense against a knife thrust or gunfire.

The girl released him and stepped back. Dr. Margolis rubbed his sore wrist while the man resumed the questioning.

"We're not thieves, Doctor," he said, "though I'm sure you know that already. We want information from you. Now, before you're tempted to try and lie again, let me spell some things out for you. You're on the take from Luveno. They're using your clinic in their Project Nuada. Not only are you getting paid personally, but money is being fed into the clinic's budget. Do I need to say more, or are you willing to take it from here?

Nervously, Margolis flexed his hands and rubbed them together as if he was washing them.

"Medical malfeasance is a serious crime," the man added, "and we have plenty of evidence to send you up for trial. You'd do time in prison, and when you got out you'd have nothing left of your assets because of the fines. You might end up here on these very streets." He glanced at the ceramic knife thoughtfully. "Do you know, I shouldn't be threatening to kill you; I should be threatening to let you live."

The knife blade came up sharply, its point resting lightly against the doctor's nose.

"We want to know everything, Dr. Margolis. Why don't you just tell us and save us all the trouble of convincing you?"

The doctor looked from one face to another. All were cold and hard, unforgiving of his conduct and unwilling to show compassion.

This was Rendak. Compassion was a weakness.

He talked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tyler stared coldly at the doctor. He felt no regrets over this interrogation, none at all. This man was supposed to be a healer, dedicated to saving people's lives, and instead he was using that position to injure and destroy them. It was a savage betrayal, both of the doctor's creed and of the Jaeger Foundation's good intentions in founding the clinic. He knew that Anje and Risa both felt the same way.

They had considered a direct assault on the clinic, breaking in, having Anje disarm the sec-systems, then searching for records and physical evidence. That idea had been dismissed, though, as being both too dangerous and not as likely to be productive. The doctor wasn't protected by the Emerald Legion and he had all the answers, without having to hunt for them or trying to interpret scientific and medical data that none of them had the training to understand.

Margolis, meanwhile, was spilling his guts to them. The woman who'd originally approached him had been a usual faceless middle-manager type, but once her overtures had been accepted, the man who had sat down with him to provide specific details had been none other than Gage Worthmann.

"He gets around, doesn't he?" Tyler murmured.

"You know him?" the doctor asked.

"By reputation. Go on with the story."

"He said that the corporation needed test subjects for a series of biotech experiments that they were running. The proposition was that I would perform certain tests on our patients. If the results proved to be within certain acceptable ranges, the subject was to be given over to them."

"What sort of tests?" Anje inquired.

"Blood typing, DNA, as well as a few others. A full Manxham screening, for one. Do you know what that is?" He asked it in a smug tone of voice, as if he was sure his audience would have no idea. If that was the case, he was doomed to be disappointed.

"It gauges magical power," the android stated. "The procedure was an outgrowth of the Esper wars on Mota, and includes a genetic testing for Esper lineage as well as examining technique potential including both the types of techniques which might be developed as well as the strength of those techniques if mastered. The equipment required for these tests is quite expensive and unusual, however, and certainly would not be part of a small clinic's laboratory facilities."

The doctor's smile, which had vanished during Anje's explanation, crept back on his face.

"The clinic didn't have it. LIM arranged for untraceable funds transfers to the clinic's accounts to purchase what was needed."

"Not that untraceable," Tyler replied. "Go on, though. That was why it was necessary to suborn the admin, Lathom, because only she could approve the payment and installation."

In spite of his position, Margolis' smug, self-satisfied look grew.

"It was a pleasure to see that holier-than-thou bitch get cut down to size. Always looking down her nose at me because of my past while all the time she'd been running around on her husband. A husband who, I might add, sits on the Jaeger Foundation board and was responsible for giving her the cushy job she holds now." He smiled wolfishly. You should have seen her, begging Worthmann not to betray her, gladly selling out all the ideals she'd been such a big shot about trumpeting just to keep from losing her meal ticket."

Tyler had an overwhelming urge to kick Dr. Margolis' teeth down his throat which he controlled only with difficulty.

"I guess she arranged your new security contract too, so Luveno would have someone on hand to clean up any problems that arose."

"How much do you know? What do you need me for?"

Tyler stepped forward, careful not to cut off Anje's line of fire, and grabbed Margolis by the front of his white coat. He slammed the doctor up against the wall, hard, and pressed the point of his knife against Margolis' skin just below the left eye.

"What I want, you lousy vampire, is for you tell me what happened to those people!"

"I don't know!" the doctor pleaded, white-faced. "I told you, if the results came back negative we didn't do anything. If they matched any three of six parameters, I gave them to LIM."

"How?"

"We've got a couple of landrovers outfitted as ambulances."

"For a little back-corner clinic in Rendak?" Risa sneered. "I doubt it."

"LIM provided the money. The whole idea was to have a mode of transport that wouldn't excite attention."

That part, Tyler figured, actually made sense. Ambulances were about as innocuous as a vehicle could be. One could go literally anywhere and not look suspicious or out of place. Who would know that it was taking people away from the clinic instead of to it? For that matter, if stopped, there was a perfectly good reason why an ambulance would be carrying a sedated patient.

"Where do the ambulances go?" Tyler asked.

"I don't know."

Tyler twisted his fist in the man's coat front.

"Might I suggest," he ground out between clenched teeth, "that you try that answer again, and this time make it responsive to the question?"

"Damn it, I don't know!" Dr. Margolis howled in protest. "It's the truth. Those ambulances are driven by LIM's people. They don't tell me what they do with the patients and I don't want to know. You can get killed for learning too much."

"Or for learning too little," Risa said. She turned to Tyler and said, "He's useless to us now; why don't we go ahead and kill him?"

Tyler thought it was probably the nonchalant way she said it, but for whatever reason, the doctor cracked completely. The mix of fear, arrogance, and resignation that he had been displaying crumbled into pure, gibbering terror.

"Wait! Wait! I know how you can find out!" he said.

"He's lying," Risa said, playing the bad cop.

"No, no, it's true! Look, there's going to be one leaving tonight with a fresh subject. You could follow it, sneak aboard--something. I can make sure you get the chance!"

Then again, Tyler thought, Margolis might not be as scared as he acted. What he was saying sounded like an excellent opportunity, but it also sounded like a classic trap, the kind that ended with Risa, Anje, and himself arriving that night to meet a dozen or so Emerald Legion troopers.

"Let me see if I understand this. You want the three of us to return tonight, and you'll let us into the clinic without attracting suspicion so that we can learn what LIM is doing with the people you're helping them kidnap."

"Yes, that's it exactly!"

Tyler arched an eyebrow at him.

"That's a very generous offer, even considering that you'd be getting your life in return."

"You're not leaving me any choice."

"Oh, I think you have a choice. You could sell us a bill of goods and have Emerald Legion thugs ready to kill us when we showed up. You're just the type to rat us out as soon as you were out of immediate danger."

Tyler released the doctor and stepped back.

"Would you tell Dr. Margolis what a deadman's switch is?" he asked Anje, being careful not to use her name.

"Oh, sure. It's a bomb detonator that, instead of going off when you push the button, goes off when you let the button go. It's called a deadman's switch because it's used by bombers who expect to face personal danger. If they get killed, the muscles of their hand relax, and the explosion occurs. In terms of computer code, it refers to a program that executes a command unless it receives instructions not to at regular intervals."

"Thank you; that's very succinct and accurate. Since our doctor friend is an intelligent man, he probably understands the point of all this, but just so that there are no misunderstandings, I think I'll explain it to him."

Tyler's eyes were hard as they lanced into Margolis'.

"What this means, Doctor, is that when we come back tonight, we'll have used that time to set up an insurance policy. Everything we've learned about your nasty little sideline, including recordings of what you've said here will be placed in a datafile. If we aren't able to transmit a passcode to it--say, because you've had us killed--that information will be automatically sent to the press, the Jaeger Foundation board, the DLE, and to Gage Worthmann at LIM. You might end up discredited or jailed, but probably you'll just be killed to keep you from testifying against the corp. Any questions?"

Not surprisingly, there were none.

"What time do we meet?" Tyler asked.

"The ambulances always leave at eleven, so how about ten-thirty? Come to the service entrance and I'll let you in. You can avoid most of the posted guards and the security cameras that way."

"Good. Now get going; you're late for work."

"Do you think he'll play it straight?" Risa asked as the doctor scuttled away.

Tyler nodded.

"Yeah, I think so. There's always a chance he'll do something crazy, but he's bright enough to realize that he doesn't have a choice, and he doesn't have what it would take to wriggle his way off our hook."

"He's a rat," Risa said. "You can't tell which way he'll squirm."

"That's why we keep our eyes open. We're going to need better equipment, too, both in case things turn sour and to deal with whomever we find at the end of the ambulance ride."

"Do you know where we can find what we need?"

"This is Rendak. Everything is for sale--at the right price."

### Chapter 18

"So this is Nuada," Gage Worthmann said, unable to take his eyes off the six-foot-square monitor screen. It wasn't just a theoretical idea, not just a plan on a computer screen or an experimental sample. This was a fully complete, working prototype. It was the culmination of over a year of theorizing, planning and design, computer modeling, and finally live experimentation. Gage had not only supervised the project's funding, but at its earlier stages had been responsible for many of the technical design specifications. This was more than the success of a corporate project for him; it was a validation of his own time, effort, and cutting-edge research. It was a dream come alive. "It's perfect."

"Well, we still have tests to run," cautioned Dr. Lovell Hurlston, the graybearded chief scientist for Project Nuada at Lianora. Nuada was Hurlston's brainchild, the source of the original idea, and he was unwilling to commit himself completely to the corporate officers without proof. Inside, no doubt, he was bursting with pleasure. Gage was certain of it.

Hurlston was right, of course--Nuada had to be tested before LIM could declare it a success. Yet the feeling was there in Worthmann's gut, that this was what he had worked for, that this was the victory he had awaited.

"Nonetheless," Director Macklin stated, "it is highly impressive. You and your team are to be commended for your fine work."

"Thank you, Director."

Macklin broke the connection and the screen withdrew into the ceiling. "Finally," she said, "some good news." She looked from Gage to Nash Garrett and back again. "Unlike, I may add, your attempts to bring Tyler Jorran to heel. Last night was nothing more or less than a fiasco."

"I lost good agents," Nash said. "You don't need to tell me what happened."

"It appears that perhaps I do," the Director informed him. "The expenditure of Palman assets does not concern me. What is a concern is that those assets were spent without any return. Lives are not to be wasted, just as money isn't." She drummed her fingers on the Laerma-wood desk. "Project Nuada is entering the final phase before implementation, and we still find ourselves cleaning up after Eric Stephens."

Garrett's face tightened. The security chief, Gage had noticed, was utterly ruthless in dealing with those who opposed the corporation but oddly protective of his own people. He would cause the death of a thousand innocents without batting an eye, but the death of even one of his own agents filled him with rage. Of course, loyalty in a commander tended to inspire loyalty in the troops, so from a personnel-management standpoint Garrett's qualities were positive ones.

"Lieutenant Derrek will be more suspicious of us now than ever," Macklin continued. "Unless he is a bigger fool than we have any right to hope for, he'll realize that he was deliberately set up to arrive late and clean up the bodies. Instead of being a useful cat's-paw, he's rapidly developing into a liability. Thankfully, at least his superiors are still acting in accord with our original scenario."

"Probably due to the military connection."

Tara nodded.

"Yes, and at least we have no worries on that score. What I am worried about is what Tyler Jorran may discover."

"Yes," Gage agreed. "Apparently he's managed to recruit competent assistance. The girl, Risa, was apparently a pupil of Melora Nain's, at least to judge from what our informants have learned." He glanced in Garrett's direction, acknowledging that the security chief had been responsible for most of those contacts. Garrett in turn verified what Worthmann had said with a nod. "As for the Demi, we have no information on her. I'd assume she's either a free agent or working for some unknown ally."

"A free agent?" Garrett asked in surprise. "I thought an android always had to serve something, even if it's something relatively abstract like a code of laws or military duty?"

Gage shook his head. When he answered it was as a robotics engineer rather than a corporate executive.

"Not for a Demi. While Demis are assigned to various tasks by their owners, it is possible for one to draw moral conclusions about the world around it and determine to act on its own agenda. This has occurred a number of times in the past, including one occasion on which the independent personality developed along sociopathic lines."

Garrett's jaw dropped.

"An insane android? Could ours do that? Our Mieu-types?"

Gage couldn't help but chuckle at his peer's discomfort.

"No, there's no danger of that, at least not without catastrophic physical damage. Unlike the creators of the Demi, our Robotics Division does not allow its android AIs to override their own core programming. In fact, I believe that Scion-Colesburg removed that capacity from their later-model Demis as well. The idea of androids who are able to function as full citizens of Palman society is romantic, but it makes for bad business."

Not to mention bad morality. A free-willed android with an owner wasn't a possession, it was a slave. Better to stick to androids that were programmed for obedience.

"The point," Macklin stated, bringing the discussion to heel, "is that the scenario we presented to the DLE as a ruse has come to pass. Tyler has either assembled or joined a dangerous group with resources capable of doing serious harm to our plans. If he continues to pry into our affairs, he's sure to learn something damaging. He cannot be allowed to gather enough evidence for a court case, or worse yet cause a public outcry. I have no desire to see LIM become another Eppi Products."

Not to mention, Gage thought, the personal consequences.

"Since we've created a successful prototype," Macklin continued, "I think the next step should be to close down our operations in Camineet."

"You mean, just abandon Project Nuada?"

"The local aspects of it, yes, Gage. As long as our operations are up and running, there's the chance that Tyler can ferret them out. For him to gain clues to what happened in the past will be a lot harder. Especially, I may add, if he can't find any witnesses."

"You're talking about the clinic."

Macklin smiled darkly.

"In the main, yes. Cut off our connection with them, and see that anyone who has knowledge of the operation is no longer in a position to take action."

Gage mentally reviewed his knowledge of the clinic's personnel.

"That would be Dr. Margolis, and the hospital administrator, Mara Lathom. Also the security staff, including the drivers, who are our people."

"You can count on them to keep their mouths shut," Nash quickly said. He wasn't about to stand by while an execution order was put out on his men. "I'll have them reassigned to other duties, out of the archopolis, just in case Tyler decides to play rough with them, though that never was his style."

"If I may make a suggestion?" Gage asked.

Macklin gestured airily.

"Feel free."

"Tonight, another subject is being delivered to us from the clinic through our usual channels. When that subject leaves the building, Garrett can pull the contingent of Emerald Legion guards off-duty, leaving the building unsecured."

"And then?"

"Well, we do have a prototype in need of field testing."

Macklin's smile was positively diabolic.

"Open a communication circuit with Lianora," she purred.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you sure about this?" Risa asked.

"Four years ago, Morbile was the best weapons dealer in Rendak or anywhere else in the city," Tyler replied with a shrug. "I'd say the fact that she's endured in the biz since then is an adequate recommendation."

"It's just that your track record with old friends isn't so hot."

Tyler was now equipped with untraceable electronic funds, thanks to Anje. The little android had rerouted a credit transfer from Tyler's bank account through a number of shell accounts and transfers and finally onto an access card which registered the presence of meseta but no encoding information. Such "credit blanks" were even more untraceable than certified credit, because not even the originating bank could be quite sure of where their money had come from. Blank credit was illegal, but also common for large-scale transactions which were also illegal in nature where carrying cash would be prohibitive or unwieldy or the very act of obtaining cash from a bank would itself be incriminating.

It was kind of ironic, Tyler thought. An individual like himself, with the assistance of a skilled gridrider, could lose a small sum of money in a maze of confusing and sealed transactions, while a powerful megaconglomerate like LIM, due to the amounts involved and the complex recordkeeping systems set up by their need to be accountable to the shareholders, couldn't fund Project Nuada without leaving a data trail. Of course, the extraordinary qualities of the gridrider in both cases was a significant factor; Anje's skills were, after all, quite literally inhuman.

The Demi had declined to accompany Tyler and Risa to Morbile's. She liked to maintain a low public profile, due to her distinctive nature, instead conducting most of her business electronically or through cut-outs. There had never been a rumor on the street that Angel Red was an android, and Anje liked it that way. Besides which, unlike her Palman allies, she was already fully equipped, with composite armor and headgear already installed in addition to her plasma cannon.

Tyler reached for the door, but doubts suddenly plagued him. What if Morbile would sell them out? He didn't think it would happen, but then again, he hadn't expected treachery from Jac, either.

"Damn, Tyler, don't take stuff so personally!" Risa groaned. "We need the right tools for this job. I'm not going to try breaking into this Lianora place, wherever it is, with only one claw. Do you expect this guy to sell you out?"

"No," he admitted.

"Is there anyone you know who's less likely to stab us in the back?"

"Not really." Especially not after four years out of the archopolis, he thought, but he didn't say that.

"Then this one's as good as any," Risa said, and pulled open the door.

In most parts of Camineet, an illegal business required some kind of front. Messages would be left at online drops, there would be face-to-face meetings at restaurants and bars, and black market merchandise would be hidden in back rooms and secret compartments. Not so in Rendak. Morbile's wares were right out on display in ballistic-armor cases like the stuff Ham's windows had been made from. Morbile was also more than capable of filling special requests, including bulk orders, through her connections to several criminal syndicates. The cases were locked, to keep customers from taking spontaneous test shots inside the premises, especially in the owner's direction.

The woman herself was sitting behind her counter, lovingly cleaning a disassembled vulcan. Her eyes flicked up as the door opened.

"Hey, is that Tyler Jorran I see?"

"The same."

"Tyler, ace, you are red hot, did you know?"

She hopped down out of her chair and came around the counter. Morbile was a tall, skinny woman with long, spiky red hair and a tiger-stripe mask tattooed on her face. She wore leather--black boots, black pants, and dark blue jacket. In her late thirties, Morbile knew more about guns and armor than most of the engineers at Redfield and Inverness.

"Yeah, unfortunately. Can you tell me what's being said, Mina?" he asked, using her real name.

"Not much; it's all really hush-hush. LIM's got a three-hundred-K meseta bounty on your head, but it's not out in general circulation. Strictly notice to the top-flight fixers, with special instructions not to pass the word around or to hire outside muscle. I mean, there's maybe twenty people who've heard about it in the whole arch', and none of them are going to let it get into general circulation. You figure it's the street they're scared of, or the cops?"

Tyler shrugged.

"Maybe all of the above."

He was glad of it, too. For three hundred thousand meseta the entire population of Rendak would be prowling the streets after him.

"I kinda figured they wanted you dead 'cause you knew something you shouldn't, so telling the world would kind of defeat the purpose. Gotta say this; when you unretire, you do it with a bang."

"Which brings me to the reason I'm here. We've got a job and need the right equipment."

"Say no more; you have come to the right woman. By the way," she added, holding up the gun parts she was working on, "guess what this is."

"Early-model vulcan, light frame, but I don't recognize it."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Morbile said smugly. "This baby is an Inverness AGV dual-barrel dating from AW 1033 and from what I can tell, is in pristine working order."

Tyler was really in no mood for small talk but his eyebrows rose in spite of himself.

"I thought there were only about a hundred of those made."

"There were--the stutterstep magazine feed jammed too often--and now I have got one."

Tyler chuckled.

"So it's a valuable collector's item because it doesn't work like it's supposed to?"

"There's irony everywhere, ace."

"Just so the merchandise you sell us isn't destined to be a collectible, too."

"Hell, I wouldn't do that." She flashed Tyler a grin full of white teeth. "I'd keep it myself until it got valuable." Morbile clapped her hands together, fingerless black gloves making a snapping sound in the air. "So, what are you in the market for? Is it just you and the girl?"

"Right. We'll need armor, a set of claws for her, headgear, and some kind of gun for me. High power, high concealability." He paused, then added. "I could also use a new coat. This one is basically salvage and it doesn't fit quite right. Plus the fact that someone pumped a vulcan round through the side."

"You and those fibercoats don't really get along, do you, Tyler?" Risa noted. "That's the second one you've gone through in three days."

Morbile surveyed the two of them.

"Hey, Tyler, that's a graphitesuit, isn't it? Or were you just looking for plates?"

Tyler nodded.

"Yeah, if possible. They can be fitted that way like a carbonsuit, right?"

Morbile flashed him a quick smile.

"Be pretty useless if not." She glanced over at Risa. "Are you attached to that jacket?"

"I like it, and it's a little extra protection when someone wants to take a boot to my ribs."

"What do you think of this one?" Morbile tugged on the hem of her own coat.

"The color sucks. Otherwise it's okay."

The red-haired weapons merchant grinned.

"Lined with ceramic mesh, just like a ceram-cape. Not half bad, eh?"

Risa grinned.

"You're talking my language, Morbile. Do you have one in black, though? That blue shade doesn't go with my hair. Of course, I'd rather be unfashionable than dead, but..."

"I'm with you. Is stealth an issue? If not, I've got a red carbonsuit with titan weave that would be just about your size."

Risa folded her arms across her chest, leaning back against the wall.

"You know, Morbile, I am definitely starting to like you. Where can I try it on?"

While Risa was seeing if her new armor fit, Morbile brought out a steel case from the back room.

"This is for you, Tyler."

She flipped back the catches and lifted the lid. Inside on a bed of molded plastic foam rested a short-barreled gun. Morbile lifted it out, cradling it lightly in her hands.

"Redfield Arms Kestrel. It's called a pulse laser. Operates either in single-shot mode, or in repeated bursts." She touched a selector switch on the side. "The rate of fire isn't as heavy as a vulcan, but the individual laser bursts are comparable to a laser shot's, so I'd estimate its overall power as being somewhere between a standard vulcan and a pulse vulcan. Plus, the Kestrel's small size is designed for close work and urban conflict. The battery packs are easy to manipulate, specifically designed to operate similarly to a vulcan or poisonshot clip."

Tyler smiled eagerly, taking the weapon as she offered it. The Kestrel nestled nicely into his palm, a bit heavy for one hand but manageable, and effortless to control with two for directing rapid fire into a group of enemies. He gave it a quick once-over, making certain that it was in good working order. The weapon was illegal, of course; a special permit was required beyond the usual weapons license any citizen without a criminal record could obtain for personal protection for laser weapons. Weapons regulations were not a law that Tyler was particularly concerned with obeying, though.

"How much?" Tyler asked simply.

"Fifteen thousand meseta," Morbile told him. That price wasn't out of line; in fact, it was almost retail, without the usual black market markup. It would take a nasty bite out of Tyler's savings, but he had come prepared to pay and pay heavily.

"Done," he decided.

"No haggling?"

"Why bother? Your first offer was as low as I'd have tried to drive you anyway." It would have been insulting to scorn a contact's good-faith offer, besides. Morbile wasn't in the habit of screwing over her clientele, but she wasn't adverse to making a sizable profit, either. Keeping up a first-class gun collection wasn't cheap.

"Besides, Mina, you didn't try to grab three hundred K at my expense, so why should I take a shot at one or two K at yours?"

Morbile looked at him oddly.

"Hell, ace, how many of my customers know what an AGV is? If I decide to sell someone out, it'll be a guy like that weasel Lake Hyberson. He actually tried to stiff me on the back end of the payment for the weapons his crew used to take out the whole Murrain family eight months ago."

Tyler raised an eyebrow.

"Hyberson is running the Seven Circles syndicate?"

"Straight into the ground. He forgot that Jeni Murrain was Jeni Dougan before she got married. Parolit's been a syndicate strike zone ever since. The Black Wings are still Esme Dougan's toy, and she was not happy about her favorite granddaughter getting offed."

The chainmail curtain separating the fitting cubicle from the main room swung open.

"So how do I look?" Risa purred, striking a pose in the doorframe.

This time, Tyler raised both eyebrows. The carbonsuit fit her like a second skin, the titan-laced weave flowing over her sleek form. She was pretty and knew it, and still young enough to enjoy the fact. Tyler hoped she kept that enthusiasm. Presuming that he didn't get her killed trying to seek their mutual revenge.

Risa pranced forward, then spun to give them a three-hundred-sixty-degree view.

"I like the boots," she said, flexing her ankle. Glittering silver blades sprang from the tiny gap between the sole and the upper part of the knifeboots.

"Someone's going to get a kick out of those."

Risa's head snapped up.

"What? Did the always-cool, always-frosty Tyler Jorran actually just crack a joke? And a bad pun at that? Damn, what's next? Flying androids?"

"They've already got those."

The green-haired girl raised her hand and snapped it into a clenched fist. Four thin bars of steel extended from her gauntlet, then suddenly began to glow with a brilliant green light.

"Laser claws," she said. "Top of the line; perfect for slashing up corp skags--or smart-mouthed ones, either way." She winked at Tyler. "Tyler, I'm not going to make a stink about you footing the bill for this, but sooner or later I will find a way to pay you back."

Tyler nodded. He could have gone through the entire routine about payback not being required, but he knew it would be. Melora would have demanded a chance to even things up in Risa's place; she always had scorned charity as being condescending. Risa, Tyler was sure, would be the same. Throwing twenty thousand meseta's worth of combat gear at her with nothing in return wouldn't be a gift but an insult.

"I'm glad it fits well," Morbile said, then added to Tyler, "Y'know, ace, I may be giving up a three hundred K bounty, but at this rate we'll have done at least a sixth of that in biz before the day's done."

"I know," Tyler groaned, thinking of his life savings. "Believe me, I know."

### Chapter 19

Ten-thirty found Anje back in the depths of Rendak along with Tyler and Risa. The deadman's switch Tyler had threatened Dr. Margolis with hadn't been a bluff; Anje had set up the program which was now awaiting its chance to blow the whistle on LIM's games at the clinic. They walked around behind the building, noting the closed steel shutters that kept thieves out of the ambulance bay, and approached the service entrance.

Tyler checked his chron. Ten-thirty-two. He knocked twice, and the door swung open.

