

Fade to Black

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Series - Shadowrun

1994

ISBN: 0-451-45287-9

Scanned, formatted and proofed by Dreamcity

Ebook version 1.0

Release Date: December, 26, 2003

Special thanks to readers Scott Lusby, Ted Swedalla, and Dave Zimmerman, John S. Franca-villo and Fern R. Francavillo for productive and unique critiques of the original manuscript, RNC for keeping me honest and more, VD, AP & CR for language tips, JF who knows I'm alive, and TZ who might suspect, RB, SD, KM, FW, JAW and RZ, for, among other things, enthusiasm and support.

And, of course, Oscar, Madeline ... and Ginger Ann ...

Long may you run.

At 01:14 hours, everything went dark: the rooftop lounge, the aeropad outside it, every light, beacon, and security system guarding the top of the tower.

Gordon Ito slipped on a pair of light-intensifying shades, checked his watch, and motioned the uniformed security officers out of the rooftop lounge. Only his personal bodyguard remained.

The blackout was on Gordon's order, engineered via a diagnostic program running on the tower's operations mainframes-initialized in error, should anyone ever ask. The blackout had been a pre-condition for the meet about to occur. Gordon did not like the pre-conditions, but he liked far less the reasons that had compelled, him to call for the meet.

Recent events now forced him to roll up one of his games, a covert op. The prospect displeased him, all the more so because ending the operation would require special action. All evidence of the op had to be spirited out of the competition's hands, that or eradicated, before any embarrassing disclosures could be made. This would cost Gordon a few more nuyen from his clandestine operating budget, but that meant nothing compared to the risks and the potential for disaster. The games he played always involved high stakes, commensurate risks, and ominous potentialities.

Now, the chopper came into view, a grayish specter cast in silhouette by the radiant illumination of the soaring towers of lower Manhattan. The rhythmic thumping of the craft's rotors resounded softly against the lounge's floor-to-ceiling windows. Gordon recognized the chopper's configuration, that of an A.C. Plutocrat, a big helo with luxury accommodations, usually reserved for the corporate elite.

Carefully, the chopper settled onto the aeropad outside.

"Iku beki desu," said Gordon's bodyguard.

Gordon shook his head. He would attend this meeting alone, as arranged. He would not need the bodyguard's protection. That much he could be sure of. The person he was about to meet considered him too valuable a customer-and perhaps too dangerous a potential enemy-to let anything unwise occur.

Outside, the whirling rotors slowed. Gordon stepped forward. Double transporex doors snapped open before him. As he walked out onto the aeropad toward the waiting chopper, the wind howled and tugged at his tailored suit. The aeropad sat perched some two hundred and fifty stories above the street, atop Tower Five of Fuchi Industrial Electronics' monument to economic imperialism. The wind always raged up here, and it was always cold and harsh. Gordon knew that better than most.

The door in the flank of the chopper swung open like a pair of jaws, the lower section descending