Dr. Margolis was nervous, which was how he should have been, given the situation. The question was, what was the cause of his case of nerves? Was it the fear of getting caught by the Emerald Legion guards, who were probably planted LIM sec-agents? Or was he afraid that Tyler and the others would find out about a planned ambush and take him down before the trap could be sprung?

"Hurry up!" he hissed. "I can't be seen talking to you like this!"

Loitering at the side exit was definitely suspicious behavior, so Tyler pulled open the side of his coat to show Dr. Margolis the Kestrel in its shoulder rig--just as a friendly reminder--and the three of them let the doctor usher them inside.

"Something very strange is going on," Margolis whispered, "but it's good news for us. Most of the guard team has gone off-duty. The only ones left are in the ambulance bay and the one manning the security office."

"I'm surprised there isn't a camera covering that door," Tyler mused. Exits were always the most obvious place for vid systems to be installed.

"Only the most sensitive areas are covered--the lab where we work on Nuada, the ambulance bay, and the records room. There are cameras in the ER, the main lobby, and the drug locker too, but those are mostly for show, decoys to justify the sec-system's existence."

"We will have to do something about the cameras," Anje said. "Otherwise we won't be able to do any sneaking around at all!"

Suppressing a grin at the little android's excitement, Tyler nodded his agreement.

"Where's the security office?"

"I'll show you," Margolis said.

From the schematics that Anje had found, Tyler, Risa, and the Demi already knew the office's location. Letting the doctor show them was, as much as anything, a test of the man's good faith. Would he give in to their threats, or did he think he was smart enough to get out of the situation unscathed?

Apparently, he intended to play along, at least for now, because he took the three intruders directly to the sec-office. Tyler drew his gun while Risa extended her claws, and then he opened the door.

Like Margolis had said, there was only one green-and-gold-uniformed Legion guard manning the security office. She looked up when the door opened, and despite the guns made a dive for the control panel and an alarm button, but two scintillating green beams speared from Anje's eyes and struck the guard. The Demi's stasis beam inflicted instantaneous neural paralysis, causing the guard to slump back into her chair. Tyler and Risa efficiently disarmed the woman, then bound and gagged her with her own belt and weapons harness.

"Anje, can you get the pressure sensors, motion detectors, and any other automatic alarms off-line and make it tough for them to get them fixed?" Tyler asked.

"No problem!" the android replied and stepped up to the terminal. Quickly interfacing with the security computer, she disengaged in less than three minutes.

"Done!" she chirped happily. "Those sec-systems will be virtually useless for at least two or three hours." As she spoke, the bank of holovid screens switched to a test pattern. "I didn't kill them entirely, just in case they've got a trigger that calls back to Emerald Legion headquarters if the system is shut down."

"Yeah, otherwise I might have just shot the thing up and left it at that," Tyler agreed. Very little technology worked well after directly interfacing with repeated laser fire.

"So what's the next step?" Risa asked. "Do we roust the ambulance drivers and convince them to give us the what, why, and how of their deliveries?"

"No, too risky. If they decide to shoot it out or they hang tough under interrogation, we could completely screw ourselves over. No, we're going to follow them and let them show us their secrets of their own free will."

It wasn't anything obvious that made the thought pop into Tyler's head, not the doctor's white lab coat or the repeated mention of ambulances or something like that. It was almost as if his dulled subconscious had been putting the connection together since the night before and had finally, in spite of himself, drawn an inference that was almost blindingly obvious now that he had thought of it. The Kestrel was about two inches from Dr. Margolis' forehead, the barrel pointed right between his eyebrows, when Tyler voiced his thoughts.

"Four days ago, Gage Worthmann had you take delivery of a subject," he stated flatly. "Not one of your ordinary patients off the street, but someone you had to go out and get. A woman, about thirty, medium height, red hair. You brought her back here in one of your ambulances. Where is she?"

"Melora's here?" Risa exclaimed.

Dr. Margolis had gone stark white. The two humans were glaring at him with death in their eyes.

"She was here," he quickly claimed. "Just like you said, Worthmann had me pick her up and bring her here. She's gone now, though!"

"Gone?" Tyler ground out between clenched teeth.

"Not dead!" Margolis exclaimed. "That's not what I meant!"

"Then I advise you to be more specific. Gone where?"

"Lianora. Worthmann wanted her taken there for private interrogation. We were just to hold her until the next day delivery was scheduled, then put her on it regardless of how the tests turned out."

"How long was she here?"

"Just a day."

"One day. An abduction, followed by transport to a remote, secret location for an urgent interrogation as Gage Worthmann desperately attempts to cover his tracks, and in the middle of all this rushing about by Luveno, an accountable twenty-four-hour delay.

"Do the ambulances always leave for Lianora at a set date and time?"

"Yes, twice a week, always the same days."

"Curious," Anje said, echoing Tyler's thoughts. "That implies that there is some reason why the delivery to Lianora can only occur at specific times. Gage Worthmann isn't an idiot--if he wanted to get Melora safely away to Lianora, he wouldn't leave her sitting in a low-security building like this without a good reason."

"This just gets stranger and stranger," Risa growled, disgusted that they'd come that close only to still be behind.

Tyler lowered the Kestrel; Dr. Margolis exhaled with a loud sigh.

"Take us to the lab," the former agent told him.

With weapons put away, the group attracted little attention as they moved through the crowded corridors of the clinic's medical facilities. Doctors, nurses, and technicians all had their own business to attend to as they tried to deal with the never-ending stream of patients brought in by the promise of free, reliable medical care. Tyler, Risa, and Anje were with Dr. Margolis, so therefore Tyler, Risa, and Anje weren't worth noticing.

The people who should have been questioning their presence were the sec-agents, only there weren't any. Margolis had said that the guards had suddenly gone off duty that night. There had to be some logical reason--pros like the Emerald Legion didn't just up and leave their assigned jobs without orders or unless it was in response to some security protocol. Most likely the former; "bail out" just wasn't one of the reactions trained into a good security team. Why clear out, then? There was a delivery that night, so there was still evidence to protect, sensitive data to keep out of the hands of the public, plus the normal security functions one would expect to find in a Rendak clinic (such as keeping the locals out of the pharmaceutical stocks).

The whole thing made Tyler's neck itch, like there was a sighting laser spotting the base of his brain.

"This is the lab," Margolis said, stopping in front of a blue door stenciled with the word "Examination." He slotted a key tube in the lock, resulting in a loud click as the mechanism released itself.

The laboratory wasn't big, but then it wouldn't be; space was at a premium in the clinic. Two testing beds were the obvious centerpiece of the lab; their steel wrist and ankle cuffs and the broad chest strap used to secure unwilling subjects in place made Tyler cringe inwardly. Had Melora been strapped into one of the beds, left at the mercy of the banks of modern, expensive-looking analysis machines that ringed each bed?

"This is the testing area," Margolis said nervously. He began to explain what the various machines were for, more as a way to let off stress than because anyone cared, but Tyler tuned him out as he let his mind try to work things through.

"Where's the prisoner?" he asked, cutting off the doctor in mid-spiel.

"Who?"

"You said there was a subject awaiting delivery tonight. Why isn't he here?"

"Oh, that. Our research subjects are placed in isolation chambers when no tests are being performed."

In other words, Tyler thought, the latest prisoner was in his cell awaiting transport to Lianora.

"Guarded?" he asked.

"Only by a magnetic locking system, for which the Emerald Legion officers have the only two keys."

"Tyler glanced at Anje. She nodded; getting in would be no problem.

"Ordinarily there would be guards at the door to the isolation section, but they've left with all the others."

Not bothering to acknowledge Dr. Margolis' words, Tyler checked his chronograph again. Still time, he estimated.

"All right, then, let's go to the isolation ward."

Whatever name they called it by, the isolation ward was, first and foremost, a prison. The heavy doors with their "Authorized Personnel Only" lettering in bright red were cold and forbidding, the short corridor beyond them black and lifeless. There were six cells, each sealed by its own antiseptic-white door with a little pane of clear, armored plastic in the center so those in the hall could look in. Each chamber contained a cot and a toilet, and that was all.

"Here he is," Risa said, peering through the window of the second door down on the left. Tyler went over and took a look.

The prisoner appeared to be a gang member; the red stripes on his short synthetic-denim fiberjacket were obviously gang colors. He lay on the bed, unconscious, probably drugged. His jacket gaped open at the front to reveal a bloodstained shirt cut away over his bandaged abdomen. Apparently he'd been treated with Monomate, Dimate's cousin, but had taken wounds too severe for the medicine to fully heal. As for what had started the street fight that had brought him to the clinic, who could say?

"Get it open," Tyler told Anje. Risa glanced up in surprise at his brusque tone, but the android did not take offense. She stepped forward and turned the door handle, pulling it open.

"The locking mechanisms for these doors are controlled by the security computers," she said happily. "I disengaged them when I shut down the system."

Risa chuckled. "One step ahead of us again, aren't you?"

The ganger didn't stir as they approached the cot, but Tyler remained cautious, weary of any sudden moves. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a slender, short tube with a tapering point, one of the items he had bought from Morbile. In one smooth motion he pressed the tip of the tube against the side of the ganger's neck just inside his jacket collar and pressed the activation switch.

"All right, let's get out of here. Anje, can you get the door locked again? I don't want the guards getting too suspicious when they come for him."

"We're just going to leave him here?" Risa exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes," Tyler said flatly.

"You want to just walk out of here and let LIM do whatever they please to him?"

Tyler nodded sharply, then turned to leave the cell. Risa grabbed his arm.

"Hey! Don't just walk away from me! What kind of inhuman skag are you?"

He shrugged off her arm, wincing internally as logic and conscience warred inside himself.

"Do you want to lug an unconscious body through the halls with us? I think that might attract a bit of attention, don't you? Not to mention the hue and cry the guards would kick up when they got here and found their prisoner missing."

"I've overridden the lock again," Anje called. "When we shut the door, it will latch into place and engage."

"Besides," Tyler continued as if he hadn't noticed the interruption, "we're trying to find out what happened to Melora, remember?"

"What does that have to do with leaving a person here to be a lab rat for a corp's twisted research? What did you do to him, anyway?"

Tyler's voice was level, almost monotone as he replied.

"I injected a bioscan transmitter underneath his skin. It's a homing device which will allow us to follow wherever LIM takes him."

"So you're using some poor kid you don't even know as bait? You're a real piece of work, Tyler. Just what the hell did you bail out of LIM for, anyway? Four years out of Camineet may have dulled your brain, but it hasn't made you anything but the same cold, ruthless bastard you always were!"

"You think this is easy for me?" Tyler roared back at her, his control snapping under the stress of too many emotions. "I wouldn't leave anyone, not even this punk, in Luveno's hands if I had a choice, but I don't! The important thing is to find Melora and to shut down whatever LIM's got planned that needs all of this. To do that we have to find out where Lianora is. We can't bug the ambulance because we don't know if it's going all the way there. We can't just tail it because we might lose them, and then where would we be? We damn well can't rescue the kid because if we did get him out of here there wouldn't be any reason for them to go to Lianora at all! Sure, once we get there, we'll do what we can to help this guy and anyone else still held there, but if we do anything now we'll blow our whole plan up in our faces. That'll be it for Melora and probably us, too."

The sudden emotional force of his response seemed to take Risa off guard.

"Bad enough to leave this guy," she muttered sullenly, "but did you have to make him part of your plot?"

"If you've got a better idea, tell me."

"Excuse me," Anje interrupted again, “but we need to get going, now!"

"You're right," Tyler admitted, his body still trembling from the emotional outburst. It was too hard to remain cool and controlled when his every instinct was screaming out to destroy this mockery of a hospital, to cut down Margolis and his Emerald Legion allies, to free the unconscious ganger and all the other potential victims of Gage Worthmann's greed and ambition.

Yet, like he had told Risa, he couldn't afford to do any of that. Not if he wanted there to be any chance at all of saving Melora and stopping this Project Nuada before it could get started.

They got out of the isolation unit at ten minutes to eleven, retreating to the relative peace and security of the lab.

"Anje, can you trace the transmitter I planted by yourself, or will you need the sensor unit I left in the skimmer?"

"I'm not certain," she said. "What configuration is it?"

"A standard stealth communicator. It constantly transmits genetic, pulse, and nerve activity information from its subject, so the one tracking it will know if the homing device has been found and removed."

"Hmm. I wasn't designed for communications originally, but I did have a Frequency Scanner installed in place of a Phononmezer." In a human being, the eyes would have become unresponsive, even unfocused, but the Demi's face did not change at all as she tapped into her internal comm unit, trying to find the transmission. "All right, I've got it. Encrypted signal, probably to keep scanners from pulling it out of the rest of the noise--but I'm very good at decryption!" She turned and pointed at one of the back walls. "The signal's coming from there. I can't provide coordinate grid locations, though, without uplinking to some kind of computer system." She paused, then said, "The signal's moving. Do you know its range?"

"About two miles," Tyler replied. "That's standard for this model. Ironically enough, it's made by LIM."

"You've used them in the past?" Anje asked, mostly as a rhetorical question, so Tyler answered it only with a sharp nod.

"They're probably taking him to the ambulance now," she added.

"Yeah, all right; let's be ready to follow." He turned to Margolis, "Doctor, if you wouldn't mind showing us to the door?"

"Again?"

"I don't want you to get any bright ideas about calling for security. It bothers me that the guards have mysteriously vanished and I have a sneaking suspicion that they're all outside, waiting for us."

The doctor's eyes widened behind his spectacles.

"You're insane! What kind of idiot do you think I am?"

"The kind," Tyler replied, "that can't tell when someone isn't bluffing."

\* \* \* \* \*

Finally, they were gone. Dr. Margolis could relax again. His nervousness remained, though, not the cold terror of imminent physical danger but the creeping, gnawing assurance that sooner or later the bubble would burst and leave him facing disaster. He didn't believe that the blond man, Tyler, was bluffing, but he did believe that the crazy quest he and his companions were on was doomed. Luveno Industrial Mechanisms chewed up and spat out agents and hunters like these three every day of the week, and when they did, Tyler's datatrap would spring on Dr. Margolis.

As the doctor saw it, there was only one way out of his trouble. He needed LIM's protection, because they could keep him out of the way of the law and give him work--under the table, of course, but that didn't bother him--when his medical license was pulled. To get the corp to do that, though, he'd have to convince it that helping him was in its best interests. He'd have to prove his loyalty, so that they didn't believe that trusting him would bite them in the back.

He'd also have to somehow convince a man like Gage Worthmann that one Dr. Ewan Margolis could bring more profit than the dangerous information he possessed would likely cause loss. Otherwise, Luveno would squash him like the bug Tyler clearly thought he was.

Not, Margolis admitted, very good odds. It was still a better chance than betting on Tyler's little band somehow going up against the corporation and making it out alive, though. The first step was easy. He hurried through the clinic's corridors to the security office, where the Emerald Legion guard was still tied. Anger flared in her eyes, the kind of helpless rage that trapped people felt--that Margolis felt whenever the fear slacked off. Margolis took the gag out and went to work on her bonds.

"What, your friends ran off and left you?" she sneered.

"They were hardly my friends. Or do your friends shove guns in your face and hold knives at your throat?"

The belt fell away from the guard's wrists, freeing her from the chair.

"So that's your story?" she mocked him, rubbing her wrists to restore circulation. "The old 'It wasn't my fault; they forced me to do it!' routine? Couldn't you think of something better than that?"

"You're talking to a doctor," Margolis said. "The Demi's Stasis Beam paralyzed your muscles, but you could still see and hear the whole time. You saw how they treated me. That crazy blond one--Tyler, they called him--nearly shot me right here in front of you!"

"Maybe, maybe not. What I saw and heard might just have been a little act put on for my benefit. The way he 'suddenly' realized that you'd had their missing friend, for example. That's just oh, so convenient. I think that security control is going to want to have a long talk with you, Dr. Margolis."

Suddenly, the room lights died, leaving the security office a mass of twisted shadows cast by the unchanging test patterns on the monitor bank.

"That won't be necessary."

The voice was strange and unnatural, low-pitched and electronic, but not quite like an android's. There was a depth of emotion, malevolence even, that an artificial voice could not fully convey.

Where was it coming from? Margolis' mind gibbered, as he desperately clawed in his pockets for his scalpel. The guard reflexively went for her sonic gun, then clenched her fist angrily as her hand found only empty air in her holster. Her weapons were in the experiment laboratory, where Tyler had left them, and she was forced to assume a handfighting stance.

"The decision has already been made."

The office door was not opened, it was literally detonated, leaving the ragged edges of the doorframe smoldering redly. Smoke from outside poured into the room, and fire alarms, individual sensors not hooked into the sec-system, began to ring.

The biggest surprise was that the form silhouetted in the door was normal-sized. Its presence seemed far, far larger, though, to the doctor; there was a menace about it that made vicious punks like the Violators or professional soldiers like Tyler seem meek by comparison.

The Legionnaire might or might not have been in danger. The thing in the door seemed, from its words, to have been sent by LIM, and as such might not have harmed the sec-agent. Her own reflexes sealed her fate, though. Seeing a potentially lethal threat and being unarmed, she chose to attack at once, hoping to catch her target off-guard and possibly win the fight by surprise. She thrust her fist outwards and chanted, "GIFOI!"

Three spheres of flame took shape from the empty air and launched themselves from around her arm towards the door. The intruder flung itself aside and the technique's fire burst harmlessly against the corridor wall. With a precision of movement that matched its speed, it sprang off one foot, changing its direction by ninety degrees. A blade gleamed in the multi-hued light, then sheared deeply into the guard's body. Blood spurted as titan armor offered no more resistance than paper.

Margolis' hand trembled around his scalpel. He knew what his chances in battle would be against this killer, and his brain tried to fasten desperately on one of the techniques he had learned during medical school, one which might save him, but he couldn't overcome the shock of sudden violence and summon the concentration that technique use demanded.

"Now I shall fulfill my primary task."

It raised its right hand, dull black in hue. Blue-white lightning sprayed from several spikelike points that circled its wrist, arcing into the doctor's body. Margolis' back arched, his muscles contorting painfully, and his brain went into a fugue state.

Nuada, was the last coherent thought that filled his mind. This was my work.

Whatever gods there were in the universe, Ewan Margolis' soul reached out to them in search of forgiveness at the moment of his death.

### Chapter 20

"This is a quality piece of equipment, although limited," Anje commented as Tyler steered the android's landskimmer onto the highway. The flow of traffic at nearly midnight was almost as dense as it was at noon, fluorescent light bars illuminating the road nearly as brightly, only with the bluish-tinted glow of technology instead of the pure brilliance of the sun Algo. Camineet never slept.

The Demi had interfaced with the tracking sensor Tyler had purchased along with the subdermal bug; Tyler drove because apparently Anje couldn't talk, drive, and maintain contact with the bug all at the same time.

"What does it do?" Risa asked from the back seat.

"It can pinpoint the precise distance and direction between the transmitter and our present position, correct to within a two or three-foot radius! That's much more precise than my internal scanner could manage. I can then plot our position and its on the 3-D map of Camineet I carry in my memory core."

"The perfect tracking system," Tyler agreed, "a Demi and a sensor unit working in concert."

"What if he goes inside a building?"

"It will not intercept the signal, if that is what you mean, Risa."

"No, I meant, could you trace him from room to room?"

"Not without possessing some kind of schematic of the building's interior. I can continue to locate the source of the signal, but without knowing the internal layout I could not pinpoint it as being in a particular room or know the quickest way through the building to it."

Tyler smoothly guided the compact skimmer down the highway, heading in a general northwesterly direction. It felt good to be out of the clinic, and for that matter out of Rendak. The maze of lights and darkened buildings he moved through was beautiful, reminiscent of Tyler's first night back in Camineet. Like a piece of bad fruit, the archopolis' rotten spots only showed when one was close to it.

He was still tense and nervous, though. Maintaining his composure had taken its toll, and the eventual emotional blowup even more. Now there was a knot of anticipation building up in his stomach as he envisioned the beginning of the last part of his quest to help Melora. He didn't know precisely what kind of facility this Lianora was, but any installation could be penetrated. That was the experience of a former corporate agent talking. It took an effort to keep himself from making preliminary plans, thinking through various ways of getting past Lianora's security. That could wait until he knew what he would be facing, to keep himself from getting locked into preconceived ideas.

He wondered what Risa was thinking, but didn't ask. That could wait until they were alone, and not in the middle of a mission.

The signal kept on going northwesterly. The aeroport was out in that direction, and Tyler started to feel like he really was retracing his steps from the first night. Were they going to transfer the punk to a plane or copter?

"Do you realize that I've lived all my life in Camineet and I've never been out to the aeroport?" Risa remarked as an aerojet soared into the night sky, its red and green running lights like new stars in the sky.

"Come to think of it," Anje said, "neither have I. I have traveled, but always by land or teleport to and from Camineet."

"I've seen it on holovid, of course, but there's something different about really being there. Of course, I guess that's true no matter what you're talking about, so I'm probably not being as profound as I think I am."

"That's really weird!" Anje said.

"I didn't think it was that strange," Risa protested.

"No, I mean that the signal has bypassed the exit to the corporate terminal."

Tyler frowned.

"Well, if their cover story is good enough, they might be taking a commercial flight. Since flight plans have to be filed for air traffic safety, an unusual corporate flight to a remote destination might attract attention to Lianora's location." Since Lianora didn't appear openly in LIM's computer system, it was a safe bet that they wanted to keep their connection to it under the table.

"That could be it." A few minutes later, though, Anje spoke again, even more surprised. "Tyler, they've gone past the exits for the commercial terminal too, both continental and overseas flights! Where could they be going? The connection to the Ward Tunnel under the river to Gothic is about three miles south of here, and the only thing out in this direction is the spaceport!"

"They can't be going there," Risa exclaimed. "Mother Brain banned space travel after that awful collision near Dezo."

"Yeah, that was in 1274," Tyler said. "I remember seeing it on the holovid just two weeks after I moved to Abion. The astrogation vessel Ranger collided with the colony ship Wanderer set to leave and explore beyond the Algo system. Hundreds of people died. Space travel was judged too risky given current technology, so it was restricted to use by androids and robots, except for specially authorized military flights. About the only thing the corps use the spaceport for is cargo shipments, and not many of those." The corporate presence as well as their ability to get away with their usual highly profitable but highly unethical business practices was sharply restricted by Mother Brain on Mota, and the Dezolians weren't particularly fond of Palman culture so the Palman colony of Skure was the only viable market on the icy third planet.

"They're approaching the spaceport gate!" Anje exclaimed.

Tyler accelerated through the thinning lanes of traffic and took the spaceport exit. He was in time to see the ambulance vanish through the gate in the twenty-foot-high wall that ringed the complex. The massive panels slid shut behind it, interlocking teeth in the gate sliding together to form a seemingly unbreakable seal. Tyler continued on, not wanting to attract attention by parking near the gate, and turned down the lane that circled the spaceport. There was more here than he'd thought; while to his right there was only the bleak, forbidding wall of the complex, on the left side of the road there were houses, shops, and other signs of a thriving little neighborhood. Idly he wondered if the end of commercial space travel had raised or lowered property values in the area

"Tyler, what's going on?" Anje asked.

"I don't know." He glanced up at the wall again as he drove on. "I'll admit it's a great choice if you wanted to conduct an operation out of the way of prying eyes."

"Yeah, but that's a military-controlled outpost," Risa protested.

"It might work," Tyler said, thinking his way through the scenario. "The big worldwide conglomerates like LIM and Nakagaki still maintain shipping warehouses in the spaceport area to handle their interplanetary business. That would give them a spot to themselves even within the military's sphere of control. They can even save on security costs because the army will do the perimeter security for them in the course of protecting the base."

"Wouldn't they be taking an awfully big risk?" the Demi wondered.

"Maybe," Tyler replied, "and maybe not." He rubbed his fingertips along the scar above his left eye. "It depends on how diligent the government is in patrolling. They might not even bother to inspect the warehouses. Equipment and raw materials could be moved in and out by shipping trucks disguised as ordinary commercial deliveries, just like the ambulance is used to bring in living subjects."

"Perhaps," Anje suggested, "LIM bribed the customs officials responsible for checking their warehouse for contraband. The robots would follow the orders of their human officers, and their operations could remain concealed. I do not understand, however, why such a facility would be named 'Lianora.'"

"They've got to call it something," Risa said. "A quick code name like Lianora is easier to talk about, especially around prying ears. I mean, which would you rather hear around the coffee machine, 'I just got back from Lianora,' or 'I just got back from our secret illegal lab located right under the military's nose at the spaceport'?"

Tyler laughed.

"You've got a point there."

"Well, of course," Anje said, "but that is not what I was referring to. I meant to say that most such names either refer to an oblique way to their subject--"

"A stupid practice," Tyler interjected.

"--or are chosen from any number of quick, catchy phrases. The name 'Lianora' appears to merely be an attractive mix from a phonetic standpoint, as one might name a city, or a yacht."

Tyler frowned as he rounded a corner. The android had something there. It was possible Luveno had given the place a code name for internal use instead of just calling it 'the lab' or 'the warehouse.' Doing so probably would have been intelligent. They almost certainly wouldn't have just made up a pretty name for it, though; it was completely out of character for the people involved and for the nature of what they were doing.

He looked over at the bleak wall, which was even bare of graffiti. The nighttime illumination made it show an eerie gray-green hue, emphasizing that it was a construct instead of a natural part of Palm.

"We're going to have to get inside and take a look," he declared. "We could sit out here all night and speculate, but that won't get us anywhere. Whatever's happening is going on in there, on the other side of that wall, and until we get inside we're just chasing the wind."

"You want us to break into a major military base? Tyler, that's crazy!"

He shook his head.

"No, that's just it--the spaceport isn't a military base, and it's not designed to be one. It was designed to support commercial and private travel, like the aeroport is. That puts limits on how tight the security can be. The wall looks bad, but I'm sure it's deceptive."

Risa groaned.

"You're crazy, but what the hell, count me in."

Anje nodded firmly; the little android's face was an grim and intense as its design could manage.

"I'm coming too. I won't let Melora down!"

The roaring noise that washed through the landskimmer could have only one source. A shuttlecraft rose majestically on pillars of light, the engines mounted in its wings tearing it away from the surface of Palm and lifting it majestically into the night sky.

"Tyler!" Anje exclaimed. "The tracking device--it's on that ship!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Stunned silence followed Anje's announcement. Only reflex kept Tyler guiding the landskimmer down the road. He and Risa were both completely taken aback by it, and even the little android, who despite her emotions was programmed to accept data and assess it logically, seemed at a loss.

"You're sure there's no mistake?" Tyler finally asked.

"None," Anje stated. "The transmission point followed an ascending course until it was beyond the range of its signal. Moreover, the biochemical data remained consistent, indicating that the device hadn't been removed and, say, tossed into the shuttle's cargo bay before takeoff. There's no other reasonable explanation for it; the man we trailed was taken into space."

"So Lianora is some kind of artificial satellite," Tyler mused. "Certainly, it's the perfect place for privacy and secrecy. No one is allowed up in space, so how could someone stumble on the truth?"

"Hey, hold it. Sure, there's no problem with nosy reporters or the cops, but what about the military?" Risa protested. "Don't they keep track of who's coming and going?"

Tyler nodded grimly,

"Every space ship has to file a flight plan and stick to it. Radar tracking outposts are used to mark the spacelanes, and ships venturing outside their range are considered criminals. The only way Luveno could be doing something like this would be if they're working with the military and have concealed their true activities from them, or if they've suborned one or more high-ranking officers in the chain of command."

"Damn, bad enough the corps make everyone dance to their tune without the army getting in on it. Maybe they've got the right idea on Mota after all, turn it all over to Mother Brain and let her run things. She sure can't do a worse job than us Palmans."

"I don't know about that. It's attractive, but I can't see giving up our right to govern ourselves, especially in favor of something that might last for millennia. Mother Brain's already advanced from being the main operating system of Mota's weather control system to the chief executive of the whole Algo system over four hundred and fifty years. The nice thing about living tyrants is that they die."

"Yeah, but you can program a computer not to be a tyrant...oh, hell, why are we talking about this anyway? Melora's out there in space somewhere, and we don't have any way to get there. We've failed--for that matter, we never had a chance to help her! She was already on Lianora when we started looking!"

Tyler slammed on the brakes and killed the power to the skimmer's engine.

"Tyler?" Anje asked. The ex-agent didn't answer, instead popping his door and getting out of the vehicle. The night air was cool, and Tyler could hear the roar of the aircraft arriving at and departing from the nearby aeroport on the breeze. He walked over to the side of the road, not seeing his companions get out of the skimmer and start towards him. Tyler's gaze remained fixed on the massive wall, on the towering structures inside, on the ghostly green-hued spotlights stabbing up into the dark. He jammed his hands into his pockets, looking upwards. The scar above his eye throbbed.

Melora had saved his life while he had gotten that scar.

"Tyler?" Risa asked, touching his arm. "Hey, snap out of it, Tyler!"

"We're going after her," Tyler said softly, not really hearing the girl.

"We're what?"

He turned to the two of them.

"We were intending to break into the spaceport anyway, weren't we? We'll just be taking that to the next step. Once we're inside, we steal a ship and pursue the trail to Lianora."

He looked from Risa to Anje and back.

"You don't need to come with me," he said. "If you think I'm crazy, well, you're probably right."

"I said that I was in before," Risa stated. "Don't make me repeat myself."

"You'll need my technical skills to help you get past the security systems!" Anje said. "Please don't try to leave me behind now!"

"Thank you both," Tyler said. "We'll do it tomorrow night. This is going to take a lot of planning."

Risa shook her head disbelievingly.

"I've got to be crazier than you, but I actually think we have a chance to pull this off."

### Chapter 21

The little group had returned to the Maycross apartment for another night; it was as good a safehouse as any and more pleasant than most. As a class, safehouses were chosen for security, not because they afforded a wide variety of amenities.

Anje had already linked herself into the datanet, trying to search out any and all details of the spaceport's internal layout, security measures, or anything else which could improve their chances from absurd to merely foolhardy. At the same time, she was also looking for something else, an inescapably vital part of the plan.

Tyler, meanwhile, was lying on the large double bed in the room allotted to him, but not sleeping. The bedside light glowed softly, creating a globe of illumination suitable for reading but which left most of the room in darkness, so that someone sharing the bed could sleep peacefully. Tyler was on his back, staring up at the ceiling but not really seeing anything.

The night had been a bad one. The clinic in Rendak, the bleak despair of the slum, the venal, grasping nature of the doctor who would kidnap people and turn them over to LIM to be lab rats, it all made him nauseated. It was why he had been forced to leave Camineet, his job, and Melora in the first place; he just couldn't take seeing only the worst side of people over and over again. Palmans were better than that, he knew, but the job of a corporate agent never brought him into contact with what was good and right.

Some things just didn't change.

The door opened a crack, and Risa put her head in.

"Tyler?" she said, softly enough so that she'd get no response from a sleeping man.

"Come in; I'm awake."

She slipped inside the room and shut the door behind her.

"Am I bugging you?" she asked. "I can go if you're trying to sleep." Her voice was low and oddly deferential, not at all like the way she usually sounded.

"No, you can stay. I was thinking too much to sleep, and I'd rather not be alone with my thoughts right now."

Risa sat down on the edge of the bed, near the foot.

"Tyler, I--" she began, broke off, then said, "well, I'd like to apologize. For earlier, I mean."

"You don't have to," he answered quietly, still looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes, I do. I said some things that were unforgivable. I lumped you in with scum like Margolis and Worthmann, when in reality I was the one who was out of line, acting unprofessionally."

"You're not a professional. No one can hold you to that standard."

"I want to be." She leaned forward, bracing her palms on her knees. "I don't have the skills or the education to make it out of Ossale Court in an ordinary job. That pretty much limits me to corp agent, hunter, or organized crime if I want to be anything more than street trash. No way in hell could I be some syndicate's muscle, and after this it's pretty obvious that the corps are just as bad or worse." Risa sighed heavily. "Not that I'll make much of a hunter if I can't keep my mind on the job."

Tyler raised his head to look at her.

"You're not the only one with those kinds of feelings, Risa. Frankly, I've wanted to gun down Margolis from the moment I heard his name. The man's a mass murderer, even if he never gravestoned anyone personally. He's a sickening worm with no right to live."

"You felt that way, but you didn't shoot him. That would have drawn attention to us and cut off a source of information. The same thing for that kid. You kept the bigger goal in mind. I would have yanked that punk out of there, lost my chance of getting to help Melora, and probably gotten knifed in the back for my trouble."

She stood up, then faced him, her brown eyes staring directly into his blue ones.

"I'm afraid, Tyler," she admitted. "We're going to have to be both good and lucky if we're going to pull this off. I'm scared that I'll lose my head again and screw up. Even I know that on a job like this one, one mistake is enough to finish us."

Tyler looked at her intently for a long moment, then, slowly, began to chuckle. Risa scowled at him.

"You think it's funny?"

"Yeah, considering I've been thinking the same thing ever since I got here. How many times have I been a step too slow, not seen a problem developing when I should have, or misjudged someone's reactions? My mental reflexes aren't up to speed, my judgment is shot, and my knowledge is four years out of date. That's an eternity here in the arch. So yeah, I'm just as scared as you are. Scared that I'll get us all killed because I couldn't carry out my part of my own plan."

He dropped his head back to the pillow.

"Presuming, of course, that Anje can find us a pilot for the spaceship we haven't stolen yet." Tyler groaned. "Can you imagine anyone crazy enough to do this without a personal stake?"

Risa nodded.

"Still, if we pull this off somehow, the government will probably clear us for exposing corruption in the military, right?"

"If we can keep it quiet," Tyler agreed. That, of course, was the key. Governments didn't like whistle-blowers any more than corps did, but if a traitor in the ranks could be excised quietly so as not to shake the public's confidence they'd play fair.

"I figure there's got to be a bunch of out-of-work space cowboys who'd love to give a corp like LIM one in the eye, especially if it meant getting back into space. Every pilot I've ever met is as bad as a nethead; they live for their jobs."

"You hung with pilots?"

"Okay, four total. But every damn one of them wasn't really alive when they weren't in the air. I figure it's got to be even worse when you're used to flying in space."

"Probably. Just hope one of them's got a death wish."

Risa shook her head.

"Geez, Tyler, you're worse than me." She rammed a finger into his bare chest. "Ever since I've met you, all I've heard from you is 'I'm not this' and 'I'm not that,' 'I'm not good enough anymore' and 'I should have known.' Even your good points, you talk about them in terms of what you aren't. Maybe you ought to try figuring out what you are for once. You know, as in you are a guy who'd come save his old love even though it meant returning to a life you hated? Or, you are a guy who'd take on a corp with thousands of goons and billions of meseta to throw at you, just because it's right. Or, you are a man who can get others to follow you even when the cause seems hopeless because you can make them believe they have a real chance. Try that for a change and see where you end up."

Tyler looked at her silently, knowing that his shock and surprise were showing on his face. Risa backed up, looking a bit nervous, as if afraid she'd gone too far. Maybe she had; Tyler felt like he'd been slapped in the face. Hard truths were like that, direct, up front, and antagonistic by their very nature. Like bitter medicine, they were tough to take but did a lot of good if one could swallow them.

Was she right? It was nice to get his ego stroked and told he was one of the good guys, but that didn't make what she was saying true. Had he been selling himself short? His old mentor at LIM, Nevin Dall, had once said that underestimating oneself was as bad as overconfidence. Instead of foolhardy, reckless behavior, it bred overcaution and hesitation, and as one of Nevin's infinite store of Dezolian proverbs went, 'Hesitation is a gateway which leads to inaction. One who hesitates before choosing soon finds his decisions made for him.'

"Maybe I did need a mental wake-up call," he said thoughtfully. "It's hard to do a job right when I'm busy kicking myself over the last thing that went wrong."

"Especially since you're the leader. You lose it and we're all screwed, so you've got to keep your head on straight."

Tyler got up off the bed, the dim light from the lamp emphasizing the paleness of his skin against his black graphitesuit pants.

"Funny, huh? You come in here with worries on your mind and instead you wind up helping me clear the air."

Risa shook her head.

"That's not why I came in."

"It isn't?"

"No."

She laid her hand on his arm softly, then, as if finding her courage, she thrust herself against him. Risa's armored jacket rubbed against Tyler's bare skin as she wound her arms around his neck, pulling his mouth down to hers. Her lips were warm and soft, and for a long, pleasant moment they moved hungrily on his own. Then, Tyler reached up, put his hands on Risa's shoulders, and gently but firmly pushed her away.

"I can't do this," he said.

"I'm twenty," Risa protested, "so if you're worried about me being a kid..."

"That's not it," he replied softly.

"Then what?" She looked up at Tyler searchingly, then dropped her gaze to the floor. "It's Melora, isn't it? You're still in love with her."

Tyler let go of Risa's shoulders and backed away. His instinct was to turn away, face the window or anything else neutral so he could think without distraction, but he didn't. Risa deserved better than that, deserved an answer given straight up, face-to-face.

"Maybe," he said.

"But you were the one who left her," Risa said. "You must have been over her."

He shook his head.

"Two, three years ago, heck, even a month ago I'd have agreed with that. Now, though..." He shrugged. "I'm here, aren't I? You said it yourself; I hated the agent's life, got worn down and burned out by Camineet, but Melora asked, and I came back."

He sighed heavily, his eyes on Risa's.

"She asked four years ago, too." Tyler could still remember her tear-stained face, crying with both sadness and frustration, at the security checkpoint at the aeroport. Melora had urged him to stay, to take up the life of a freelance hunter with her. She had wept when he had refused, but she had never begged. Melora couldn't keep from showing the hurt, but she had too much pride to try and use that pain as a weapon.

At his last refusal, she had turned and walked away, shoulders set. Tyler had made his choice to leave her, and he had to live with the consequences.

"Sometimes I wonder if I should have said yes, then. I had been under a lot of stress with no relief. Maybe I hadn't been as burned out as I thought. Maybe combined with the clear conscience gained by dumping LIM, all I needed was a damn vacation."

"Maybe," Risa said shrewdly, "you could have kept Melora safe if you hadn't left?"

Tyler nodded.

"I know intellectually that it's a wrongheaded feeling, but it's still there now and again. So maybe I still do love Melora, or maybe it's just bits and pieces of my past waiting, unresolved. Until I can sort out where I stand, though, it won't be time to open myself up to any new relationships." He gave Risa a smile, a genuine one without bitterness or irony. "I hope you know that you'd never be anything less than that for me."

She returned the smile, a bit wanly.

"Right now I wouldn't insist on it--but I would in the morning." She turned away and walked to the door, then looked back over her shoulder and said, "Thanks for being honest with me at least, Tyler. Too many guys wouldn't." Then she was gone, leaving Tyler alone again.

This time, he was able to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a very real way, there was no such place as the Wire Club, in spite of the fact that it had dozens of regulars and thousands of occasional visitors. It existed only as a construct on the datanet, the descendant of the chat rooms that had been created in the early years. To those accessing from a standard computer, the visual images appeared on the screen, and the speakers nearby sent text scrolling across the display. For the true gridriders, though, the Wire Club was a place where the decor changed from moment to moment, where they and the other patrons talked, drank, and watched the floor shows.

Anje, meanwhile, perceived the Wire Club as a simple node in the datanet, a subsystem created by a collection of software uploaded from a remote location that changed from day to day. The exotic decor, the computer-generated entertainment, the wild music, even the patrons were no more than lines of code to her. To the android, though, the code had more meaning than it gave to the best VR interface. She perceived all the nuances that escaped those relying on simple sight, sound, and touch.

A gridrider could tell those in virtual reality from those at a keyboard by how they looked. The keyboarders all appeared alike, featureless Palman figures made of liquid silver metal, but each gridrider using a VR interface was an individual. They could be anything, from people to animals to mythical creatures. A massive winged Musk Cat sat at the bar talking to a cloaked lich, while a bare-chested warrior bristling with weapons joined a giant serpent and a blue-robed Motavian in cheering on an overdeveloped dancer clad only in wisps of pure darkness who performed on their table to the fiery tunes of a thrash-metal song audible only to the three of them. The place was jammed with professionals, wannabes, and tourists alike. Anje, though, was there to find a specific person.

In virtual reality, her quarry was easy to spot. It looked quite unique, appearing as a floating ball of jet black fire with three silver lights gleaming inside it. Anje approached the fireball's table just as a badly withered deadtree slipped aside. She maintained an innocent facade, appearing to the fireball and other VR gridriders as if she were only one of the keyboard users.

"Hello, Ebon," she said, instructing the datanet to transmit her voice in the blank monotone of someone who lacked an audio hookup.

"Do you have business for me?" The flame's voice echoed in a radius around it rather than appearing to emanate from a fixed point.

"I do. Can we speak privately?"

"If you wish." The silver eyes dimmed momentarily, and a glowing golden cube shimmered into place around the table and the two gridriders. Anje triggered a program from her internal suite of datanet software, letting the sensor utility confirm her initial analysis of the cube as a beta-level data shield securing communications between Anje and Ebon from outside eavesdropping. Ebon was a fixer, much like Jac Norbridge, but the black flame conducted business exclusively online. While Ebon held meetings at numerous locations on the datanet, the Wire Club was the most common.

"Now, time is money," the fixer stated. "You're paying for my time starting right now, so let's see the color of your meseta."

Instead of opening a link to a secure line of credit or blank-encoded funds, Anje instructed the datanet to alter her appearance. The featureless chrome figure rose off the virtual "ground," deepened in hue until it was a liquid scarlet color and took on features that though indistinct were definitely feminine. Two pairs of glorious golden-feathered wings sprouted from her back, each separate pinion an individual work of art down to a level of detail which the vast majority of computer systems could not perceive, let alone create. It was Anje's signature when she chose to be herself, proof to separate Angel Red from any imitator who tried to batten on her reputation.

"You should be more careful, Ebon," Anje said. No newbie, the fixer understood what she meant. Had she been feeling hostile, she could have used any number of attacking virus programs to disrupt the flame's systems, infect software, and even send lethal feedback through the gridrider's VR interface without any functional defense.

"Yes...yes, I should," Ebon admitted, somewhat taken aback. Anje got that reaction quite often; her reputation was towering and she did not bother to show herself openly often enough for anyone to get used to her. Unlike the vast majority of gridriders, Anje had very little ego and no reason to strut and parade herself to pad it.

Ebon was immensely professional, though, and quickly became composed once more.

"I don't see you very often, Angel, and even less so when it is on a business matter. What can I do for you?"

"I need to hire someone, a specialist."

"Well, I know it certainly isn't a gridrider you're looking for, unless you're subcontracting now."

"I'm looking for a pilot."

The black flame flickered up and down in the closest it could approximate to a shrug.

"There are many of those."

Anje dropped the other shoe.

"A spaceship pilot."

"Now, that will be a different story. There isn't a lot of call for that, given that all space travel is supposed to be supervised by Mother Brain."

"I have a client who intends to do without supervision."

"Let's see...there's Sergeant Morlin; he's reliable."

Anje shook her head.

"No, he won't do. His piloting skills are fine, but the wheelchair would get in the way. There'll be a need for mobility on this job."

"So the pilot isn't just transport?"

"Spacecraft, unfortunately, don't grow on trees."

"Oho! This is interesting. It sounds like you're playing for high stakes." The silver orbs dimmed again as Ebon consulted various datafiles. "How about Eagan Grange? He has his own shuttle which he keeps based in a secret location somewhere--I haven't asked where, and I doubt he'd tell me. The only problem is that he's on a smuggling run. What sort of timeframe is involved here?"

"Immediate."

"Well, so much for that idea." The fire flared up momentarily, releasing a puff of smoke. "I think I may have a candidate for you. He's not my first choice--too independent-minded to just hand him a job and have it left at that--but he's got the skills you need."

"Define 'independent-minded' for me. There's a lot of possible interpretations."

The flame bobbed quietly for a moment.

"Insubordinate. He'll substitute his own judgment in place of a set plan. He'll also bail on the whole job midway through if his moral dander gets up. The last time he was hired, he ditched a whole cargo of Motavian neuro-stims because he doesn't agree with metachem dealing. He hasn't worked since."

Anje dipped her wings in acknowledgment.

"Curiously enough, he sounds like exactly the type that this mission requires!"

### Chapter 22

With the deliberate pace of a Cooley-61 mining robot ripping chunks of ore out of a rock wall, the shrill beeping of the visiphone tore again and again into Hale Brandon's stupor of sleep. His eyes ached as he came to; the apartment was dim but they still pulsed painfully as if daggers of light were searing into them. The veins in his temples throbbed, his mouth was dry, and his tongue felt swollen and generally in the way.

Hangover, he concluded, a logical deduction for the morning after drinking himself to sleep.

The last third of the bottle of Loar whiskey beckoned to Hale from the nightstand. He reached for it instinctively, not even thinking about what he was doing until his hand was six inches from the bottle. When the realization hit him, he snapped his fist shut, nails digging into his palms.

"No," he growled aloud. "Not...yet..." Hale tried not to think how good the strong liquor would taste sliding down his throat, or how much better his pounding head would feel, or, most of all, how he wouldn't have to think with his system saturated with alcohol.

It was the last one that almost got him.

When he finally stood up, he was shaking from the effort and a light sheen of perspiration covered his body. The damn visiphone was still ringing.

Hale took three steps across the room and punched the connect button, leaning against the counter to brace himself.

"All right, what's so bloody important?" he snapped.

The visiphone screen stayed dark, but it seemed to ripple now and again, as if the darkness was moving. Three brilliant silver eyes took shape.

"Your gratitude overwhelms me." The voice rising from the speaker was shrill and rasping, not that of a living thing but generated electronically and intentionally made to sound that way. "I come bringing gifts, and find myself received with delays and curses. 'Tis true that no good deed goes unpunished."

Hale swore again, then angrily added,, "If you've got something to tell me then do it, but spare me the crap, Ebon. I haven't got the time."

"Yes, so I can see. You're shaking like the proverbial leaf, Hale. From where I stand, you need to take the job I'm offering you just to give you a reason to leave your apartment. Unless you've finally finished the slide into full-fledged alcoholism, in which case I'll be glad to find someone else and let you crawl back into your nice warm bottle and rot."

It was funny. His words were nasty and sarcastic, but Ebon almost sounded worried.

"Stow the preaching," Hale snapped, shoving away any implied concern. "If you've got a job for me, let me know. And no more of those damn metachem runs. I'm not going up against Mother Brain and the Algo system patrol just so a bunch of crooks can get rich poisoning people."

"For all you know, those neuro-stims were intended for Motavians."

"Yeah, right. Do you think the Seven Hands Gang would have been smuggling them to Native Motavians, on whom they act like coffee, or to Palmans, who get addicted and go through six kinds of hell's worth of withdrawal symptoms if they can't pony up the meseta for their daily dose? Nice talking to you, Ebon."

His hand moved towards the disconnect key.

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"This isn't like that. It's not a smuggling job after all."

Hale scowled.

"What else is out there for space pilots, now that Mother Brain's killed off travel?"

"Interested, are you?"

"Yeah, all right, I am." He pushed himself upright and tried to locate some halfway clean clothes. Clients were impressed with stuff like that. "You gonna throw yourself a party for getting me on the hook, or are you going to reel me in?"

"Your rancorous attitude towards life, while certainly reminiscent of certain popular fiction heroes, is rarely productive."

Hale fished a pair of pants he'd worn only once out from under the bed and located a short-sleeved green shirt that hadn't picked up any major stains, then pulled them on over the underwear he'd slept in. A carbonsuit would give a more professional appearance, he knew, but he'd hocked the only one he owned a couple of months back.

"Yeah, and you talk like you're from a couple thousand years ago, but I don't see you losing any biz over it."

"If you want to use that line, then turn off the vid pickup so I can't see your apartment. I know how your bank balance stands, Hale. Your net worth is exactly three hundred forty-eight meseta."

"Damn it, Ebon, who made you my keeper!?" Hale roared.

"I'm referring to facts. If you don't want to be called on your lies, don't try them on someone who knows better."

Hale dug a package of coffee grounds out of the cupboard and got the machine going. Maybe that would clear his head.

"Look, spare me the social commentary and tell me about the job."

Ebon sighed audibly, no doubt using whatever computer he was generating the voice with to wring the maximum amount of emotional content out of it.

"Very well, I've arranged for you to meet the ones hiring you at eleven-thirty. That's two hours from now," he added as Hale's bloodshot eyes began to hunt out a clock.

"Where?"

"Jacquez's, the outdoor cafe in Madore Park."

"Fair enough," He got a mug out of the sink and rinsed it. "Who am I supposed to meet?"

"One man; he'll be wearing a black coat. You'll get more details and the front-end payment from him."

Hale gave the visiphone screen a dirty look.

"More details? You've got to have some before you can have more, and right now I don't have any at all. You like facts so much, tell me a few about this job."

"Look, all I know is this: the job involves rescuing someone, and they need space transport to pull it off. They also need to acquire a spacecraft, since neither you nor they actually owns or has access to one."

Hale's eyes widened.

"Wait a minute. You mean, first we're going to be swiping a spacecraft, and only then does the real mission start?"

The silver eyes dimmed momentarily, then shone brightly.

"Essentially, that is an accurate summation of the matter."

Hale shook his head in disbelief.

"They're crazy. You're crazy, too, if you think that I'd go along with a suicide run like that. Where are they getting the ship from, anyway?"

"They didn't say, which does not particularly surprise me."

Hale sighed.

"Probably one of the corp hangers on those closed-up fields outside the city, unless they're intending to swipe one from a smuggler. Hell, I probably won't even get to do a halfway decent preflight on it. We'll be lucky if we don't run out of fuel on the way there."

The coffee pot was half-full by then; he paused the machine's operation long enough to fill his cup, drain half of it, and fill it up again. The hot, bitter brew scalded its way down Hale's throat, cutting through some of the pain-induced haze and warming up muscles that ached from a cramped sleeping position.

"How much are they offering for this great chance to get myself killed?" he groused.

"One hundred thousand meseta."

Hale almost dropped his cup.

"How much?"

"One hundred thousand."

"Now I know you're yanking my chain, Ebon. Hell, even with the theft you're talking about maybe twenty, and that's only if you talked up my rep until you were blue in the face. Not that you've got a face."

Lacking a mouth, Ebon's image on the screen couldn't smile, but Hale could hear it in his voice.

"Now, perhaps you begin to see why I've been so insistent that you should hear me out."

Hale dropped onto a corner of the bed. He'd never even heard of a six-figure fee before. Those kinds of numbers couldn't even be comprehended by anyone but financiers and accountants. It also stank royally. The only reason people waved money like that around was if they didn't intend to pay it. Even money on whether the customers intended to stiff him or just make sure Hale didn't live to collect.

"Ebon," he sighed, "I appreciate the thought, but this has got 'too good to be true' written all over it. There's no way I'll ever see any of that money."

For a minute there, he'd actually been getting excited, interested in maybe using this job to make a turnaround in his life. Now it was back to spending his days trying to convince himself that what self-respect he had left was enough reason not to shut out the past and present with as much booze as his three hundred forty-eight meseta could buy.

"They're offering thirty thousand as front-end money."

Hale snapped his head up.

"You mean, I would walk away from that meeting today with thirty K in my account? These people are going to fork over that much, no matter what?"

"Presuming, of course, that you do agree to take the job. Your time alone isn't worth a consulting fee."

"Yeah, but what I mean is, even if they shoot me in the back after the job, they're still out the thirty K, right?"

"Ahh," the inhuman voice purred, "the light begins to dawn upon my understanding. Yes, Hale, in the unlikely event that a double-cross is planned, then it will be an extremely expensive one for them."

Was it worth the risk? Did Hale still have the talent for a high-risk job like this? If the job wasn't a double-cross, it was almost certainly the suicide mission he'd labeled it.

Then again, a quick, clean death would be better than the slow death life offered as an alternative. Hale looked at the whiskey bottle again, sure that if he didn't do something about it soon, the drink would have him too tightly to let go. Maybe it already did, but he had to try.

Besides, the only way he could hide from his own mind was to give it something else to work on, something immediate that would drive out all other thoughts.

"All right, Ebon. I'll do it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ironic, Tyler thought. It was a beautiful, sunny day for the first time since he'd come back to Camineet, and he was planning to leave the city that night. Even the light haze of smog in the air couldn't block out Palm's blue sky, the gleaming star Algo, or the fluffy white clouds that drifted on the breeze.

Madore Park was probably the nicest of Camineet's public parks. The paths were broad, the lawns and greenery neatly kept clean, and it was safe, at least during the day. The cafe, Jacquez's, was a popular stop for park patrons, offering coffee, soft drinks, sandwiches, snacks, and ice cream. Tyler wouldn't have picked the spot for a meet; he and Melora had gone there together more than once during their off-duty hours, playing, talking, laughing together. He remembered Melora's sweet tooth, and the way she had always made the most unique flavor choices.

White chocolate cinnamon truffle, he thought, laughing. The grin remained as Tyler walked up to the cafe. Good memories endured just like painful ones.

Hale Brandon was easy to spot. Just as he'd been described, the pilot was tall and lanky, with jet black hair laced with gray pulled back in a ponytail, the sides of his head shaved, and dark stubble covering his chin and cheeks. A braided thorn-vine tattoo snaked its way up his bare right forearm. His clothing was simple and well-worn, from his battered, heavy work boots to the loose-fitting shirt. Like almost all of the cafe's patrons, he was unarmed. Tyler, of course, was not.

"Hale?"

"So you're the man. Have a seat."

"Let's go for a walk. There's too many ears here."

Hale shrugged, rising.

"Suit yourself; you're paying the freight." He picked up his burger and cola, then took a big bite of the sandwich. They headed off down one of the paths. "You got a name, or do I make one up?"

"Call me Tyler."

"Tyler, okay."

They walked on for a bit, passing parents with children, teenagers trying to look cool, and wageslaves trying to salvage some fresh air while on their lunch break.

"So you're a space pilot."

"I was, until Mother Brain put me out of a career."

"Credentials?"

"Six years with Gothic Titan Shipping, then eight more with the Algo Space Administration. Then four years out of the trade, more or less."

That checked with the information Anje had provided.

"That's funny," Tyler said. "I...retired four years ago, too."

"Small world. So what's this job you want me to do? I'll tell you right off, I'm not doing any metachem smuggling or terrorism."

Tyler thrust his left hand into his coat pocket.

"How about anti-corp work, and cleaning up some military corruption besides?"

"Better. So what's this about having to steal a spaceship?"

"We do."

Hale took another bite. "Where from?" he mumbled around the mouthful.

"Camineet Spaceport."

The black-haired pilot nearly choked on his burger.

"Are you crazy?" he exclaimed. Hale glanced around to see if his outburst had attracted any attention, then said in a softer voice. "No wonder you're paying so much. Whoever you get is gonna need it to pay their shrink and their funeral expenses!"

"You think we haven't thought of that ourselves?" Tyler asked.

Hale finished off his burger, tossed the wrapper into a trash can, and chewed thoughtfully, using the time his mouth was full as an excuse to think things over.

"It's absolutely necessary? You can't go somewhere else?"

"We need to access the flight logs in the spaceport computer, so we have to break in there anyway."

"The flight logs?"

"Be nice to know where we're going before takeoff."

Hale gave Tyler a wide-eyed look.

"Let me get this straight. You're hiring me to fly a spaceship you don't have to somewhere you don't know."

"Essentially, yes," Tyler said blandly.

"Oh, hell," Hale groaned. "You couldn't just have a gridrider hack the logs from someplace safe, then swipe a ship from somewhere a little less well-guarded?"

Tyler shook his head.

"Unfortunately, no. From the way our hacker explained it to me, the spaceport's system is part of the military net. All the access channels from the regular datanet are walled off by alpha-level security set up by Mother Brain. The internal system security isn't all that bad, or at least it shouldn't be, so if we can get inside and link up from within the milnet, we've got a fair chance of getting the data we want with little fuss."

"Still sounds insane, but at least you've got a good reason. What's the timeframe?"

"We go tonight."

Hale was getting used to these little surprises. "Oh, fine. That's right in line with everything else about this job." His eyes turned towards Tyler with sudden suspicion. "I presume this means that if I take the offer, I'll be going directly with you?"

The ex-agent shook his head.

"Not quite; there's one other thing to take care of." He pulled a bank access card out of his pocket. "First you get paid the front-end money."

Hale relaxed visibly. The transfer from the credit blank, this time funded by Anje, to Hale's bank account took only seconds from a public visiphone. The call to verify the transaction took only a few moments longer.

"Satisfied?" Tyler asked.

"Well, that ought to cover the cost of burial, at least. Let's get going before my brain recovers from the sight of all that meseta and decided it would rather live."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gage Worthmann was going over the designs for an upgrade to the corporation's Tracer robots when the secure line on his visiphone beeped. Gage keyed the pickup and was surprised when Dr. Hurlston's face appeared, rerouted through the satellite link.

"We have a problem," the scientist stated.

"Wait a moment, please."

It had to be important, for Lianora to contact him directly; Gage put away the design specs.

"Now, what is it?"

"Last night another subject was delivered here. The last one, I believe the communication was."

"That's right, presuming that the prototype lives up to its promise."

"Oh, yes. We've been running analyses on it ever since Nuada returned to Lianora this morning. Last night's excursion into the field had no apparent negative side effects."

"Quite a number of positive ones, in fact," Gage agreed. "You were given full reports?"

Hurlston nodded.

"Indeed so. All traces, all evidence destroyed with the minimum possible expenditure of time and energy. Which, unfortunately, brings me to the subject of this call. When we ran a battery of standard tests, we discovered an anomaly. This."

The doctor held up a tiny sliver with a pair of tweezers.

"What is it?"

"An intradermal transmitter. The Commander had it inspected; I'm transmitting the results now."

Worthmann tapped another key, and the screen quartered. In the window which appeared in the lower right-hand corner, data scrolled by.

"Professional class," he concluded. Garrett would know more, but that wasn't particularly relevant. "Thank you, Dr. Hurlston. Appropriate steps will be taken."

When the call was over, Gage leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers thoughtfully. The obvious conclusion was that Tyler Jorran was responsible for the tracking device, given what LIM now knew about his resources and skills. Gage didn't accept that assumption outright, instead considering alternatives, but this time at least the executive found the most obvious possibility to be the one most likely correct. Tyler must have deciphered whatever information the hunter, Melora, had found for Eric Stephens. That had taken him to the clinic in Rendak, barely a step ahead of Luveno's cleanup operation. From there, the transmitter had undoubtedly led Tyler to Camineet Spaceport. Just how much of what was happening Tyler knew wasn't so obvious, but the man's next move was.

Gage reached for the visiphone. It was time to arrange a little reception committee for Tyler Jorran and his friends.

### Chapter 23

Appearances, Tyler knew, were sometimes more important than reality. The security at the spaceport was designed with that principle firmly in mind. To any outsider, it looked impossible to pass the fortresslike barriers that separated the installation from the world, and that was part of its protection. The illusion of impregnability not only discouraged any number of intruders outright, but also inspired fear in those who did press on. That fear then led to mistakes, to either overcaution or recklessness, and then the security that was actually there did its job.

Tyler knew all this, but he felt the fear anyway. Risa felt it too, as did Hale. Perhaps Anje did as well; it all depended on the sophistication of her emotional program.

"Can we really do this?" Risa asked.

"We have to," Tyler stated. His face was a mask. Afraid or not, there was no turning back now. This was more than just a catchphrase, but the literal truth. One of the things they had learned came not from some hidden computer databank but from the public news networks. A certain Jaeger Foundation clinic in Rendak had been ripped by an explosion at around midnight last night, likely (according to the news) due to a gas leak. Everyone inside--security, patients, doctors, and staff--were said to be lost. It was obvious now why the majority of the Emerald Legion guards had been caught off-duty. Luveno hadn't wanted to waste Palman assets pointlessly.

They had spent six hours discussing strategies, poring over every scrap of information Anje could dredge up about the spaceport's layout, design, and security, as well as Hale's memories from when he had worked for the Algo Space Administration. Going over the wall was out. Beyond the mere problem of height, the top was also barricaded by a mesh of electrified razorwire and studded at irregular intervals with pressure sensors. When the patrolling Informer robots, an upgraded version of the Whistle, were added to the mix, the odds of success fell to effectively zero.

Creating a diversion was out, too. If the only concern was getting inside, then setting off explosions, for example, might do the job--generating a commotion at one point to attract people's attention while they entered somewhere else with the robotic guards and alarms negated. The problem with that classic trick was that the group had too much to do inside the spaceport to risk putting the compound on full alert. That was especially true with regard to the computer system; with security on alert, the spaceport's system would be too, becoming twice as hard for Anje to crack.

Subterfuge had been the next idea. The problem there was that they didn't have anyone or anything who could create that deception. With some information about procedures and security protocol, false identification and a cover story might be created to get the four of them through the gate, but they didn't have that information. The best they'd be able to muster was a wild bluff, and the success chance of that was flatly nil.

The only option left was stealth, and since they couldn't sneak over the wall, they'd have to sneak under it. Specifically, they had decided to slip through the access tunnels designed for the maintenance of water mains, power cables, datalines, underground phone connections, and the like. Unfortunately, these passages didn't link directly into the spaceport; the access tunnels were part of Camineet's public utility system and did not contain a passageway into the spaceport, but what they did have were walls that adjoined the subbasement levels of the compound's main buildings. All it took was the ability to get through a barricade much thinner than the one surrounding the compound and without facing so much electronic security.

Shaped dynamite charges had been among the items Tyler had bought from Morbile and now they would come in handy. As Hale unloaded one from his satchel, Risa looked up at the solid ceiling dubiously.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she muttered. "That looks awfully solid."

"According to the public works plans I retrieved from the datanet, the basement of the main control center is directly above us," Anje said. The Demi, thanks to her computerized brain, was able to accurately judge distance and direction of travel with a remarkable precision. "That does presume that the plans are correct, of course."

"If they're not," Tyler said, affixing the charge to the tunnel ceiling, "then we're going to have a lot of rock coming down on our heads." He hooked up a timed detonator to the explosives and activated it. "Thirty seconds, people; let's move it."

The four of them ran back down the access tunnel. Twenty-nine seconds later came the roar of the dynamite going off. Thankfully, the shaped charge reduced the amount of explosive that would be needed to get the job done by directing the majority of its force in one direction. That, in turn, reduced the sound to bearable levels in the enclosed tunnel.

Watching the utility lights struggle to keep the tunnel lit through the dust cloud, Tyler pulled out the Kestrel.

"All right, everyone, this is it."

They advanced cautiously, half-expecting to hear the squeal of alarms and the clatter of running feet, but all there was was silence. The hole was roughly circular, its jagged edges four feet across, and the pale greenish-white glow from above was similar to the tunnel lighting.

"You first, Risa," Tyler said. He took her by the waist, lifting her up so she could catch the edge of the hole and pull herself through. Anje was next; the android's body was much heavier than any of the Palmans and her short height didn't help. It took Tyler and Hale lifting from below and Risa pulling from above to get Anje high enough for her to help pull her weight through. Then it was Hale's turn, and finally Tyler, leaping high enough for the others to grab his wrists and help him scramble up.

The subbasement level of the command center was mostly devoted to maintaining utilities. In essence, it fulfilled the same purpose within the building as the utility tunnel they had just come from did for the external systems. It consisted of a network of corridors separating storage rooms, closets, and access chambers. The explosion had opened up an entrance into one of these small rooms, one which looked like it had been set up to maintain the water systems. Gauges and valves were affixed to a series of pipes that ran along the ceiling and one wall. Luckily the blast had been small enough to expend its force on the floor without doing too much damage to the room or bursting any pipes. The basement's design also helped to muffle the sound of the explosion; closed metal doors and interlocking walls had reduced it to no more than a dull thump.

"We need a computer," Anje said, "or at least a dataline that I can connect to, but a computer would be better."

"The mainframe will be up in Mission Control," Hale said. "There'll still be staff there, though."

"Are there any auxiliary computers?"

"Oh, of course, all over the place. The laboratories, the executive offices, they all have computers linked into the system."

"Good; we'll try for one of them. Where's the stairs?"

Hale shrugged.

"Beats hell out of me."

"Oh, great," Tyler said. "Well, we're not getting any closer standing around here. Let's get moving."

The basement corridors were dark and quiet, the eerie glow of artificial illumination filling them with a soft light that somehow didn't actually provide enough to dispel the shadows. Tyler had done this sort of thing before, many times, crept through silent buildings and empty offices looking for data, for research samples, or to plant something where it would be inopportune for someone else to find it. That had all been on behalf of LIM, though, and now he was working against it with the training the corporation had provided him. A cold knot of tension was in his stomach, his reflexes keyed to react in an instant.

Those reflexes were forced to react a moment later when a robot came around the corner ahead of them. It was called a Mechoman, an odd machine that looked like nothing more than a five-foot-tall mushroom with stubby legs and equally stubby arms that ended in two-pronged pincers. It was an outdated design, used for maintenance work but augmented with weapons to aid in security functions.

"Halt," it declared in a droning monotone voice. "Your identification badges are not visible. Present identification immediately."

Knowing that the robot's next act would be to raise an alarm, possibly by internal radio, Tyler brought up the Kestrel and unleashed a burst of fire from the pulse laser. Searing blue-white bolts ripped into its steel shell, which provided an excellent defense from impact weapons but very little ballistic or energy armor. The lasers, accompanied by shots from Hale's sonic gun, wrecked the Mechoman, leaving it a pile of scrap metal. There was no point in Anje adding a cannon round, so she held back from doing so.

"Great," Hale groused. "Three minutes inside the building and we've already had our first fight." He tugged at the neck of his carbonsuit; borrowed from Tyler it didn't fit the taller, slimmer pilot as well as he'd have liked. He also was a little nervous that, unlike Tyler's graphitesuit, it also hadn't been outfitted with armor plates. "If anyone sees this junk, we'll be up to our eyeballs in security."

"We don't have time to hide it," Risa stated. "Anywhere we tried to put it might turn out to be full of people or robots."

"She's right," Tyler said. "No side trips."

Hale nodded, seeing their point, just not liking it much.

As they approached a T-intersection, they heard the sound of shuffling feet. Instantly, they pressed themselves against the wall behind a bank of utility lockers, ready for action. Instead, two technicians walked by, debating the Parolit Scorpions' chances in the upcoming metroball championship. They didn't so much as glance to their right, for which Tyler was thankful.

"Funny," he murmured softly, knowing that a whisper actually would carry farther than a quiet but normal voice through the halls.

"What?"

"Until now, I'd completely forgotten that I've got a hundred meseta on Scion in the pool back home in Abion."

Risa suppressed a chuckle but rolled her eyes.

They found an elevator around the corner the technicians had come from. Conveniently enough, just below the row of buttons was a floor directory.

"Third floor; Administration," Tyler said. "That's good." He glanced at Hale. "I presume that the bureaucrats here are like the ones everywhere else."

"As in, do they go home every evening while the scientists and technicians work round-the-clock shifts? Damn right."

Anje, meanwhile, was busy prying up the elevator's control panel. She wired herself into the electrical innards, her eyes losing focus as she concentrated on linking into the building's systems through the elevator controls. Four minutes later, the connector cables withdrew into her forearm and she looked up at her companions.

"I think we're clean!" she chirped. "I opened all the locks on the third floor, disabled the alarms, and put the security cameras into loop mode, so they'll just show the same thing over and over again. Basically, the entire floor is going to be our own little playground, so long as we don't run into any actual people or robots!"

Hale shook his head in surprise.

"Y'know, I was a little worried, what with the gridrider being a mech, but you're one kick-butt neon angel, Anje."

"Thank you," she replied while she reinstalled the panel.

"She ought to be," Risa said. "After all, Anje's not just a gridrider, she's the gridrider."

"What's that?"

"Ever hear of Angel Red?"

Hale's jaw dropped with the same speed as the elevator rose.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night air was much too still for Conn Derrek's taste. It had the feel of expired tension, of events that should have happened but had not--and weren't going to.

"No sign of them," he murmured. There had been no mention of any intruders either from the DLE agents and their robots or from their military counterparts. Yet the regular reports continued to come in over his headset radio and Abren's internal communications link, which ruled out the possibility that a posted group or patrol had been surprised and eliminated before they could raise an alarm. No vehicles at all had come through the gate, so there wasn't any chance that a search of one had been too cursory to spot a clever hiding place.

"I'm getting a very ugly feeling about this," he growled. The long-barreled cannon he cradled in his hands wasn't to his taste, but he liked the milspec weapon much more than he liked the idea of being used yet again by the corporation. He'd have liked to tell Gage Worthmann to shove his information where the sun didn't shine, but Conn didn't even want to think about what Captain Nile's reaction to that would be.

Worthmann probably knew that already, the smug sworm-kisser. He knew that after LIM and the brass got together after Conn's last little talk with him, Conn wouldn't be able to go against Gage's "suggestion." Especially not after Abren received orders from his bosses in the military, who had also been contacted by the Luveno division chief.

"Does this Project Nuada really have an outer-space connection?" he asked the Siren softly.

"I do not know of my own knowledge," the android replied, "but I would assume that it does. Certainly, when the information that Tyler intended to break into the spaceport tonight was presented to them, my superiors did not dismiss it out of hand. That at least suggests that there is a viable connection."

Conn nodded. Much as he disliked thinking that Gage was being straight, it made sense that at the very least he had used some of the truth to spice up his manipulations.

"I'm curious how he knew Tyler would try the spaceport tonight, though. Sure, LIM's got good sources of information, but I don't buy the story about Tyler letting something slip to a fixer that let Gage figure out what he was up to."

"It could be true. If Jorran is not a member of a terrorist cadre, he might approach a fixer to hire hunters. Whether he is or not, he could also do so to obtain equipment."

Conn shook his head. The radio earpiece built into his ceramic headgear crackled.

"Position Three reporting, Lieutenant Derrek," Agent Payne's voice said. "No activity here."

"Understood. Keep your eyes open."

"Yes, sir. I've got to admit, though, these Whistles are making me nervous. You know, after the thing in the alley the other day."

"I know what you mean, but we've got to work with what we've got."

"I understand, sir. I just wish it wasn't so creepy."

Conn turned to Abren, who was waiting impassively for him to finish with the remote check-in.

"What was I going to say? Oh, yeah, that was it. It's not that Tyler would deal with a fixer that bugs me. That part of it makes sense the way you explained it. My problem is that I can't see this guy, apparently some kind of a criminal mastermind if I believe Luveno's story, or at least a corp pro to go by his dossier, flapping his gums in front of some middleman. It doesn't mesh with his profile."

"I considered that," Abren stated. "Given your continued distrust of the information we have been provided in this case, I have attempted to analyze our latest assignment."

"Thanks, I appreciate the confidence." Conn surprised himself by finding that he had meant his remark literally, and not as a sarcastic crack.

"It was justified at the very least by the incident at Shadowedge. I do believe that Mr. Worthmann's story does appear plausible."

"Would you explain it to me?"

This time it was Abren's turn to be interrupted by one of the sentry posts making its regular report. Unlike Conn, he didn't need to speak or even subvocalize to send his message. As all a radio did was to send electronic signals to be converted into sound by the receiving unit, Abren's internal commlink simply generated the proper signals based on internally generated computer commands.

"In order to obtain what he needed from the fixer," the Siren said once he was done, "whether it was a person's services, weapons, or equipment, he very well might have had to provide some details of what he wanted it for so that the fixer could determine what he needed."

Conn mulled that one over in his head for a while.

"All right, so it's possible Gage is giving us the straight goods for once," he admitted, "but if Tyler really is going to break into the spaceport tonight, then where is he?"

### Chapter 24

At that particular moment, Tyler was leading his little group away from the elevators on the third floor of the command building. There was no one in the hallway, and he was grateful for it. He was still surprised, a bit, that no one had heard the explosion, but apparently it had gone unnoticed. Why not? The shaped charges minimized the amount of explosive needed and hence the noise, the building was designed with sound-absorbent walls to keep workers from disturbing one another, the people who were still working were likely involved in their own tasks, and most robots didn't take notice of anything that didn't directly interfere with their assigned tasks. That had, after all, been the plan.

Perhaps it was just that things were going so smoothly that made Tyler uneasy. Yes, there had been the incident with the Mechoman, but that had been resolved swiftly and efficiently without negative consequences. Tyler had been mentally geared up for complications, not to have everything fall into place.

He picked a likely office, one with a bare metal door and a nameplate on the wall reading, "Room 309, Lysander Karl, Logistics Associate." Just as Anje had promised, the lock was disengaged and the door opened into a small office. The four slipped inside, turned on the light, and closed the door so the android gridrider could work unobserved.

The room was a standard interior office, a windowless chamber not much larger than a cubicle outfitted with a desk, two chairs, and assorted office equipment. A holocube of a plump man in his forties, a matronly woman with her dark green hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a boy holding a puppy, all smiling at the camera, added the only personal touch to the tidy workspace. More important, of course, was the IMVE System II terminal set to the right of the desk blotter.

"That terminal's hardly computer enough for serious work," Tyler commented as Anje wired herself in. "Why are you going through it instead of hacking the dataline directly?"

"It does slow my reaction time somewhat, having to go through another processor, but I can deal with it. What I get in return, though, is worth it." She smiled with relish. "This terminal offers a direct link to the system mainframe, getting me past at least two levels of security, and all it needs is a passcode which I can tease out of the system easily enough."

Tyler picked up the holocube and turned it over.

"Save some teasing. Try DX3\*91AS."

"What?"

"D-X-three-asterisk-nine-one-A-5." He showed her the cube. "The average wageslave keeps his or her passwords written somewhere. It's way too embarrassing to admit to the computer staff that you've forgotten it."

The passcode worked, and soon Anje was dancing through the spaceport mainframe. A side effect of using the terminal was that the S-II insisted on putting up a visual representation of what the Demi was doing, so that everyone else could follow along, mostly. Windows and displays appeared and disappeared on the screen, sometimes subdividing, other times being replaced. Text maps and visual images were shown.

Suddenly, the main display, showing a directory of subsystems, began to flash red.

"Probes!" Anje exclaimed. "They're trying to signal an alarm, but--" The red flashes suddenly stopped. "There! Froze them solid! They won't be able to do anything, and they'll get in the way of other security programs too. That should be all I need to--aha! Silly mainframe, it doesn't have enough active memory designated for security to run most of its core defenses with those three frozen probes eating it all up. Presto! Last night's flight to Lianora, the complete mission reports."

She sounded smug, and Tyler had to admit she deserved it. Hale leaned in, intently studying the times, distances, velocities, thrust levels, and other details of the flight with a pilot's expert eye.

"Can you get this on paper?" he asked.

"Of course!" The printer hummed to life, spitting out page after page until Hale had a complete copy of both the ship's flight plan and the in-flight data.

"Perfect," Hale said. He slapped the pages with the back of his hand. "With these, I could get you to Lianora blindfolded. It's a space station in orbit around Algo. In fact, it's trailing directly in Palm's orbit, about a day behind the planet."

"Now we just need to get you a ship," Tyler said. "Anje, can you check on the status of the ships based here?"

"I can; just give me a second." She wasn't exaggerating by much; she spoke less than a minute later. "Four ships are fueled and ready for travel. Let's see, one is one of those automated ones, set for travel only between Palm and Mota. Then, there's a cargo freighter, but that's rated for a crew of four actual operators, not just a pilot and passengers. The other two...Thunderbird-class shuttles, both of them."

Tyler turned to Hale.

"Will those work for you?"

The pilot's head bobbed up and down.

"Yeah; they're utility shuttles. ASA always kept one or two of them up and ready for takeoff in case there was some kind of emergency, so they made sure that all of their pilots were rated on T-birds. Which one's closer?"

"I'm not sure," Anje said. "One's in Hangar III, the other on Pad II."

"The pad, then. That'll save us having to taxi through the spaceport, which would make it kind of obvious that something out of the ordinary is going on. I don't know about you guys, but I'd just as soon see the spaceport staff think nothing unusual is happening until we're out of range of their guns and missiles. Not that they don't have other fun surprises to throw at us, but I really don't want them ripping up the ship with plasma cannons before we can even get off the ground."

"Works for me," Risa said.

"It also means we don't have to bypass the security measures protecting the hangar," Tyler added. "We'll only be able to push our luck so far before it snaps."

"Don't remind me," Hale sighed.

They left the unknown Lysander Karl's office and again slipped back to the elevator. Once more they were lucky; they encountered no one in the halls. That the elevator was back waiting for them was not luck, though, as Anje had wired it to do just that. They got inside and the android reconnected herself to the building's maintenance and security systems. Her first move was to make the doors slide shut, hiding the group from view.

"So how do we get out of here?" she asked.

"The only doors are on the first floor," Tyler said, remembering the schematics.

"The side door's nearest," Hale said.

"Isn't that right past the staircase that runs up to that second-level lab?" Risa pointed out.

Hale scowled angrily.

"Damn, I forgot. That's the astronomy lab; those skags work in shifts and most of the time they use the stairs because of the way the place is laid out."

"Then it's the front door," Tyler said. "Can you handle the alarms for that route, too?" he asked Anje.

"Of course!" She slipped through the computer circuits once again, accomplishing her work even faster than before due to her familiarity with the system. "I reactivated the security on this floor, and opened a path for us directly to the main exit--basically, the door alarm and the cameras in the lobby and the elevator bank." She frowned, then added, "There's a guard post in the lobby. I've jammed their communications, but we'll have to take the guards out ourselves."

"How many?"

"I don't know. The security roster must not be kept on this computer; I'm pretty sure it only controls the building's machinery and physical systems."

Tyler sighed and raided the Kestrel.

"I guess there's no other choice. Remember, though, any humans or androids you see are just soldiers doing their jobs, so take them down alive if you can."

Anje set the elevator in motion; Hale looked in surprise at the ex-agent.

"You serious, Tyler? About trying not to gravestone the soldiers?"

"Yes, I am," he replied icily.

The black-haired pilot regarded him appraisingly, then bit at the first knuckle of his left hand through his fingerless gloves, a gesture that was obviously a longtime habit when he was thinking.

He was all business, though, when the elevator doors opened on the first floor, just like the other three. Their good luck continued to hold as they moved through the silent, empty halls with their gray faux-marble floor tiles and ultramodern walls, but broke when they reached the lobby. The guard post consisted of two square counters missing the backs on either side of a gray-tone metal arch, which was presumably a weapons detector. Behind each desk sat a soldier, wearing the dark blue uniform of a Palman soldier beneath titanium armor and headgear. Both were identically armed: a cannon strapped across the back for heavy work, a holstered laser shot for when the big rifle was inappropriate, and a laser knife for close combat. The bad news was that they were supported by a quartet of robots, two short, stubby Informers and two golden humanoid Poleziss.

Silently, Tyler indicated by gestures which member of the party should attack which targets. The robots were security models, and would definitely be equipped with internal communication systems, so if they were given the chance they could raise an alarm in spite of Anje's hacking.

Tyler raised his left hand as the four prepared themselves, then snapped it down as the signal to attack. The Kestrel's shrill scream slashed laser fire into one Informer while Anje's pulse cannon detonated the other one. For the second time, Tyler got to see Risa's special fighting skill, as her inner power drove her forward in a plunging claw thrust that inflicted severe damage to a Poleziss. She kept right on attacking with ferocious slashes, the laser claws ripping apart the robot's titanium exoframe and shredding the circuitry beneath.

The last Poleziss, though, was a problem. Not because Hale was a bad shot, which he wasn't, but simply due to the lack of power his weapon possessed. The soundburst from his sonic gun struck the robot in the back, cracking its armor but not penetrating. A second shot gouged its left shoulder, but now it was turning, and probably preparing to alert security control.

Hale thrust his palm out and cried, "FOI!" The searing arrow of flame launched itself from his hand, crashing into the robot's face as it turned around. Simultaneously, Tyler walked the spray of laser fire from his gun into the golden robot. Their combined attack put it down.

Meanwhile, the Palman soldiers were reacting in a disciplined fashion. Both immediately slapped the red alarm button on their consoles--an act which accomplished nothing due to Anje's tampering--and spun to face the threat while drawing their laser shots. The one on the left had just gotten his gun clear of its holster when the android's stasis beam struck him with verdant light and he slumped to the floor.

"Drop it!" Tyler commanded the second guard. As a loyal soldier, though, he only used the chance to pull the trigger. The laser hit Tyler's ceramic chestplate, which thankfully did its job and turned aside the attack. Tyler feinted right, then lunged forward and to the left, throwing off the soldier's aim. Planting his left foot, he changed direction by ninety degrees and launched himself at the guard as two hastily-fired shots missed him. Tyler slammed into the man, his armored shoulder crashing into the soldier's midriff just below the armor. A gasp filled Tyler's ears as the breath was driven out of the guard's body.

The two men crashed against the security console, then began to slip down. Tyler managed to catch his footing, pull his groggy opponent to his feet, and clip the point of the man's jaw with the butt of his pulse laser.

Risa took the opportunity to knock out the paralyzed guard.

"Not bad," Tyler said, surveying the results of the surprise attack. "All right, let's get moving. If anyone heard the fight--or if someone just happens to walk through here, which'll happen eventually--we're going to be knee-deep in troops."

They left the main control center, stepping from the sterile brilliance of artificial light to the nighttime darkness. Powerful lights illuminated this area too, but it was impossible to conceal the fact that it was night, and that the sky above was jet black. The group had intended to rush to Pad II as fast as they could, but it wasn't to be. Waiting for them outside the door was an arc made up of over twenty guards, including soldiers, Whistles, Poleziaxes, and surprisingly, DLE agents. There were even a pair of Firgammas, odd-looking military robots with four legs and shell-shaped heads dubbed "lightning bots" both for their speed and the electric projector mounted where their "face" would be.

A DLE agent with purple hair stepped forward, keeping the cannon in his hands leveled directly at Tyler.

"It seems that your hunch was correct," stated the Siren standing next to him.

"Yeah. It finally came to me that, since we'd waited so long already for them to break in and nothing happened, then maybe they were already here and we should be watching for them to break out."

"So what's it going to be?" Tyler challenged.

"What do you think? You're under arrest for murder, treason, and espionage. Or if you prefer to give up your right to a trial, you can try and shoot it out. Now, drop your weapons!"

The agent was right. They had no chance if they tried to fight; there were just too many of them, and no doubt many more ready to come to their support. Tyler dropped his gun, and the others followed his lead.

"Look at it this way," the agent said. "You'll get to enjoy something that not many people do anymore: a space flight...to the prison satellite, Gaila."

### Chapter 25

"What a sight," Conn sighed blissfully, looking down at the blue-and-green orb that was his homeworld. He had traveled in space before, as a child when his well-to-do parents had vacationed on Mota, but the experience was no less breathtaking now. The sheer wonder of it was almost enough to make the lieutenant forget the unease in his stomach over the Nuada affair.

"I must say, it does make me wish that I possessed the ability of biological entities to appreciate aesthetics," Abren remarked.

"Just wondering, here; if you can't appreciate aesthetics, how you know when you're looking at something that you'd enjoy more if you could?"

"In this case, from your reactions," the android replied eloquently. Conn had to smile at his partner.

"Yeah, I hadn't thought of it like that."

He turned away from the viewport and leaned back against the bulkhead, folding his hands behind his head.

"You seem troubled," Abren observed.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"What is bothering you? Your fears that we were sent on a 'wild goose chase,' as I believe the idiom is, by LIM did not materialize. Instead, you successfully deduced Tyler's tactics and captured him along with his associates. The operation was brought to a satisfactory conclusion."

Conn sighed heavily.

"I don't know. Maybe it's just that this whole thing has been giving me trouble from the first. Or maybe it's because the ending was way too pat. No detective work, no clues, we're just told to go somewhere and wait for Tyler to show up. The end."

"This operation was supposed to be an efficient combination of resources from the Division of Law Enforcement, the Palman military, and Luveno Industrial Mechanisms. I would hope that our combined efforts would minimize any of the usual difficulties of criminal investigation."

Conn grinned slightly.

"Do you expect committees to be productive, too?" His smile faded somewhat, then. "No, what I really mean is, we were supposed to be the lead investigators--you and I. Supported by the resources of our organizations, yes, but still the lead investigators. Instead we've functioned more like beat cops, going where our superiors say, questioning whom they say to question, arresting whom they say to arrest. The only time I've made an independent decision, I got called on the carpet for it--yeah, I know it was something of a numbwit move, but it's an odd coincidence. As for actual, honest-to-goodness investigation, we haven't done jack." He angrily slammed his fist against the bulkhead.

Abren remained silent for a moment before speaking.

"Admittedly, you are much more familiar with the investigative dynamic than I am. Still, I begin to understand your point."

"Yeah, well, here's another one for you. Remember those Whistles that decided to go crazy and gun down Rhys Hamdak? We haven't heard a thing about that from tek-forensics yet. Either someone's holding those reports and not passing them on to us, or the reports haven't been made yet. Either way it tells me that someone high up the food chain is interfering."

"Gage Worthmann again?"

Conn shook his head.

"He's involved, I'd bet, but I'm talking about someone placed inside the DLE or the military who can issue directives to the forensics unit. There must be someone working with Worthmann on whatever cover-up is being arranged."

A thought struck him, one that he'd had before.

"I'll tell you, Abren, you know what this feels like to me?"

"No," the android answered, missing the rhetorical nature of the question.

"I think that Project Nuada, whatever the heck it is, turned out to be a complete bust. Given the frenzy that's been whipped up over it, I'd deduce that major meseta and big promises were laid out, and that the corp's rep is on the line together with that of whomever in the top brass convinced Mother Brain to approve the design."

Warming to his theory, Conn continued, "LIM's got a bunch of juicy defense contracts that must bring in billions of meseta each year. Scion-Colesburg, Redfield, a whole bunch of guys would love to snap those up and a big enough debacle could make the government let them. Plus, there's the personal angle to it. The careers of whomever was behind Nuada on both sides wouldn't be worth a snowfall's chance in the Bortevo volcanoes."

"Then your hypothesis is that the plans for Nuada were not stolen?"

"Right. I think Gage and whatever cronies on our side of the fence he's got cooked up this whole thing as a scheme to cover their hind ends. I don't know how Tyler got into this mess, but he's clearly been slated for the role of patsy."

"Do you believe that the evidence against him has been fabricated?"

"What evidence? All the proof we have that he's involved at all is the word of our superiors in the mission briefing. I haven't seen any evidence at all of his involvement with the theft of Nuada or the murder of Eric Stephens."

"He was at Shadowedge, and again at the spaceport," Abren pointed out.

"So what? All that shows is that we were given good information about the whereabouts and activities of Tyler Jorran. It doesn't show that he has any connection to Project Nuada."

"That is logical," the Siren conceded. "I believe you have overlooked one thing, however. Rhys Hamdak's words did indicate a conjunction between Jorran and Stephens."

Conn frowned.

"Yeah, I forgot about that." Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute. Hamdak said that Tyler hadn't known Stephens until whatever happened at his shop. That wasn't until after the death. So you're right, there is a tie, but it actually tends to exonerate Jorran of the crime. That's not saying he's not a criminal; ex-corp agent usually means hunter and most of them walk outside the lines three-quarters of the time. We've got him cold on breaking and entering a military installation, destruction of government property, assault on a government official, and possession of an unlicensed Class III weapon. What I don't see is any connection to the crimes he's actually accused of."

The Siren stood impassively, showing no reaction. Unlike the Demis, Wren-type androids were not programmed to give humanlike gestures such as shrugs, headshakes, and nods to make people feel more comfortable around them and indicate what they were thinking. Still, Conn had the feeling that Abren was carefully considering Conn's theory, examining it against whatever he had seen and observed. If there was a hole in Conn's logic, his partner would find it. The DLE agent didn't think there was, though. It all felt too balanced, too well out-together. Maybe he hadn't figured everything out, but he had to be on to something.

At last, Abren spoke.

"I can see no evidence to justify your suppositions about the worthiness of Project Nuada. Conversely, your observations about the course of our investigation are quite accurate. Something is undeniably amiss." He paused, then said, "Jorran and his companions will be interrogated on Gaila to determine their precise role in this affair as well as to attempt to discover the whereabouts of the Project Nuada datafiles. This could yield valuable information. However, if your hypothesis is correct, Conn, then there is corruption within the military, presumably at a position and/or rank sufficient to prevent any testimony from entering the official record."

"'Committed suicide while in custody,' perhaps. Or, there's always the old standby, 'shot while trying to escape," Conn agreed grimly.

That was especially true, he realized, if Hamdak had been telling the truth. Even odds of that; lying to the cops was a fairly generic routine for guys like that when quizzed about their illegal activities. Still, if he'd been honest, then there was a link between Tyler and Stephens, and moreover Tyler was coming at this business from the outside. That would make it absolutely vital that he be silenced before he could relay any damaging information that could be used against the ones behind the cover-up. They'd do their best to learn everything Tyler knew, including the names of his associates and anyone else Tyler'd told about what he knew. Then they'd kill him, to keep the truth from getting out.

The view could wait, Conn decided. He had something else to do that couldn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, Tyler, you really screwed up this time, the ex-agent told himself, sitting on the cot in the transport's brig. The bare titan-armored walls were bleak and gray, reminding him of how badly it had all turned out. The security personnel had quickly and efficiently strip-searched him, removing everything he wore or carried and replacing it with dull green prison clothes. Plasma rings were secured around him, pinning his arms to his body--standard procedure for dangerous prisoners.

What Tyler did have left to him was time, so he used it. Risa had been right about him, after all. He had been wasting time gnawing over his shortcomings, when instead he should have been confronting them. Instead of castigating himself for going wrong, he tried to figure out why it had happened. When he turned his thoughts in that direction, what he couldn't get out of his mind were the charges the DLE lieutenant had accused Tyler of: murder, treason, and espionage.

Espionage, all right, that made some kind of sense. They had broken into what was technically a military installation and hacked its computer systems. So there were valid grounds for at least assuming that.

Murder, on the other hand, didn't make sense at all. Yes, Tyler had killed, both in the fight with the tech-gangers in Ossale Court and in the brawl at Shadowedge, but both times it had been in self-defense. The first instance had taken place away from witnesses in a part of Camineet where the authorities rarely if ever heard what was going on, and during the second time Tyler's strictly reactive role would have been recorded on the club's security cameras, which no DLE investigation would have failed to check.

There was the possibility of a frame. Perhaps LIM had laid the blame for the death of Dr. Margolis at Tyler's feet--destroy one leak and use the act to remove a second. Two for the price of one was an attitude that played well among the corporate set. Frames like that weren't easy to manufacture, though, especially when such an effective job had been done of destroying the real evidence that discovery of planted clues would have seemed suspicious.

It was the last charge, though, that really had an effect on Tyler. Treason. Until the spaceport break-in, Tyler hadn't done a thing that even impacted on the government's interest. The accusation of treason told him that one of his earlier suppositions had been correct: there was a definite link between Project Nuada and the military, and that there was corruption in the ranks, individuals who had decided that Tyler Jorran would make an ideal fall guy. The treason charge had to have been generated by that person or persons.

If it had been Tyler who was the military link to the Nuada experiments, he would have the prisoners interrogated to discover how much, if anything, they knew. Then, before they got the chance to tell anyone else about it, he'd have them killed, their bodies set adrift in space. Tyler, Risa, Anje, and Hale looked to be slated for just such a fate, or some variation thereof.

Tyler tried to pull his arms away from his sides, trying to see what kind of movement the plasmarings allowed, and soon learned that they gave up nothing at all. Escape wouldn't come that way; the rings would have to be turned off by someone not stuck in them at the time. He certainly couldn't do it while he was a prisoner.

He wondered what was happening to his companions. Whatever happened to Tyler, Hale and Risa would share the same fate. He felt badly about that, especially over Hale. Risa had chosen this path; it was her quest too and the consequences were hers to share by right, good or bad. The pilot, though, was only a hired assistant. He knew the job as Tyler had explained it, but not the background behind it, not everything that had happened so far. He didn't deserve to be caught up in this conspiracy.

Then there was Anje. Possibly she'd just be reduced to scrap metal. Even more likely, though, was an even worse alternative. The government could do a complete dump of her core programming, everything that made her Anje, and replace it with a newly-programmed personality designed to be law-abiding and subservient. She wouldn't just be dead, she'd be someone else entirely with beliefs completely opposed to her original ones.

The realization left Tyler all the more determined to somehow escape captivity. It wasn't just Melora any more, not even the greater moral duty to the people of Palm. The friends and allies he'd met for the first time on his return to Camineet needed him. Unfortunately, from where he sat, there didn't seem to be anything he could do to help.

A face appeared at the armored glass window of Tyler's cell door. The intercom system that allowed communication in and out of the nearly soundproof room beeped.

"Tyler, we need to talk."

### Chapter 27

Gaila. The name sent chills through the hearts of hardened criminals and turned their guts to water. Common lawbreakers were not sent to the prison satellite; its confines were reserved for those whose crimes were political in nature: spies, traitors, terrorists, traitors, and members of the armed forces who had committed sufficiently serious breaches of the Service Code. Mother Brain called these people "enemies of Algo" when she had announced the construction of Gaila, declaring that as enemies of the state had rejected the beneficence of the Algo System, they would pay for their crimes in a place that was no part of any of the system's three planets. Their crimes were viewed as so repugnant that they had forfeited their right to live on the worlds that had given them life.

There were other stories about the horrors of Gaila, too, but they were mostly the same as inevitably grew up around any maximum-security military prison. The real difference was that when you were sentenced to Gaila, you were sent out there. Not only was escape as difficult as possible, but if you got away, what then? What was there to escape to except the cold blackness of empty space?

The artificial satellite was a huge complex. Not only did it have to house and contain the prisoners, but also be self-supporting, generating food, oxygen, water, and power. To reduce the strain on the hydroponic farms, most of the guards were robots, elite Tracer and Poleziss models. This measure also sharply reduced the corruption and brutality that Palman psychology seemed to breed in prison environments.

Conn remembered something a repeat offender had told him once. While he had never been sent to Gaila, the man had done time in several prisons on Palm. His experience had been that while the occasional sadistic guard certainly hadn't been good, the almost antiseptic, icily efficient routine of a robot-run jail had been much worse. The process was completely dehumanizing--wake up, eat, exercise, sleep, over and over again like the prisoner, too, was nothing more than a machine being run by robot operators. How much worse would that be in the utterly artificial environment of a space fortress?

Sympathy for lawbreakers wasn't something Conn felt very often, but he pitied those sentenced to Gaila. Death, he thought, might have been a kinder fate.

Of course, death probably was the ultimate destiny planned for Tyler, Risa, Anje, and Hale. Those four were presumed to be terrorists and traitors, and death was the punishment prescribed for treason. From what Conn had encountered so far, it didn't look like any of his superiors had a vested interest in proving the four innocent, either.

Were they innocent? Tyler's story was outlandish, the kind of thing cooked up by conspiracy theorists who blamed the "Evil Government" for the spaceship collision disaster four years ago, the theft of the Sword of Ango from the Palman History Museum, or the revolt of the Espers on Mota several centuries ago. The problem was, it also held together, both in internal logic and when compared to outside evidence. It held together much better, Conn added mentally, than what he had been told by his own superiors.

In fact, Tyler's story reminded Conn of his own hypothesis. True, if Tyler was right those behind Project Nuada were trying to cover up public knowledge of the criminal acts behind the project rather than a waste of time and money, but the motivation was the same: prevent a public scandal! Save face! Protect careers! The conclusions as to who was doing what to whom were still preserved.

The real difference between the two theories was the moral imperative. If the government and Luveno were wasting money and framing a group of hunters over it, that was bad but it was also business as usual. If, on the other hand, the Palman military was involved in kidnapping people and turning them into test subjects for who knew what reason, that was something else, something that had to be rooted out and stopped regardless of the cost.

The downside, Conn realized grimly, was that the cost was likely to be his own career. Whistle-blowers in the ranks weren't well-regarded by anyone at the DLE, and the fact was, besides, that he didn't even know who to blow the whistle on. It would have to be blown, though; Tyler had almost convinced Conn by himself but Conn's interviews with the others had cemented it. Risa hadn't been too helpful; her only suggestion had been anatomically impossible. Hale didn't know much of his own knowledge, though he could verify both the computer search for Lianora and the fact--which Tyler hadn't mentioned--that Tyler had instructed the group not to kill the soldiers on guard. The finishing touch had been Anje, though, who had backed up Tyler on every point and with the precision to be expected from an android.

Conn shook his head, still a bit amazed. After several days as Abren's partner, the scarlet Demi's eerie combination of Palman emotions and mannerisms with her AI's thought processes had left him almost shaken. To clear his head, he glanced at his chronograph. Barring anything sudden happening, they were about an hour and a half from Gaila. That didn't leave a lot of time for him to act.

There were three possible choices. The easy way, the safe way, was to do nothing, keep quiet, and accept his orders, but that was out. If he had been the kind of person who could just ignore injustice in front of him and accept corruption, he'd have gone into politics or taken up one of the corps on their offer when he'd graduated. Choice two was to begin his own investigation into Tyler's allegations. Unfortunately, the likelihood of ever bringing LIM or their military allies to court was just about nil, given their power. The politicians might stand for a private, in-house cleansing, but they would never tolerate a public scandal. That would destroy people's confidence in the public institutions, they would say. Better to let a few go unpunished than undermine the entire system. The logic was faulty, wrong conclusions based upon spurious premises, but it was nonetheless the reasoning dredged up every time an injustice within the system was raised.

That left the third option. Conn wasn't sure precisely when it had opened itself up as a possibility, when he had been able to see it as a viable alternative, but he did know the moment he had chosen to accept it. The elevator was carrying him from the lower deck to the ship's bridge when he reached his decision. As the door slid open, his laser shot was already drawn.

There was no hesitation in Conn's actions. Hesitation would mean disaster, second-guessing spell his end. He had made the choice, and he had to go forward with it. He zeroed his gun in, the red dot of the targeting laser pinpointing the back of the Twig Man robot's head as it sat at the communications board. Slight pressure on the trigger unleashed the lethal blue-white beam, which reduced the robot's main processor to slag. The Twig Man's body crashed from its chair, the stump of its neck spitting sparks. Conn was already changing targets, aiming at the bridge's only other occupant, the Warren android who acted as pilot.

The Warren was unarmed, but that didn't make it defenseless. Not only was it equipped with a powerful Flare Shot unit similar to Abren's, but it was also programmed with at least a basic knowledge of hand-to-hand combat, and probably more, being a military model. Conn put three shots into it, blasting sparking holes through its armor, sending the android staggering back into the control array. He then flung himself aside, barely in time to avoid the beam of the Flare Shot the Warren fired in desperation.

A large hole was gouged in the main door to the bridge right behind where Conn had been standing, but the agent took no notice of the damage. Instead, he was rolling, already hearing the pulsing hum of the android initiating its Recover utility, ordering its self-repair systems to operate at full capacity while diverting power from other areas. Conn popped up from his roll in a shooter's crouch, arms extended, actually seeing the holes in the android's structure growing smaller.

Recovering, however, left the android at a disadvantage in battle. Its reflexes were sluggish, the attention of its circuitry given over almost entirely to curing old damage rather than preventing--or inflicting--new. Conn took advantage of the distraction to fire at its unprotected torso. He was an excellent marksman, and the Warren was a much less challenging target in the close confines of the bridge than the goals on the practice range had been. The bolts from the laser shot not only struck home but found the vital spots they had been aimed at. The constant flow of serious damage was too much for its overstressed Recover capacity to handle. The android went down, no more than a tangle of sparking, ruined electronics. Conn stood over it and obliterated the main processor in its torso, to make sure it wouldn't, somehow, regain functionality.

Afterwards, he glanced around the bridge, the realization of what he'd done catching up to him. Conn had rebelled against his job, against his ethical beliefs, turned his whole life on its head with one violent act. He had done it because he believed Tyler and saw an absolute need to stop what Luveno was doing, but he had done it all the same.

The next step, he knew, was to free the prisoners. In accordance with standard protocol, two guards had accompanied each prisoner to the spaceship, apart from Conn and Abren and the one-android, four-robot crew. Thankfully, the guards were all robots; only Conn had the rank and position to be permitted to fly in space. Nonetheless, he would need the help of Tyler and the others to defeat them.

He'd also need Hale to fly the ship, now that its only pilot was gone.

Smiling wryly, Conn thought that it was all part and parcel of the same pattern. By deciding to free the prisoners and fight LIM and Project Nuada with guns and techniques instead of words, he'd bet all the material things in his life on his success, so why not his life itself?

Now, if the ship just doesn't get hit by a meteoroid while there's no pilot...

Conveniently, Tyler's group's equipment had been brought along on board as evidence, so Conn headed for that first. The fight on the bridge might as well not have happened, for all the Poleziax on guard in the cargo bay knew.

"This is a secure area," the robot stated. "Please show your identification."

Conn showed his badge.

"Lieutenant Derrek, DLE. I need to review some of the physical evidence taken from the prisoners. Where is it?"

"The third locker on the left."

"Thank you."

The cargo lockers were actually large bins, sealed by flip-up doors that could be secured by keypad-controlled locks. The display bar showed red, indicating that the door was locked.

"What's the lock code?"

"3634."

Conn typed it in, then turned the handle. A hiss of air sounded as the airtight seal was broken. Inside, the prisoners' weapons, armor, and equipment were kept in sealed, labeled plastic bags. Conn was surprised at the care the military was taking with the evidence while running the coverup. Then again, they did want to find out everything Tyler and his companions knew, and good investigative procedure was valid regardless of what was being investigated.

After a few moments' consideration, Conn picked up a hard-sided transport case, a bit larger than a briefcase, and loaded it with the items he felt most important: Tyler's pulse laser, Risa's claws, and Hale's sonic gun. He wanted to take the Demi's pulse cannon too, but it was simply too obvious to carry through the ship's corridors or into the brig. He'd have to fight the robots sooner or later, but he wanted to do it on his own terms, preferably with backup. Conn shut the case and snapped the latches shut.

"Thank you. Is there a log to record that I've taken these items?"

"There is no register or cargo manifest."

"That's stupid, but it's useful." Conn walked past the robot to the doorway, then stopped and turned around. "Oh, by the way, there's one more thing."

"What is that, sir?"

"This."

He shot the robot, gun snapping into his hand and firing from the hem. The Poleziax staggered back, raising its arm to fire its internally mounted mini-vulcan as its artificial brain switched to combat mode, but Conn's laser shot did its work again, finishing off the robot. Conn closed the door as he left the cargo bay, keeping the evidence of his activities from being seen by any passing robot.

The trip to the brig took only a few minutes, but each took a lifetime for the lieutenant. With every step he expected to hear alarm klaxons signaling a red alert, and when he passed a Poleziss in the corridor he expected the goldtone robot to see his betrayal in his heart and attack. Nothing happened, though, and he reached the brig without incident.

The same robots were on guard from when he had visited the prisoners: a Wirehead and two Informers. The Wirehead was an oddity, a nearly immobile security robot that looked like nothing more than an upside-down egg, the "head," mounted on a pile of cables and circuitry. While it could not move from place to place with any speed, it could move its "head" rapidly to zero in on new targets. Essentially it was a mobile gun target with a fairly developed tracking and threat assessment system; it could take verbal orders but was unable to communicate.

Conn went to the front of Tyler's cell, set down the case on its side, popped the latches, and opened it facing the cell door. Tyler raised an eyebrow, seeing the weapons, but didn't comment, which was good. Conn didn't want any wrong or sudden moves or words to alert the robots that a jailbreak was going on. He pulled open the bag around Tyler's gun, then stood.

"I hope you know what's good for you," he told the ex-agent, a description which he supposed applied as much to himself now.

"I think so," Tyler replied, "though I don't have all the reasons straight in my head yet."

"In your position, you don't need to."

"That's just what I was thinking."

The two men looked at one another and nodded, a silent bond of understanding forming between them. Conn concentrated, focusing his mind into the proper frame for technique use. This would take split-second timing between the two of them, and a lot of luck. Conn took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, launched into action.

The lieutenant's hand flicked up, switching off the lock for Tyler's cell door and the plasma ring controls in one motion, then he continued to pivot, thrusting both hands out in front of him. Conn could feel the surge of energy as he unleashed the technique.

"GRA!"

A wave of gravitational energy swept across the brig. It knocked away a table and chairs meant for the convenience of human jailers, and found the three robots. The technique assaulted their structure, drawing it in on itself, ignoring their armor plating to snap and bend the fragile circuitry within.

Tyler used the opportunity provided by Conn's attack to pull free of the now uncharged plasma rings and thrust the cell door open. Rather than grabbing up the Kestrel, he instead leveled his hand at the Wirehead and unleashed the TSU technique. The searing beam flashed by Conn's head, blasting the already-damaged robot apart.

Meanwhile, the Informers were already responding, their weapons tracking Conn. No doubt the robots were already trying to contact the bridge to raise an alarm, but there was no one there to respond. A door in one's side popped open, and an electric beam lashed out, missing Conn by inches. The other's aim was better, but its mini-vulcan rounds were turned by Conn's ceramic-armor breastplate.

Tyler had recovered his gun by then, and he swept the two stubby robots with a burst of laser fire as Conn drew his own laser shot and put several blasts into them for good measure.

"So," Tyler remarked when it was over, "why the change of heart?"

"Because what you told me, what Anje told me, and what I'd learned and discovered on my own all fit together. I'm stuck in the middle of a cover-up and I won't be a part of that. It's like you figured, someone way up the food chain is behind this and they have to be rooted out forcibly."

"You do realize that at this point, the only way any of us will be able to return to our lives will be to expose the scam, with proof, and get a pardon from Mother Brain for it?"

Conn shot him a grin.

"Heck, Tyler, I can do you one better. The only way any of us are getting out alive is if we get that pilot of yours up to the bridge before this ship runs into something. I already took out the pilot."

Tyler shook his head in amazement.

"Conn, when you decide to rebel, you don't do it halfway."

They quickly freed the others and gave back Risa and Hale's weapons.

"So the cop's now on our side?" Risa boggled.

"Yes; unfortunately the military robots are not," Tyler told her, then turned to the pilot. "Hale, Conn's already disabled the bridge crew, so we need your services."

Hale nodded.

"I'm with you. What is this thing, anyway? An LX-type corvette, I know from the look I got from the outside, but I couldn't tell whether it's a Fiblira, Parolit, or Starwalker class."

"Hey, I don't know a thing about spaceships. Does it matter?"

"If it's a Starwalker. That class is completely automated for its flight systems. It doesn't need a pilot and wouldn't know what to do with one."

"Then, if it is, we'll wind up docking at Gaila even if we do take over the ship?" Conn asked.

"Basically."

"Let's hope it isn't, then."

"Enough chatter," Tyler said. "Hale, you get up to the bridge and get the ship under our control. Anje, why don't you go with him? There may be security lockouts on the navigational computers to deal with situations like this, so you should probably be there if trouble arises." He looked over the two of them. "You're a bit under-armed if you run into security robots. Risa, why don't you go with them?"

The green-haired girl nodded.

"All right, I'm on it."

Tyler then turned back to Conn.

Since you had our weapons, I figure the rest of our equipment is on board as well?"

"That's right; it was just too obvious to carry."

"Why don't you and I get it now. We can reequip on the bridge, secure the ship, and head for Lianora."

Conn nodded. Tyler was quickly and efficiently assuming command, which rubbed him the wrong way, but he wasn't going to make a fuss over it, at least not while time was of the essence and Tyler's plans made sense.

"All right, let's go, then."

Conn and Tyler got to the cargo bay without incident, but their luck didn't hold on the way from there to the bridge. Their skill was still with them, however; they destroyed the Poleziss with little trouble.

The three on the bridge had also handled their jobs efficiently. When Conn and Tyler got there, Hale was seated at the controls and Anje had linked to the navigational computer.

"I guess this is the right kind of ship," Conn concluded.

"Welcome to the Parolit-class corvette Freewind, ship serial number LXP-1270. This baby's one of the newest multipurpose craft around, less than a decade old," Hale enthused, patting the console. "It's almost going to be worth getting gunned down by the military just to fly her."

"She's also got one less of those stubby little bots than she did an hour ago," Risa added smugly. Apparently she'd taken care of another Informer on the way to the bridge.

"That should leave five more robots to deal with," Conn tallied the destruction mentally. "One Informer, two Poleziax, another Wirehead stationed near the docking hatch, and just for fun, a Firgamma."

"Any chance of ordering them to leave us alone?" Tyler asked him.

"Uh-uh. I'm DLE and they're military robots. I can give them certain commands, but I don't have the rank or position I'd need to override basic programming like 'shoot escaping prisoners on sight.' They've pretty much got dog-brains, nothing better, so they can't adapt to changing conditions the way an android could."

Mentioning androids made him think of the one other person on board the Freewind, his partner. With his logical mind, Abren would easily see that the case against Tyler was at best superficial even if he wasn't convinced that it was an outright lie. The problem was, would he go along with Conn's rejection of the orderly, legal way of doing things?

"The data obtained from the spaceport flight records has been assimilated into the navigation computers," their own android interjected. "The course data for our position relative to Lianora's is laid in, Hale."

"I've got it," the pilot said. "Any objections to changing course now, before we show up at Gaila?"

"None at all," Tyler replied. "We can settle up with the robots on the way."

"Consider it done." Hale tapped a few keys and the ship lurched. Since its artificial gravity remained constantly oriented with the floor, the feeling of turning was different than in an aerojet, but the sensation of motion as the body's inertia reacted to the change in velocity was unmistakable. The view of the starfield outside shifted as well. "Flight One to Lianora is now on course."

The scream of an alert klaxon combined with the lambent red glow from a light on the control array shattered the mood.

"What the hell was that?" exclaimed Risa.

"Trouble in the engine room!" Hale reported. "Someone's tampering with the main drive!"

The girl looked at him wryly. "Looks like Flight One is going to be one-way unless we do something fast."

### Chapter 28

"Conn, Anje, come on," Tyler said. He had assumed a leadership role of the little group right after being released; it was easy enough to do because Risa, Hale, and Anje already looked to him for direction. Conn was the wild card. He had official rank, and from his point of view he was going way out on a limb because he believed in them. Surprisingly, he hadn't objected to Tyler giving commands. At least, not until then.

"Wait a minute," he said, holding his hand up. "Why us?"

"Yeah," Risa added, "why are you leaving me behind?"

"You've been wearing your armor the whole time," Tyler told Conn. "Anje's is installed directly into her body. I put mine on just now when we fished it out of storage. Risa, you're still in prison clothes, and so is Hale. Besides, Hale's got to stay here to keep the ship under control, and someone's got to protect him. I don't want all four of us to go running off to the engine room only to have a pack of robots break into the bridge while we're gone."

The Freewind gave a sudden lurch.

"Look, will you people move it?" Hale exclaimed. "I don't know how much longer it's going to take before the damage can't be fixed!"

Anje disconnected herself from the computer and picked up her plasma cannon. When it came time to be efficient, the little Demi was the best of them all. Tyler and Conn were on her heels leaving the bridge. The three of them moved rapidly through the ship, setting up fields of covering fire as they advanced and being on the alert for robotic ambushes. Nothing happened, though, until they reached the engine room.

The Freewind's engine room was at the extreme rear of the corvette. It spanned the ship's three decks vertically, ringed by catwalks so any part of the machinery could be reached for easy maintenance. Here were not only the engines themselves, but also the micro-fusion powerplant that provided energy for the spacedrive as well as the entire ship. Red emergency lights illuminated the entire area in a bloody haze, cut by the brilliant bolts of light from energy weapons.

The engine room's automated defenses were in place, which was a bad sign. Heavy, retractable steel and titan shields had slid into place over the most vulnerable parts of the machinery, and the eerie green glow surrounding them revealed the presence of energy barriers.

Attacking the engines were an array of robots: an Informer and a Poleziax cut at the shields with vulcan rounds, while the Firgamma Conn had mentioned--a fast-moving, four-legged robot with a flat, circular head--launched bolts of electricity from the lightning projector mounted on its face. In front of the pillar-shaped reactor were the shattered remains of another Poleziax, probably the Freewind's engine maintenance robot. Its primary duty would have been to protect the engines, so the others had been forced to destroy it.

"Cease fire!" a voice commanded loudly. The room's last occupant was a Siren, cannon in its hands, Flare Shot unit extended for firing. It had not been shooting, however, but instead the android was simply waiting, watching the doors.

The robots obeyed orders and stopped trying to wreck the engines and reactor. They turned, aiming their weapons at the three intruders but not attacking. In that, they matched Tyler, Conn, and Anje, who had their guns leveled and ready but did not fire.

"Abren, what are you doing?" Conn exclaimed.

"I deduced from your behavior earlier that you were tending towards precipitous action. When I discovered that you had freed the prisoners, it seemed logical that you would attempt to destroy the security robots one by one, most likely by ambush, in order to minimize the risk to yourselves. Therefore, once my conclusions had been verified by our change in course, I generated a situation in which you would be forced to react and drawn into a battle on our terms rather than yours."

Psychological assessment and small unit tactics. Tyler was highly impressed by the sophistication of the emotionless android's AI. Being pragmatic about such things, though, he preferred foes who were stupid and careless. He cared about results, not "the joy of the fight"--especially since Melora's life was depending on his success.

"You could have destroyed the ship!" Conn protested.

"That was a possible outcome. It would have been unfortunate if that had occurred, but it would have been an effective method of preventing the escape of the prisoners."

"Abren, you know as well as I do that this assignment is a farce. We're nothing more than the cleanup crew for bigwigs who don't want to get their hands dirty!"

"While melodramatic, your description appears to be essentially accurate."

"Then why are you trying to stop me?"

"It is the course mandated by my own programming. Where you are driven by moral imperatives, I obey my programming directives in accordance with their allotted hierarchy. Above all, I must obey orders as an officer of the Palman military."

Conn stared at the preternaturally calm Siren in amazement.

"But...but you know that those orders were given due to corruption on the ranks and work contrary to the goals of the government."

"My orders come from Mother Brain."

"Only because she was deceived!"

"The orders of Mother Brain are not to be questioned. If you surrender now and the prisoners return to their cells, I will assist you in proving the guilt of Gage Worthmann and the others you suspect, but my duty to capture Tyler and his confederates remains paramount."

This was turning unpleasant quickly, Tyler thought. Conn was an unknown quantity, and like any honest cop he would have a strong dedication to law and order--the legal way of doing things. Once past the point of no return Conn would press on without complaint, but now the Siren was holding out hope that, just maybe, he hadn't hit that point after all. That there was still a chance to turn back. Tyler could see the indecision on the agent's face.

It would have been so easy to make the decision for Conn by simply opening fire. That would have gained the advantage of surprise in the fight as well as forcing Conn to stay on Tyler's side out of self-defense. Only, he couldn't make himself do it. He could only stand mutely, waiting for Conn to reach a decision.

The DLE lieutenant's jaw clenched. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

Wait a minute, Tyler thought. He's not thinking it over, he's--

"GRA!"

It came as a surprise and a relief when the surge of gravitational energy called up by Conn's technique enveloped the robots and Abren rather than Tyler and Anje. For once, though, Tyler's reflexes were working at full capacity. Almost as soon as Conn launched the technique, the ex-agent was sending a stream of laser fire from the Kestrel into the odd-shaped Firgamma. Meanwhile, Anje was activating her Barrier unit to protect against the enemy's return attacks.

Tyler was already in motion, darting to his right by the time their mechanical enemies were ready to respond. The Firgamma, damaged but not destroyed, lashed out with a brilliant bolt of electricity that slammed into Anje. The Barrier, thankfully, saved her from what would have been a crippling attack, but it still hurt her. Tyler ducked behind a pillar supporting the catwalk just in time; the energy pulse from the Poleziax's neural paralyzer struck it harmlessly. He leaned out around the column and swept the robots with laser fire.

Unfortunately, Abren had chosen to raise a Barrier of his own rather than counterattack and the lambent shields absorbed much of the violence of Tyler's assault. The Barrier was much more effective than Anje's was, not because it was of superior quality but because of how each side was armed: Tyler, Conn, and Anje's guns were all energy weapons, while Abren, the Informer, and the Poleziax had projectile weapons available.

Protected or not, the detonation from Anje's plasma cannon was still powerful enough to decimate the already-damaged Firgamma, keeping it from tracking her with its deadly lightning. Tyler holstered his gun and drew his knives. Conn, meanwhile, was locked up with the Informer in a running battle that drew both of them away from the reactor.

Tyler spun, rolled, and zigzagged away from the stanchion, trying to close the range with the enemy while avoiding the spray of fire from the Poleziax's mini-vulcan. He could hear the slugs ring off the metal floor and walls as he charged, rushing the robot in much the same way he had attacked the guard in the spaceport lobby. The end of the charge was different, though. Rather than trying to take the enemy alive, the attack finished with two savage knife thrusts into the machine's body. Nonconductive handles kept the electrical current flowing through the Poleziax from making a surprise counterattack. Relentless, Tyler hacked again and again until the robot was defeated.

The battle between the androids, Tyler noted, appeared to be evenly matched. Anje had the more powerful weapon, but Abren's was unaffected by their mutual Barriers. The Siren was specifically designed for war, but the Demi was a more advanced machine. Each had been damaged before engaging each other, Anje by the Firgamma's electric attack and Abren by Conn's GRA. As Tyler prepared to intervene, Anje tried to overload the Siren's systems with her Spark attack in the same way she had at the club. The Siren seemed to shudder, but this time nothing happened.

"That won't work on me again," Abren told her flatly. "I know the pattern of your unit's attack and can compensate for it."

He leveled his cannon to fire, and Tyler launched himself at the android's side. Abren released the gun with his left hand and swung his metallic fist in an arc faster than the ex-agent would have believed possible, crashing it against the side of Tyler's head. Tyler was slammed back against the reactor, his vision clouded by a red haze different from the one that lit the engine room. Only his headgear had kept him conscious, possibly even alive.

Anje took advantage of the diversion Tyler's attack had generated by leveling her plasma cannon at Abren and methodically blasting a sphere of green energy into his midsection. He took a step back, jolted by the impact, then steadied himself and blew a huge chunk out of Anje's right side in return.

Damn, is he going to take us all out by himself? Tyler thought, trying to collect his senses.

Suddenly the bright beam of Conn's laser shot slashed across the room, slicing into the android's weapon. Abren responded at once, launching a Flare Shot at his former partner. Neither could draw a bead on the other; the best they managed were a couple of glancing hits that armor and their Barrier protection reduced to virtually nothing.

Knees shaking, Tyler managed to stagger forward towards Abren's unguarded back. He raised the two knives high, then slammed them down into the Siren with all his strength. The one in his left hand was turned aside by the android's armor plating, but the second knife's keen edge sank in to the hilt, severing wiring and circuitry. Abren's entire body jerked, not as a reflexive reaction to pain but due to the damage Tyler had inflicted. He lurched forward, ripping the weapon out of Tyler's weakened grip, then turned back to confront the other threats. He never got the chance.

The detonation of the plasma charge was thunderous in Tyler's ears. Partially stunned as he was, the impact knocked him flat on his backside. It did a lot more to Abren, though. Barrier or no Barrier, the direct hit to the side of the android's torso was too much for its battle-damaged structure. Its chest, the site of its central processor and memory core, basically vanished, while Abren's head bounced once, then came to rest at the base of the reactor.

"Recover from that," Anje snapped angrily. Apparently she's put her own Recover utility to good use; the damage to her side was completely repaired.

Tyler couldn't help but chuckle at the image, the cute little android standing bold and defiant over her fallen foe, spouting victory quips straight from a holovid cop show.

The actual cop, though, wasn't laughing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Were the two of you close?" Tyler asked Conn quietly some time later. Hale was still at the controls, and Anje and Risa had gone to remove the last hostile robot on board the Freewind. That left the two men with time on their hands.

"I've been working with you for less than two hours and you're already asking personal questions? You don't waste time, do you?"

"I just wanted to know where you stood, that's all. My old partner is the reason I'm involved in this, though of course she wasn't an android."

Conn shrugged.

"True, I can't see falling in love with a mech, even one like Anje who's probably capable of the emotion."

He ran his hand through his hair.

"Though I know what you're getting at. No, it wasn't easy for me to start shooting it out with my partner." He didn't mention the chance to redeem his position Abren had held out to him, and Tyler didn't try to go there. "We weren't really close, though. Heck, we only started working together the night you flew in to Camineet. If I've got the timing right, I got my marching orders right after you and the girl left Hamdak's. Somebody'd probably been watching the passenger lists, and when you showed up, they started the wheels of conspiracy turning."

"No doubt knowing to look for me by interrogating Melora."

"Probably," Conn agreed. He sighed. "You know, Tyler, what gets me is that I'm sure Abren was never actually part of the coverup. He was an honest officer investigating a crime just like I was. He didn't need to be corrupt, because they knew he'd follow orders right or wrong. He wasn't a threat to them, not so long as they couldn't be brought down within the system."

"Makes me wonder if we can do any better outside the system," Tyler said.

"Have to try it."

"We wouldn't be us, otherwise."

"Nope, we wouldn't. Do you have a plan?" Conn asked.

"Go to Lianora, rescue Melora and anyone else we can, blow away the bad guys, get our hands on as much physical evidence and computer data and as many witnesses as possible to prove we're not crazy traitors, then dump the whole thing in Mother Brain's lap and let her clean the dirt out of her government."

"In other words, you don't have a plan."

Tyler grinned.

"Well, if you want to put it that way...Besides, none of us know anything about Lianora, so we can't make any useful preparations anyway." It was basic military science; you couldn't plan for the unknown, only ready yourself as best you could physically, mentally, and with equipment, then hope for the best. He said as much to Conn.

"Then we'd better hope our preparations are enough."

"If they aren't, we'll find out."

"That," the lieutenant observed dryly, "is what worries me."

### Chapter 30

The most notable thing about the Freewind's path through space was how uneventful it was. Tyler had been expecting patrol craft, fighters, or perhaps some spacegoing variation on the Aerotank flying robot. Instead, the sum total of what they encountered was nothing. It bothered Conn too, so much that he asked about it.

"Nah," Hale replied easily. "Outer space ain't exactly small, and there ain't a whole lot out here by way of patrols. See, there's barely any legit space travel since the ban, so it's a big waste of cash for the government to maintain a fleet."

"So how do they stop smugglers?" Tyler asked curiously.

"Well, the whole point of smuggling is to get something from point A to point B, and in space smuggling you don't have too many points: Palm, Mota, Dezo, and a few of the artificial satellites. Palm and Mota are both surrounded by a web of tracking satellites combined with regular patrols, and there's at least a nominal presence around Dezo, mostly concentrated to cover the Skure area."

"So you can fly around all you want; the only trouble comes if you want to take off or land."

"Which is fine for us, since we aren't going to any of the planets anyway," Hale concluded. He tapped a few buttons, making minor adjustments to their course and speed.

"Unless the engines blow up," Risa grumbled. The girl from the streets was having a difficult time adapting to space travel, especially after the life-or-death struggles had stopped and she had time to think about it. Trouble in the engine room wasn't a thought that sat easily on a mind already nervous about the whole idea.

"Don't worry about that," Hale assured her. "I've run through the damage-control diagnostics twice, and Anje's made a physical inspection on top of that. The automated defenses kept anything more than cosmetic damage from being done. I tell you, they ought to install those on all ships, even emergency shuttles. It would be a major jump in terms of safety."

"I'm in favor of anything that keeps the ship from exploding around me," Risa agreed.

"Lianora will have its own radar," Tyler noted, ignoring the momentary tangent. "We may not get hit by patrols on the way there, but they'll be sure to spot our approach as we get near."

Hale grinned.

"Not if we're lucky. This is a top-of-the-line multirole military ship, designed to carry out all kinds of tasks, including stealthy raids on enemy targets."

"And?"

"And, in order to do that, it's been equipped with stealth capability. In stealth mode, the Freewind is completely invisible to radar."

"Ni-ice," Anje admired.

Hale nodded, still grinning.

"That's the truth. The only way they'll see us is if someone looks out a window. Or if they've got a canceller."

"A canceller?"

"A module that can be hooked into a radar array. Essentially, it enables the radar to detect the cloaking field, which pretty much negates the point of stealth mode."

Conn hooked his thumbs into his belt.

"Okay, I'll bite. What are the odds that Lianora's got one of those cancellers?"

"If they've got standard equipment for an artificial satellite, none. Cancellers were equipped on interceptors, ships designed to hunt smugglers, space pirates, and enemy raiders. At least when I was with the ASA, the military mind was fixated on the canceller as a tool for attack, not as a defense."

"That's not particularly bright."

"Tyler," Conn interjected in response, "if you're expecting brilliance from the top brass, you're giving rise to some hard questions about the state of your own brain."

Hale raised his hands, drawing everyone's attention back to the pilot.

"There's another consideration. Even if they do have a canceller, it's not going to do them any good if they're not using it. Those things eat power, so they're not left on full-time. If we use ours, for example, then we can't use our weapons at the same time."

"This ship has a canceller?" Risa asked. "Would you tell me why the hell anything with all these features was being used to transport prisoners? It's as if the DLE used a bloody landrover--the armored kind with guns and cluster bombs and all that--to run crooks to the local lockup!"

She had a point, or at least it seemed that way to Tyler, but after a bit of thought he found the holes in it.

"I think you may be underestimating our importance to them. This Project Nuada is obviously the pet operation of someone very high up, and we've stepped on the toes of the single biggest corp on Palm, besides. The DLE just might use that landrover to haul the head of a crime syndicate, to make damn sure they didn't lose him after they finally caught him." He turned to the pilot as another thought struck him. "Hale," he asked, "are the prison facilities on this ship common?"

"Good guess. No, they're not. Only the larger ships were designed with brig facilities because they're the ones with crews."

A full crew wasn't necessary to operate the Freewind, Tyler knew. Hale could fly it by himself, perhaps with the assistance of another to operate the navigational computer. That wasn't the way the ship was designed, though. For the Freewind's original conception, Tyler could easily envision a pilot, a navigator, perhaps a weapons officer as well as a captain in overall command on the bridge. Then there would be a chief engineer on full-time engine room duty with at least one or two subordinates, another handful of crew members for general maintenance work, a detachment of marines if a boarding action or commando raid was planned, and a doctor plus a nurse or two to keep the crew healthy. The ship was over three hundred feet long and three decks high; it was meant for a full complement of human, android, and robot crew.

"So, we have both stealth capacity and a canceller?" Conn asked. "What about those weapons you mentioned?"

"Laser cannon, a couple of small-scale rail guns, nothing much. She's made for speed and stealth, not a stand-up slugfest."

Tyler nodded.

"All right, Hale," he said, resting his hand on the pilot's shoulder. "We're trusting you to get us aboard Lianora. It's your show, so go to it."

Hale's jaw tightened.

"You've got it." He pressed several more controls, and the Freewind shot forward. "If you guys aren't ready yet, I'd get that way if I were you. We've got one hour to contact, at most."

One hour to Melora.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Nothing!" Hale exclaimed. "There's nothing here!" He turned to Anje. "You're sure you gave me the correct heading?"

The Demi nodded emphatically.

"Absolutely! Based on the data we took from the spaceport computers, Lianora has to be within five miles of our present location!"

"Not according to our radar, it isn't. There's nothing but empty space out there. Long-range sensors can't find it either."

Risa gave the pilot a curious look.

"What about using that canceller?"

Hale looked up from the display screen.

"What?"

"Well, if I was carrying out super-secret research, I'd try to hide it from anyone who happened by."

The pilot shook his head, amazed at himself.

"Damn, I bet she's right. There's no reason you couldn't install stealth field generators on an artificial satellite. Let's give it a try." He tapped four keys, and a bright blip appeared on the radar display, with X-Y-Z position coordinates noted next to it in tiny green numerals. "Risa, you ever want to suggest strategy, just sing out. That's our baby."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Commander!" The blond, bearded head of Lianora's radar officer snapped upright. "A contact has just appeared three-point-seven-two miles distant, bearing one-thirteen, minus twelve degrees!"

"'Appeared,' you say?" Rane asked.

"That's right. One second there was nothing at all, and now this."

The commander nodded slowly, drawing the obvious conclusion. "It looks like our guests have arrived," she said. "Initiate Response Alpha."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the Freewind's radar, a second blip had appeared alongside the first.

"Blast it!" Hale cursed. "They've spotted us."

"I thought we were cloaked," Tyler protested.

"Remember how I told you that using the canceller takes out the weapons?"

"Yeah."

"It kills stealth mode, too. They know we're here and what we are by now."

The communications system came to life.

"Unidentified corvette! You are entering a restricted area. Provide your authorization immediately."

"That's a shuttle out there," Hale said, launching the Freewind ahead on an evasive pattern. He waved his hand at the third seat on the bridge. "Someone take the weapons console! I can operate the forward-firing cannons myself but we may need the turrets."

Tyler slipped into the chair. He was amazed at how radically the starfield outside was shifting as the Freewind dipped and turned. Since the artificial gravity was oriented towards the floor, the ship could radically pitch and turn without altering the crew's perspective of "up" or "down," though Tyler could still feel the sharp course changes just from his body's inertia.

"Cease evasion immediately or be destroyed!" the shuttle demanded over the com system.

"Not a chance," Hale muttered under his breath.

Tyler managed to get the weapons system up and running. The enemy ship showed on his screen; Lianora did not. Hale had turned off the canceller so the Freewind would have the power to fight.

Energy beams lanced out from the shuttle, barely missing the corvette. The battle was underway.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Lianora's command center, Commander Rane watched the duel begin with her heart in her throat. She knew the defense shuttle wasn't a "real" fighter, only a transport equipped with weapons and slightly upgraded engines. It shouldn't be any match for the corvette, which was a true military ship. That didn't prevent her from hoping for its success, though.

At least the crew is only robots and androids, she told herself. It's not the same as if there were people on board.

No, Palman soldiers weren't at risk. Not yet. That wouldn't come until later.

Damn you, Hurlston! And damn you, too, Gage, for backing him up!

\* \* \* \* \*

The first few shots Tyler took with the laser cannons missed badly, as he tried to master the targeting system while adapting himself to the rapid changes in course and speed Hale put their own craft through to evade the enemy's attacks. Steadily, though, he began to get the hang of what he was doing, and managed to lock on target. From that point the computer tracked the shuttle, making it much easier to aim. Evasive maneuvers shook him off for a few moments, making the computer constantly have to alter the guns' angle to catch up, but eventually Tyler zeroed in on target and slashed two laser hits into the enemy craft.

"Nice shooting, T-man," Hale encouraged. "Now, it's my turn."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rane didn't need the radar officer to tell her that the attackers had scored the first hits of the battle. She had seen the pulses of light flash across the screen, seen the shuttle waver off-course.

"How bad is it?"

"I can't tell for sure," answered the Warren manning the long-range sensor units. "I can verify two hits, a hull breach, and a drop in speed."

She could see the drop in speed, too, from the way the corvette swept in behind the smaller ship, lashing out with more weapons fire. The barrage was mercifully short before the shuttle vanished from the screen.

"Shuttle has been destroyed," echoed the radar officer. "No damage to the enemy ship."

"Let's fix that," the commander said through clenched teeth. "Station cannons, track and fire."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Freewind shuddered, shaking everyone on the bridge, nearly knocking Conn to the floor.

"What was that!?" Risa exclaimed.

"Near miss," Hale answered tersely. "Lianora's shooting at us."

"Now what? We can't see them to shoot back," Tyler asked, hoping the pilot could come up with a solution. Thankfully, he could.

"Anje!" Hale ordered. "Get me the expected position of that satellite."

She did so at once; it was easy for the computer to extrapolate where Lianora should be based on its previous position and velocity.

"Can you tell how much firepower they have?"

"Judging by the volume and pattern of fire, they have two laser cannons and two heavy rail guns."

"All right; we're going in! Tyler, switch your screen to the external cameras. Since we can't scan and shoot at the same time, we're going to get close enough that you can fire by sight."

They swept in towards the station, the Freewind zigzagging to throw off the satellite's targeting computer. Soon enough, Tyler was afforded his first look at Lianora. The space station was roughly barrel-shaped, the silver-gray of steel in color, with a boxlike superstructure jutting off from one side. Lights, evidently meant as guides for space traffic when the light from Algo might be obstructed, glittered here and there, and more light was visible behind heavy plasteel windows. The enemy's rail guns appeared to be mounted on the ends of the satellite while the lasers were fixed to the superstructure.

"The dock is on that box on the side. Aim for the lasers," Hale instructed, "or we'll be sitting ducks."

Obligingly, Tyler began firing. This was actually easier for him than dogfighting with radar-targeted guns. That exercise was for children experienced in the latest VR computer games, but aiming and shooting a gun at something he could see was something Tyler was quite good at. He zeroed in on one laser and obliterated it with a direct hit, then walked his fire into the second. Hale moved the Freewind in close to the station to reach the docking bay; in that position the rail guns couldn't be brought to bear on it.

"Firing boarding clamps," Hale announced. A moment later, the ship rocked as the clamps began to draw it in towards Lianora's external docking bay. A second jolt shook them as it locked into place. "All right; we're holding ourselves on right now. It's not too precarious, but if you can get into their computer system and get their docking clamps to help us, it would be nice."

"All right," Tyler affirmed, and got up. "Okay, Hale, from here on in your job is to make sure we've got a ride home. Keep the engines hot, because when we come back we may not have time for niceties."

"Just like the getaway driver in a movie," he said with a grin. "Hurry up, Tyler; you don't want to keep the lady waiting."

### Chapter 34

"Put the guns down and surrender," the woman in the commander's uniform barked.

"Don't try to be funny; I'm not in the mood for it," Tyler replied.

"You can't get away with treason."

"Interesting," Conn replied; "I was just about to advise you of the same thing. Your activities have encompassed more violations of the Palman Laws than I can handily add up, but at least for those of you associated with the military, your use of the government's resources to cover up your crimes could be seen as usurping executive authority, a treasonous offense. If anyone's going to be taken into custody, it would be you."

The burly doctor burst into great guffaws of laughter at that statement, Worthmann chuckled, and even the sour-faced commander smiled.

"Now this," Worthmann replied with a smile, "is really just too funny. Do you really mean that you had hopes of breaking in here, smashing a conspiracy, gathering damning evidence, capturing the malefactors, and seeing your records wiped clean by a grateful government just like in some novel?"

Conn glared at the executive. Tyler still hadn't heard most of how Conn had gotten involved in this affair, only that he was the investigating officer. Apparently, he and Gage had some kind of history, and it wasn't friendly.

"Yes," Gage continued. "That fits nicely with your psychological profile, doesn't it, Lieutenant Derrek? Honest, dedicated to lawful rule, distrustful--even resentful--of corporate types who use the law to facilitate their crimes. You'd be off fighting corruption as soon as you were convinced you were just being used. Which, of course, you were."

"Considering," Tyler said tersely, "that we've done a good job wrecking your little plot so far, I'm surprised you're laughing."

"But that's just it," the white-coated scientist cackled. "You've done all this, against remarkable odds, and it was all for nothing. No one will thank you for stopping us, because this project has been carried out under the direct orders of Mother Brain all along!"

Liar! Tyler's mind screamed, as he fought to conceal his stunned reaction. The announcement wasn't personal, though, not like finding Melora, so he was able to maintain his cool even while his brain reeled from the implications. Palmans could be corrupted by power, let greed lead them into moral bankruptcy, but Mother Brain?

"You lying skag," cursed Risa. "You think you'll keep from getting gravestoned by passing the buck?" She brandished her claws angrily.

"How...colloquial," Gage remarked archly. "Nonetheless, he's telling the truth."

Could he be? Tyler didn't know. It might be a lie, but would the three of them have prepared to tell that story in advance? All three had laughed at Conn's bold assertions, which definitely implied that they were telling the truth. Yet if Mother Brain was the ultimate force behind Project Nuada, why the elaborate cover-up? She had nothing to fear from the law; she was the law. Tyler knew the answer to that question, though. It was public opinion, the ultimate weapon against any tyrant, that had to be concealed. Mother Brain could be removed from power if the people of Palm lost faith in her, and she would naturally want to preserve the illusion that she was omnipotent and all-beneficent.

It explained so much, too. Free access to the spaceport and Lianora...it was Mother Brain who held absolute control over space travel since the ban of four years ago. Mother Brain could easily be the force bringing pressure to bear on the military investigators and the DLE top brass.

I am an agent of Mother Brain! Nuada had said. What if that was the literal truth?

My core directive is to obey the orders of Mother Brain, Abren had said during the fight in the engine room. What if those orders weren't based on deception, but were specific and to the point?

One of the basic principles of logical reasoning was that when faced with two equally plausible explanations, the simplest one was most likely correct.

They're telling the truth.

"Why?" Tyler asked. "What did Mother Brain have to gain by creating Project Nuada?"

"The perfect weapon, the perfect agent for destruction!" Hurlston crowed. "Android brains are too limited, Palmans too inclined to independence. A cyborg would possess the imagination and creativity of a living brain, but more rebellious elements of its personality could be restrained, suppressed. A Palman's skills and abilities, enhanced by technology rather than replaced by it. One Nuada would be a more fit vessel for Mother Brain's will than an army of robots or a corps of Palman agents."

Tyler's eyes flicked to Gage.

"So, for Luveno Industrial Mechanisms, Project Nuada was just another defense contract. Under the table, but just another job?"

"Essentially," the suit replied. "As Dr. Hurlston told you, Melora Nain's involvement was strictly accidental. Margolis chose to run the standard tests on her while he had her in custody, and she happened to fit Hurlston's desirability profile all but perfectly. Incidentally, she was the one who killed the late, unlamented Margolis; the destruction of the clinic was the first field test for Nuada. I thought you'd want to know that."

"It does have a pleasant irony to it."

Then, Tyler pulled the trigger. The commander's body shuddered spastically as the pulse-vulcan slugs punched through her carbonsuit. A half-second later, Risa sprang at the Warren, claws outstretched. Hurlston reached into his coat pocket as Conn let Anje drop and reached for his laser shot. Moving faster than a man of his bulk should have, and with better reflexes and precision of movement than most scientists displayed in battle, Hurlston pulled a compact, lethal acidshot from his pocket. He never got a chance to use it, though; Worthmann burned a laser beam into Hurlston's brain.

"Drop it!" Tyler snapped, covering Gage with the now-empty vulcan. Obediently, the executive let the gun fall and raised his hands. The Warren, only a technician android, proved to be no match for Risa. The fight was over.

"What kind of trick is this?" Conn challenged Worthmann. "Why kill Hurlston?"

"I said this was a matter of business." The technicians cowered in the corner, hoping that the intruders wouldn't think to kill them, too. "Why fight on in a doomed cause?"

"What makes you think that we'll let you live?" Risa snarled. "You're the one who had Melora kidnapped! You're the one responsible for all this, more than anyone!"

Gage shrugged.

"If you're bent on revenge, I can't stop you. I can, however, offer you a deal."

Tyler raised an eyebrow.

"You don't have the influence to clear our records," he stated, "and we can handle our escape from here without you. What have you got to offer?"

"And don't suggest money," Conn warned, "or things will get ugly."

"I wouldn't dream of it. What I can offer is the life of your android friend, there."

"Keep talking," Tyler said cautiously. Men like Gage always had an angle. Maybe offering a way to save Anje was that angle, a way to keep Tyler and Risa's revenge from catching up with him. Maybe it wasn't, though. It could have been a distraction designed to set up a desperate move. Tyler wondered what techniques Gage knew, if any; at this point one NAZAN or NAGRA could finish things in a hurry.

"I'm a robotics engineer by trade. That's how I worked my way up through the division. My major contribution to Project Nuada, other than supervising the funding, was to design many of the cybernetic systems. Hurlston was responsible for the neural interface, but the rest was largely my own work. I believe you're familiar with the Positron Bolt unit, which I would have to consider a complete success."

"So you're saying that you could restore Anje?"

Gage nodded.

"I have a repair kit here with me. I had anticipated using it on my escort android if necessary, but the basic mechanisms of Wren-types and Demi-types are similar enough for the kit to be compatible. The process isn't complex, merely a matter of bringing her own self-repair systems on-line again and letting them finish the job."

Tyler's initial reaction was to accept the offer. Melora was gone, and ripping Worthmann limb from limb as some feral, vengeful part of his brain wanted wouldn't bring her back. If, on the other hand, not killing him could bring Anje back...

"What do you guys think?" he asked the others.

"We can't arrest him. You might as well do it," Conn said. Risa didn't reply at all. No doubt she was stuck between her need for revenge, maybe even justice, and the life of someone who'd been an ally, but whom she'd known for only a few days. Beyond that, Anje was an android, an AI. Was her existence really the same as being "alive"?

"Yeah," she finally whispered. "I wanted to pull that kid out at the clinic. I ought to be willing to do as much for a friend. Hell, she saved our lives."

Tyler nodded.

"Looks like it's your lucky day, Worthmann."

"Excellent. A point, though. As you can appreciate, now that you've turned this project into a debacle, LIM is going to consider me persona non grata. I have no desire to be made an example of. Therefore, as part of our bargain, I do not want merely to be left here."

"Don't worry. We weren't going to leave you. That wouldn't be keeping our end of the bargain, given that we're going to destroy Lianora from our ship. Hurlston probably kept backup data on Nuada that eliminating the mainframe didn't take out, but I doubt he'll have extra copies off-station. As for you, Worthmann, get to work, but move slowly. If you so much as make us think that you're going to pull a weapon or try a technique, you're dead."

Risa pressed the tips of her claws against Worthmann's back to emphasize Tyler's threat. It was melodramatic, but Tyler wasn't complaining; it also meant that she was now in range to finish the LIM exec if he tried anything funny. He picked up Gage's laser shot and trained it on Worthmann rather than the now-useless pulse vulcan.

"You two get out of here," Conn ordered the panic-stricken technicians. "I'd suggest taking an escape pod, if the designers were bright enough to include any." They wasted no time in running, afraid to stop in case someone reached a belated decision to shoot them after all.

"All right, Worthmann, let's see you work this miracle."

Gage knelt, opened his case, and removed a small kit about six inches by four by two. He went over to Anje's inert form and turned her over onto her face.

"Now, if I recall correctly, the access panel should be around the back of the neck, here," he murmured, opening the repair kit and withdrawing a probe. He detached her cape, then released the armor around her neck and shoulders. "Good; here it is. I was hoping Scion-Colesburg hadn't moved things just to be different from our design." He opened up a small panel with the probe, then put the tool away and got out a plastic cylinder that seemed filled with some kind of neon-electric blue liquid. He inserted it into the back of the Demi's neck, screwed it into place with a half-turn, and pushed the tab on the end. A low hum was heard, then Anje's body began to shudder uncontrollably. Green lightning started to play over her body, just as it did when her Recover system was initiated.

"There may be some permanent memory loss," Gage warned. "Her systems will rebuild damaged circuitry, but if the physical structures where that memory is stored were destroyed, they'll take the data with them. Reconstruction happens based on initial status, not last-existing condition."

"Don't worry," Anje's muffled voice said, "there doesn't appear to be anything wrong." Gage withdrew the cylinder, the liquid in which was now translucent, its energy used up, then sealed Anje's access port and armor back up. The little android stood up, shuddered once, then began to look around. "Um, who are all of you?"

Jaws dropped as everyone groped for words. They were spared the effect of finding something to say, though, when Anje laughed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just couldn't resist. I would like to know what happened during the fight, though."

"We won," Tyler said curtly.

"Melora--?"

Tyler shook his head. Anje dropped her gaze, understanding.

"I believe I've fulfilled my side of this bargain," Gage stated. "Can we get out of here before everyone remaining decides to rush us?"

"Stuff it, skag, before we decide to kill you anyway," Risa snarled. Tyler shot her a look. Killing Gage would be a just punishment for his crimes, but it would require a cost in honor and self-image that the ex-agent wasn't ready to pay.

"Let's just get him aboard. I'll feel better when we can get him into the brig."

Conn and Tyler made sure that Gage was stripped of equipment and locked into plasma rings before they were willing to leave him alone in a cell. When they reached the Freewind's bridge, the two women were already telling Hale about what had happened on board Lianora. Risa had just gotten to the ultimate punchline when the men arrived.

"Wait a minute," Hale said, holding up his hands. "You're saying that Mother Brain commissioned all this. Kidnapping? Experiments on people? Illegal space travel? Mass murder?"

"That's what they claimed," Risa said darkly. She, at least, didn't sound convinced.

"Time for that later," Tyler said. "Now, let's get out of here. Sooner or later, Mother Brain, LIM, the military, or someone is going to have ships out here. Let's get going now and worry later."

"You've got it," Hale said. "Glad the station's docking clamps popped when the computer went or we'd be in real trouble. As it is, though, take your seats!"

The Freewind pulled smoothly away from the satellite, moving out into space. Lianora looked silent and dead on the screens, its emergency power not being wasted on external lights. It wasn't dead, though. On board that station were the machines that had turned Melora into a monstrosity enslaved to a malicious intelligence outside herself. There were the datafiles detailing every step of the process. There was even the body of the man who had created the process, whose mind might possibly be recreated in an active-memory clone. Tyler gazed at it with hatred.

"Hale, destroy that thing."

"You're the boss."

The Freewind's laser cannons fired again, again, and again, brilliant beams of light cutting into the station. Lianora was a defenseless target and the outcome was inevitable. Detonations rocked the artificial satellite, tearing it apart from the inside as Hale's guns slashed the outside. In space, the final, titanic explosion was silent, but the Freewind shook from the force of it.

Melora deserved a fitting funeral pyre, Tyler thought.

### Chapter 35

There was one question on everyone's mind. The ex-corp agent, the soon-to-be-ex-lieutenant, the girl from the streets of Ossale Court, the Demi-type, and the pilot, every one of them was asking one thing: What do we do now? The revelation that Mother Brain was responsible for Project Nuada left all of them with the bitter realization that they were outlaws, beyond all hope of pardon.

"I still can't believe it," Risa repeated. "Mother Brain may not be perfect...but the whole reason she's in charge of Algo is to keep out Palman tyrants!"

"I know," Conn said, shaking his head. "I've never liked the idea of an AI ruling the system, but at least I'd always figured she was incorruptible. I mean, you can't expect a computer to have empathy for living people, but this goes way beyond any reasonable interpretation of that."

"Clearly," Anje reasoned, "either Mother Brain has suffered some kind of system corruption, or her programming was flawed to begin with. It is possible that Mother Brain has been tampered with, but her original programmers might have taught her to seek power."

"Who were Mother Brain's creators?" Risa asked.

"She was given to the Palman government in AW 845 by IMVE Microtech."

"No, I mean, who first built her? The names of the people."

"My system does not contain that data."

"I don't know either," Tyler said. "Conn? Hale?"

"Not me."

"Me, either."

"That settles it, then," Tyler concluded. "That name or names ought to ring down through history, but none of us remember them, probably because we were never taught. That knowledge has been kept from us. Whomever it was must have been up to something, probably planning for Mother Brain to seize as much power as it could, then turn that power over to him, her, or them."

"That's one hell of a long-term plan," Hale said.

"They must have been planning for the future," Tyler agreed. "Not for themselves, but for their descendants, or future members of an organization or company." He shook his head, not really believing that anyone could conceive of a plot that could extend for over four hundred years. Was anyone alive today aware of Mother Brain's search for power? Or had her creator's heirs long ago lost sight of the truth, possibly even died out?

"Whatever the truth," Conn said, "the plan's working. Mother Brain controls the climate control network, has wide access to the datanet and its information flow, she's chief executive of Palm, controls the military and law enforcement. Heck, she controls almost every aspect of life on Mota--she owns one-third of the Algo System outright and has a pretty darn good start on the rest of it."

Hale snapped his fingers.

"Space travel," he said. "She banned free space travel on the pretext that it was too dangerous. Hell, I bet she engineered that disaster four years ago just to give herself the chance. That way, her little empire on Mota stays completely cut off from anyone who might try to change it."

There was a curious look on his face as he said it, part wrenching pain and part, oddly enough, relief. There was a story there, Tyler thought, that he'd have to go into with the pilot someday.

"Plus, keeping the Palmans and Dezolians isolated from one another," the ex-agent added. "She certainly doesn't want them giving us any ideas about doing without her."

Anje sighed heavily, an unusual sound from an android.

"She's really not going to be pleased with us, then," she concluded. "Anyone who knows that Mother Brain is as much a tyrant as the leaders she replaced is definitely a threat to her. Then, there's the simple fact that we've just smashed an important and expensive plan. Her ultimate agent of destruction must have been key to some plot of hers."

"I thought LIM was paying for Nuada? Wasn't that how that Stephens guy fell into it in the first place?" Risa asked.

"Money was probably provided through standard defense contracts, then combined with LIM's share of the investment and slipped back into Lianora's operating budget in order to keep the government's financial records from showing any funding of a supposedly closed research satellite," Tyler explained, having some knowledge of creative financing from his Luveno days.

"It all just sort of falls into place once you know Mother Brain's involved, doesn't it?" Hale marveled sarcastically. "Those wild conspiracy theories aren't supposed to be true, y'know."

Conn leaned back against the edge of a display terminal, his arms folded across his chest.

"Anje's right, though. Every one of us has got to face the fact that we're wanted outlaws now. We don't have a lot of choices left."

"So what's the big deal?" Risa asked. "Hale was an underground pilot, Anje's broken so many computer security laws that her name is a legend, and I've been on the wrong side of the law all my life."

"Not like this," Conn said. "They've got names, faces, genetic profiles, all that in their records now. Informers will be looking for big rewards, patrol robots will look for us, wanted bulletins will be released to the DLE and military police, probably even government agents sent specifically to catch us. All of us are facing notoriety as our worst enemy now."

"He's quite right," Anje agreed. "I've gone to great lengths to shield my identity, so that while people might be looking for Angel Red, the gridrider, they weren't looking for Anje, the Demi-type."

"Oh," Risa said, dejected.

"Then there's the question of what to do with our friend in the brig," Conn added.

"Why not dump him off on Dezo?" Hale suggested.

"Why Dezo?" asked Tyler.

"Well, there's not a lot of security in Dezo-space, so there's a good chance we can get to the surface without trouble. Plus, if we're really lucky, he'll freeze to death--though we'll probably have to leave him near a town or our consciences will have us for brunch."

"Not mine," Risa growled. "I say we boot him out the airlock and to hell with honoring any deals. He wouldn't play it straight with us if our positions were reversed."

Tyler drummed his fingers on his leg.

"Come to think of it," he said, slipping past Risa's outburst, "Dezo isn't a bad place for all of us. Mother Brain doesn't have much power on Dezo, only a few outposts, because the Dezolians have their own government. It's about the safest place we could go now."

He sighed heavily. The others quickly picked up on his discontentment, but it was Risa who came out and asked the question.

"If it's such a good idea, Tyler, then why are you down on it?"

"You really want to know?"

"No, I asked because I like the sound of my own voice. Damn straight I want to know."

Tyler chuckled momentarily, then his face became set with determination.

"I don't want to run away," he declared. "I ran away once when I was in a situation I thought I couldn't face, and it turned out to be the worst mistake of my life. These last four years, I might as well have been dead, for all the living I've done. I don't want to do that again."

"So what do you want?" Anje asked, reminding Tyler of how Risa had told him to define himself in terms of what he was rather than what he wasn't.

"I want to fight."

"That's it," Hale said, throwing up his hands. "The man's gone crazy."

"Do you mean, fight Mother Brain?" Conn asked. Tyler nodded in response. "All right, how?"

"Well, look at what we have," Tyler said, encompassing all of them with a sweep of his hand. "Two trained agents, a hunter, the best gridrider in Algo, and an excellent pilot. We've got a first-class ship and all the equipment on board."

"Meanwhile, Mother Brain's got the army, the cops, about a million robots..."

Tyler shot Hale a sharp glance.

"I'm not talking about a military campaign. Mother Brain would squash us like bugs if we tried that. She's not all-powerful, though. Look at Palm. There's criminals, hunters, smugglers, syndicates, and corps, all slipping through the shadows, under her radar."

"We can't go back to Palm, though--can we?" Risa asked.

Tyler shook his head.

"No, the odds are too great there. Out here, though, in space--here we can fight. Her robot ships transport laconia from the Skure mines on Dezo, deliver technology for her 'perfect world' on Mota--we'll attack them. Her patrols can be destroyed, which will help others flout her laws in turn and help undermine her plans more. We can steal her cargos, deliver them to those who need them. We can raid places like Lianora to keep them from being used for more schemes like Project Nuada."

He looked from one face to the next.

"As long as there's been trade, there have been bandits and pirates. We'll be that too, space pirates answering only to our own honor, not to a tyrannical government. Unlike most pirates, though, we won't raid and steal for plunder, but to battle Mother Brain, harrying and harassing her plans and generally throwing a wrench into her gears whenever we can."

Tyler's heart was in his throat as he laid it on the line for them.

"So what do you think? Are you with me?"

Not only Tyler but everyone else was surprised when Hale spoke up first.

"Well, you're gonna need a pilot, so I'd better sign on." The gangly pilot stuck out his hand and Tyler clasped it firmly.

"Thank you, Hale."

"Not a problem, Captain. Ebon said I'd like this job, and I guess he was right. Either that or I'm just as crazy as you are. If we ever do manage to overthrow Mother Brain, though, I'm gonna want my back-end meseta for this job."

"Ebon's not a he, by the way," Anje said.

"Huh?"

"Ebon is a female, fifty-seven-year-old systems tech for IMVE. She's got the cutest grandkids!" the android explained. Hale's face turned scorpion red.

"A grandmother? Holy, I've left the vid pickup on talking to her while I've been getting out of bed!"

Tyler chuckled.

"Don't worry, Hale, you haven't got anything she doesn't know about."

"Yeah, but a grandmother?"

Anje rolled her eyes.

"Really, you two are hopeless! I'm going to have to come along just to keep you out of trouble. Besides, you gave up your revenge on Melora's kidnapper to save me. I owe you for that."

Tyler smiled warmly at her.

"Glad to have you aboard, Anje."

He turned to the green-haired girl. Risa had shed her battered and torn ceramic-laced jacket, and her sleeveless top revealed something Tyler hadn't noticed before, a tattoo of a sinuous crimson dragon whose head and forelegs snaked across one shoulder and whose tail and one hindclaw could be seen on the other.

"Hell, Tyler, you should know my answer already," she said, grinning wolfishly. "Taking a round out of Mother Brain at every chance sounds like my idea of a great career. Angry young punks like me are supposed to be anti-establishment. Besides, if we ever need to go back to Camineet, Ossale Court is the best place I can think of to stay out of Mother Brain's eyesight and I know the area better than any of you."

That just left Conn. He was the one Tyler was least sure of, the career law officer. It was surprising enough the now-former lieutenant had come this far. Would he keep on?

As it turned out, the choice wasn't half as difficult as Tyler had thought.

"It's about justice," Conn said. "If the government has become a tool of an oppressor, then it has to be fought. If we can't fight inside the system, then we fight outside it. You can count me in on this little crusade, Tyler--if we're going to try our best to teach the people of Algo the truth."

Tyler grinned at the idealistic ex-cop.

"You've got yourself a deal."

"Okay," Hale cut in, "if all the touchy-feely stuff is over with, does anyone want to tell me where I'm supposed to pilot the Freewind?" He was looking at Tyler when he said it, and Tyler was surprised to see that everyone else did the same. He'd been the leader, yes, but this was a validation of that, the others looking to him to make the choice.

"Like Hale says, you're the captain," Conn made it official.

"Not," Risa added with a smirk, "that we won't tell you if you're being an idiot, but what are friends for?"

"All right, Dezo then. We still need to ditch Worthmann, and get a chance to rest and recover, both physically and mentally. We've got plans to make that ought to be made with clear heads. Plus, I want to go over every inch of this ship, inventory every bit of equipment on board, make sure there aren't any nasty little traps lurking in the computer system for Mother Brain to exploit, and that kind of thing. Which brings me to something else I've been thinking about."

"What's that?"

"The name of this spaceship."

"What's wrong with Freewind?" Hale asked. "That kinda has the pirate spirit to it."

"Yeah, it does," Tyler agreed. "That's my point. We may be space pirates now, but we're not doing this for money or escape. We're fighting against an evil that's keeping the entire system in thrall, and I thought it would be a nice idea to reflect that purpose in our ship's name."

The suggestion drew smiles and nods of agreement from the others.

"I presume you've got a name in mind?" Conn asked.

"I admit, I've always liked the legend of Alis Landale," Tyler said. "There's a direct parallel to our situation: one small group of companions taking up arms against an impossible foe."

"Oh yeah," Risa said. "That's the name you used for the contact with Jac Norbridge at Shadowedge. Sometime, you're going to have to tell me the entire story."

He would, one of these days. Just the way Melora had told it to him.

Hale was shaking his head.

"I don't know, Tyler. 'Alis' just doesn't have the right ring to it, not for a spaceship."

"'Landale' has possibilities, though," Conn remarked. Anje nodded in agreement.

"All right then, Landale it is. Now, let's lay in a course to Dezo. We've got a long fight ahead of us, and the first step is out there." Tyler didn't know what the future held for him, or if it would be long or short, but whatever came, he was done with running from it. Instead, Tyler smiled in anticipation as he felt the surge of the Landale's acceleration, carrying him towards a destiny they would face on their own terms...and, though he didn't know it, into a legend of his own.

### Epilogue

"Is...is it really true, Captain?" Kara Mitchell asked, her lower lip trembling, her eyes glistening with tears.

Alana Nile sighed heavily. Looking at the pretty young datatech, she didn't feel like the DLE's "Steel Hawk." Maintaining a calm, even cold exterior was all but impossible in the face of the other woman's sorrow.

"It is. Lieutenant Derrek has apparently gone rogue, joined with Tyler Jorran and his group of hunters, terrorists, or whatever they call themselves. They've seized control of a military spaceship."

"I can't believe it!" Kara cried out. "Conn loved the DLE."

"I know he did. He was one of my best agents." She sighed again, trying to find a way to explain the inexplicable, to tell a woman that the man she loved wasn't what she had thought he was. "Sometimes...sometimes it happens. To catch a man like Tyler, Derrek had to try to see how he'd think, understand his mind to predict what he'd do next. A cop can start to sympathize with his adversary that way. This was a very important case, with a lot of stress and political pressure."

"Conn hated that," Kara agreed tearfully. "He never liked it when people threw their weight around, especially the big corps. 'Buying justice,' he called it."

Nile spread her hands helplessly.

"You can see, then, how it might start. Having to work for politicians and Luveno Industrial Mechanisms wouldn't be easy. Plus, he definitely was developing a feud with the LIM liaison, Gage Worthmann. No doubt you've seen the holovid broadcasts about what he was up to. There's no hard evidence, of course, but from the way the corp reacted you can bet they--and the media--believe every word of it."

"Do...do you mean that Conn...?"

Nile sighed for the third time. Dealing with this type of situation wasn't her forte.

"It's quite possible that Lieutenant Derrek caught a whiff, or perhaps more, of what LIM was up to. Under pressure from the brass, he might have snapped and decided that justice was on the side of the outlaws. That's what happens when you start thinking that corruption goes deeper than a bunch of greedy, venal leeches trying to line their own pockets at everyone's expense. Once you stop believing in the system, you're not a cop."

The datatech blotted her tears with a handkerchief.

"He...he isn't a bad person, Captain."

Nile shook her head.

"No, I wouldn't call him that, Kara. Just a man who let his ideals become stronger than his good judgment."

"Th-thank you, Captain."

Still sniffling, Kara left the office. Nile was glad; there was little else she could say, and she didn't like feeling helpless. The captain tapped the intercom button on her visiphone.

"Davis, I'm going to be in conference. Hold my calls."

Nile closed her door, then locked it. Davis would keep visitors out, but every so often someone decided to barge right past the receptionist, whether it was a headstrong cop or an aggrieved big-shot. For these, the locked door served as a reminder that she made her own appointments.

Returning to her desk, she keyed in a number on the visiphone. The screen remained in its default display, showing the logo of Nakagaki Telecommunications.

"New Eden," she stated in a monotone voice. The voiceprint and password were compared to those stored on computer, and the screen displayed the single word, "Verified," in red letters, before its image changed. The unearthly beauty of a woman's face sculpted in light looked back at Nile. She was a goddess, cold, aloof, and distant, another order of being altogether.

"This channel is secure; I have distracted all internal systems and used the security scanners to verify that no transmitters or recording devices are in operation," the woman said. Nile accepted her assertion as fact; she was quite capable of slaving the DLE computer system to her needs and doing so in a matter of seconds. This was, after all, Mother Brain.

"Good," Nile replied, not in the least cowed. "What's happening?"

"Hard data is sketchy. Not only did Lianora's destruction deny me any connection to its systems, but some time prior to that it suffered a catastrophic computer failure, further interfering with my capacity to learn. However, records from the system and security logs, combined with all available military, media, and corporate information suggests that Tyler Jorran and his companions, including your DLE agent, successfully defeated Nuada and arranged for the destruction of the satellite."

"He wasn't caught in the blast, I suppose?"

"I analyzed the search team's results myself. No wreckage from the captured corvette, Freewind, was present at the site. The logical conclusion is that they escaped in the ship. Also, what could be gleaned from the damage to the station's exterior is consistent with attacks from the type of laser cannons the Freewind mounts." Mother Brain paused for a moment, then added, "Lowell Hurlston is dead. The subsystems on board Noah recorded a cessation of life signal from his implant shortly before Lianora's destruction."

"I see..." Nile said, absorbing the information. She had never liked Hurlston; the man had never treated his work with the seriousness it deserved. Yet she felt sorrow at his death, not for Hurlston himself, but for what he represented. Another one dead. Dead before his time. How many could they lose? Each generation was smaller than the one before, as if there was some pernicious influence, a subtle, insidious curse the doctors could not detect on board the star-voyaging ship Noah.

Alana Nile grieved, not for a man she disliked, but for all of her comrades, the last children of a dead world many light-years away called Earth.

"We must assume that Jorran possesses complete knowledge that Project Nuada was initiated by me," Mother Brain stated, her cold voice knifing through the pain in Nile's heart. Even when speaking to her masters, the arch-computer had an edge of nastiness in her voice. She had been created to take control of Algo, to build a new home for the Earthmen in their last home's image and to remove the native population from that home by whatever means necessary. Perhaps they had done their work too well, or perhaps the creation of a thinking, feeling mind whose ultimate purpose was conquest could only produce an evil will regardless of intentions. "It is unlikely that he possesses the further knowledge of my service to the Earthmen, or that Hurlston was an Earthman aiding my work, but this, also, is not impossible."

"You know what to do. Make them outlaws, hunt them down. If they do know some or all of the truth, they'll reveal it by their actions."

"I agree. My aggregate psychological profile suggests that the group will not be able to merely hide from me. They will set themselves in opposition to my plans. It is improbable that they will be able to interfere notably--"

"But you'd have thought that about their chances of stopping Project Nuada, too," Nile interrupted.

"Correct," Mother Brain was forced to admit.

"Lianora's gone, Hurlston's dead, Nuada is destroyed along with Hurlston's data--"

"Incorrect. I possess copies."

"No, you don't." Nile probably shouldn't have enjoyed saying that as much as she did, but she took a savage pleasure in pointing out the flaws in the computer's self-assurance. "Hurlston would never have given you or anyone his notes. You may have certain data, but not a complete version of his work."

She paused, then added, "By the way, we've completely lost LIM."

"I do not follow," Mother Brain replied.

"You're aware of the databomb that went off not long after Lianora's destruction?"

"Yes. A timed file, set to release information to LIM, the DLE, and to several media outlets if a signal was not sent within a specified time period. Undoubtedly, it was activated because the android Anje could not send such a signal from space."

"Resulting in most of Palm learning that Luveno Industrial Mechanisms was kidnapping people and performing secret experiments on them. There's no proof, but the clinic and Dr. Margolis were named, and the fact that the clinic was destroyed under suspicious circumstances is enough to convince everyone that the stories are true. LIM's stock price fell through the floor, individual shareholders came out of the woodwork screaming for reform, and corporate rivals whetted their knives."

"As you are aware, I continuously monitor all Palman media broadcasts. I am fully apprised of these facts. For example, within twenty-four hours of the story reaching the public, Redfield Arms had obtained a controlling interest in Luveno's subsidiary, Emerald Legion Security."

"Then you're also aware of the board meeting taking place in one hour? There'll be a pretense of fairness, but the results are already set. Macklin's finished. She made a bad mistake trying to put all the blame on Gage Worthmann and Nash Garrett just because they were the two mentioned in the datafiles. Garrett was already angry, it seems, over the death of his security people in the clinic, and when the blame was handed down he was not willing to sacrifice himself on behalf of a corrupt Executive Director."

"The psychology of organic lifeforms does produce intriguing and unexpected events on occasion." That was, of course, Mother Brain's weak point. She might have been the most powerful computer ever created, but her ability to model psychological profiles--especially those of the native cultures alien to her creators--was still somewhat limited, especially when dealing with people as individuals rather than in the aggregate. It was, perhaps, Mother Brain's one weak point.

"Care to hazard a guess who will get Macklin's job?"

"Presumably Aron Destain, the current Executive Sub-Director."

Nile smiled ruthlessly, enjoying the moment.

"Wrong. Destain's a nobody, a paper-pusher. LIM's in crisis, and although his hands are clean he hasn't got the leadership ability to pull the company out of its tailspin. The new Executive Director is going to be the Industrial Division Sub-Chief, Orakio Sa Riik."

"It seems unlikely that they will select someone that far down in rank."

"Not this time. Sa Riik has got the skill package and education to do the job."

It took Mother Brain only a fraction of a second to consult the citizenry database and absorb the entirety of Orakio Sa Riik's public life history.

"I see. Parolit University, graduated AW 1267 with a double major in business management and military science. AW 1270, received his MBM from the Luveno-owned Magerry Institute."

Nile agreed. Mother Brain's data was always precise as well as accurate.

"What makes him dangerous, and the reason he'll be put it charge, is that he's basically incorruptible and everyone knows it. Moreover, under the circumstances, he'll feel he has a shareholder mandate to rip out any additional 'bad seeds' the current purge misses. Presuming that it survives the upcoming corporate war, LIM won't touch any under-the-table schemes for years, and the other corporations will be touchy for a while, too."

Among the Earthmen, Alana Nile was their best expert on Palman business, from general economic theory to the internal logic of financial markets to corporate psychology. When she drew a conclusion about how a corporation would act, even Mother Brain was wise to listen.

"Your analysis confirms my initial assessment, then," Mother Brain stated. "It appears that further design and development work should take place on Mota. Your conclusion that we will experience difficulty in gaining the help of Palman business only reinforces that course of action."

"So, you're going to try to restart Nuada? Will your pets on Mota be able to recreate Hurlston's work?"

"They will not have to."

"Oh?" Nile asked.

"I have decided to pursue a different course in creating my emissary. The need for an organic mind is undeniable; only an AI on my own level would have the necessary combination of logic and creativity to fulfill its role. However, it seems that Nuada, for all its success, was unable to create an entity of sufficient power and versatility to carry out my wishes. Therefore, I intend to turn to bioengineering."

"You're going to design your own agents, genetically sculpting them to develop however you want?"

Mother Brain smiled arrogantly.

"Precisely. The Palman scientists at the Biosystems Lab on Mota will be overjoyed to help develop a better, stronger, faster, smarter version of themselves, and given the extent of my control over Motanet and the Motavian systems, I'll easily be able to intervene at the proper time to make the necessary...adjustments."

The Earthwoman leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her breasts.

"That's an ambitious plan. Do you believe the biotechnology to successfully modify Palman DNA, especially regarding the mind, will be available?"

"The basic tools exist already--active-memory cloning, genetic modification of animal species, neural-net data memory. I would estimate a four-to-six-year period for this project to reach the implementation phase."

"At which point?"

"My agent will proceed with the steady removal of the Palmans and Motavians from Mota. The people of Earth will have their new homeworld."

Four to six years. Was it possible? Was that all the longer it would take, after five centuries of striving towards this one single goal? Would Nile see the new Earth with her own eyes?

"I will call this project Nei. It is an ancient word of power in a native tongue, and that is what it will give us. The power to crush these puny natives at last!

The power to achieve a dream.

### Notes

These notes are here to answer some of the questions you, the readers may (or may not) have about Freedom's Price, its place in the Phantasy Star continuity, and to give me a chance to ramble on about what I'm doing "behind the scenes." Some of these questions I've been asked over e-mail, while some I'm only guessing that anyone cares about.

These notes do contain SPOILERS, so if you haven't finished the story, go slog through the other thirty-seven parts, and if you still care, then you can come back and read this.

CREDITS:

First, I'd like to give credit where credit is due. While most of this is basically original, it obviously draws heavily on the Phantasy Star games, especially PS2 and PS4, so thanks to Sega and its staff for making, producing, translating, and releasing them. Mike Ripplinger gave me permission to use "Jorran" as Tyler's last name; since one of my hopes is to someday have all the major PS fanfic writers come together to create a single shared fanfic continuity (um...using all of my own interpretations and theories whenever possible, of course ^\_^), I'd like to think of this as one small step in the right direction. Very small. But still a step. I'd also like to thank Mike here for letting me use some of his Dezorian language in some of my other fics. Joel Fagin, meanwhile, gets the blame for what you're reading now. I liked how he did it for The Other Side, so I'm providing my own chapter of notes. And, of course, there's also Maxx to thank for (a) maintaining the archive and (b) bending the rules on finished fics so I could see it go up part by part. Actually, the full first draft was finished way back in November of 1999, ten months before any of this appeared on the archive, but I've been typing it up as I go since September 2000.

Yeah, I write with pencil and paper, then convert to computer. It's one reason I can write so darn much stuff--I write pretty much everywhere I go. When my wife lets me. ^\_^

SO WHAT'S UP WITH THIS CYBERPUNK STUFF, ANYWAY?

As has been pointed out to me, introducing cyberpunk into Phantasy Star isn't the most obvious connection, and the first thing people tend to ask on reading any of my "PSCyber" fics is, well, you read the title of this section.

The fact is, back in April 1999 I was in something of a writing quandary. I wanted to write a Phantasy Star story, and I wanted to write a cyberpunk story. Rather than write two stories, I decided to combine the two ideas in the hope that by satisfying both writing urges, I might actually be able to complete the story.

Strangely enough, it was relatively easy. We are told nothing about Palm during the PS2 era, and conveniently enough it gets blown up during the game so there's no way to prove me wrong. I decided that any society ruled by Mother Brain could be pretty dystopian, and there was a start. The only problem is that the gritty feel of cyberpunk doesn't match well with bright and sunny PS2 Mota, or with Palma in the original Phantasy Star. My rationale for letting society take the shape it did was that, while Mother Brain wanted Mota for the new home of the Earthmen, she didn't care about Palm. After all, look what happened to it!

Essentially, Mother Brain's attitude towards Palm is one of "stay out of my way." She doesn't have full control over Palm because it doesn't have the need for an environmental control system the way Mota does, so the people are not dependent on her. Therefore, she's taken steps to keep them busy with each other. Reducing the power of government and allowing worldwide corporations to flourish has helped, for the simple reason that while governments, especially when driven by public mandates, can stand up and begin crusades (say, against a tyrannical computer), corporations don't. They're too busy worrying about the bottom line. Plus, they're a very effective symbol of oppression, so that the street-level rebellious urge is directed at them, not at the government. After all, it's the cutthroat business practices of Luveno, Scion-Colesburg, and IMVE that keep the people of Ossale Court in poverty and misery, while it's the work of Mother Brain that at least lets them have access to clean water and (usually) working power.

TYLER, CORP AGENT?

Since the "PSCyber" setting is so far outside the games of Phantasy Star to nearly be an original creation, I wanted to give the plot as close a tie to the games as I could, basically to justify the fic's existence. Then, later, I could spin off new stories which had less of a tie to Phantasy Star, and no one would complain because they would link back to the source material through Freedom's Price. Of course, I shot that plan in the foot by cranking out ten or so PSCyber stories before Freedom's Price ever appeared, so I'm glad no one's pointed out yet how much of a gaiden-type story they are.

In any event, I settled on Tyler. Here's a guy who saves Rolf & Co. from disaster and eventually becomes important enough in post-PS2 Dezolis to have a town named after him, but we know almost nothing about him. Better yet, from a fanfic point of view, what we are told about him doesn't make sense.

Specifically, I'm referring to the fact that in PS2, Tyler is a space pirate, but he exists in a star system where space travel has been banned for ten years! Not a lot of piracy going on, there. Some other fanfic writers (Mike Ripplinger and Neilast, to name two) have speculated that Algo had contact with other star systems in this era, which is a valid explanation but not one I really like, because it postulates other alien races but ones which we've never met.

Instead, I decided that my Tyler would be more of a Robin Hood type, fighting the tyranny of Mother Brain. This interpretation allows me to keep out additional foreign elements and also justifies why Tyler came to Rolf's rescue in PS2, making that scene more than a lucky coincidence. So, Freedom's Price became the story of how Tyler went from being a disillusioned, directionless person to a courageous hero. If Tyler in PS2 seems more upbeat to you than he is here, well, then, it's not just a random quirk. The Tyler in the game has been acting in accordance with his inner self for six years, and while it was no easy fight, having purpose in his life has made him much more at ease with himself.

CYBORGS

Having decided to put a cyberpunk setting into Phantasy Star, I soon realized that something was missing. Namely, while Phantasy Star has androids and clones, it does not have cyborgs or cybernetic implants as far as I could tell, other than the misnamed androids and robots of PS3. They ought to have them, given their technology level, and it didn't seem right to have a whole raft of cyberware show up in my stories but not in the games. So, I decided that I needed to explain that in establishing my setting, and what better way then to make it a plot point? Of course, I copped out and blamed magic, but, hey, you've got to take SOME shortcuts, right?

PROJECT NUADA

The name for Dr. Hurlston's cyborg project is drawn from Celtic mythology. Nuada was the king of the Tuatha De Danaan, but lost his hand in battle. The god Dianchect was able to replace the lost hand with one made of silver, making Nuada a magical cyborg. Since laconia, the metal that Melora's artificial parts are made from, is linked to silver in Phantasy Star (in fact, in PS4 "silver" is the name for low-grade laconia), I thought that Nuada would be an appropriate name for the cyborg project. Since Hurlston is an Earthman, it's entirely possible that he'd heard of the story and would make the same connection.

OTHER CONTINUITY NOTES

The Earthmen and Dark Force: My fundamental assumption here is that the Dark Force who manifested in 1284 boarded a worldship (or even appeared on one initially), was sealed on the Alisa III, got carried back in time to Earth by way of either Sean or Adan's ending, and then was brought back to Algo by the Earthmen in a partly-sealed state. Dark Force has been subtly corrupting the Earthmen for centuries, perhaps even millennia, and has been infiltrating Mother Brain since the beginning. Thus, the Earthmen of my timeline are not wholly sane; many are driven by Dark Force-instilled urges towards violence, hatred, and destruction. Only when the seal's weakest point came in PS2 did Dark Force emerge from its seal openly and was able to fill the Noah with its monsters. Any Earthmen left on the Noah at that point were either killed or overcome by its evil to become the raving destroyers of worlds that Rolf meets up with.

It is Dark Force's influence that kept the Earthmen from trying to make a peaceful first contact with the Algo natives, which gave them the plan to create Mother Brain, and which drove them to destroy Palm. Not that we might not have done all those things anyway without it. History is filled with examples of human monsters who needed no evil god to shape their monstrosity. Hitler is only the most obvious example.

Motavians: The Motavians we see in PS2, despite their technological skills, come off as simple, none too bright, and have an unusual attraction to garbage. I blame Mother Brain for systematically destroying their culture even as she changed the environment of the planet to suit herself. Motavian culture was only restored when Motavians who had emigrated to Palm returned to Motavia on the escape fleet.

Is it any wonder PS4 Motavians aren't particularly fond of "Parmanians"?

Weapons and Armor: Converting a videogame's weapons and armor system to the variety of circumstances in which combat happens in a story is enough to give any fanfic writer fits. Slashers, for example. There's no way in the world to justify what these things can do. Guns, though, make an even more annoying example, because in PS2, the guns are all armor-piercing despite the fact that they fire such a wide variety of projectiles (arrows, sonic pulses, acid blobs, vulcan rounds, laser beams, etc.) which should have their own characteristics. So, with the example of PS4 before me, I decided that this feature was merely a game mechanic from PS1, 2, and 3 rather than a feature of firearm physics in Phantasy Star. I've treated the fact that some guns have a rate of fire which is determined not by the shooter but by how many enemies are present in the same way.

I'd like to say that the one-handed laser shot Conn uses is also a product of careful analysis, but in fact, it was just a mistake; I didn't realize that the PS2 laser shot is a two-handed gun. So, thence was created the "small-frame" laser shot which, similarly to Odin's laser gun from PS1, needs only one hand. Unlike Odin's gun, it's not capable of burst fire. I finally figured out what was going on in November of 2000, which is why Cash in "He Who Laughs Last" has a two-handed laser shot.

I've decided to treat "suits" as a type of armored clothing, the kind of thing that shows up in lots of cyberpunk game systems. The standard jumpsuit worn by Rolf, Rudo, and the like is the basic military model, but carbonsuits also come in a variety of fashions for daily life. Fibercoats, also, were interpreted this way, so they come in a variety of styles from Tyler's duster to jackets bearing the logo of your favorite metroball team (and no, I have no idea what the rules of that game are, other than that I'm rooting for the Scion Seatigers to take this year's championship).

Certain items were imported from PS4. The pulse-laser Tyler uses was easy, as anything technological like that would have had to be developed prior to the Great Collapse. The graphitesuit was more difficult to justify, since it is sold in PS4 stores, but I decided that it was just going into experimental production on Palm by the time PS2 happened and was only available there, similarly to how you can only buy Laconia weapons on Dezo.

Lastly, I've given Risa's claws their more obvious name, though I do call them "bars" now and again just to show that I am aware that's what they're called in PS2. I've decided that, contrary to what the PS2 instruction book says, the "Pls" for Anje's cannon stands for "plasma" instead of "pulse." The pulse guns in PS4 are all burst-fire weapons, which the cannon definitely isn't, and the green explosion is similar enough to those caused by Wren's plasma rifle and plasma launcher from PS4 to make the assumption at least partially justified.

Techniques: I've assumed, just because it's more complete, that PS4's system of skills, techniques, magic, and android weapons existed in this time period. We just never got to see android weapons and magic in PS2 because there were no androids or Espers in the party, and the Mother Brain-reliant, technology-heavy society of Mota in that period did not encourage the individualism required to teach skills.

By the way, my theory on the three types of "magic" is that true magic (spells) is drawn from within by an Esper--that there's something genetic that produces the magical energy used in Esper spells within the Esper (Blame the Great Light for that little tweak.). Skills use the will of the individual to absorb and focus the energy in the background environment, and are developed through intense personal training. Techniques are a regimented system developed by Noah/Lutz by which anyone can use the background magic and are similar therefore to skills but are easier to use and fall into a set of predictable effects which are shared among thousands of people. Most people can use techs, but which ones are available is largely a function of personal psychology.

\* \* \* \* \*

All in all, I'd like to thank everyone who managed to read this far, and I hope you enjoyed the story. Feel free to drop me a line at seishiro@cephiro.com with your comments, questions, or flames!

Well, actually, I wouldn't mind too much if you kept the flames... ^\_^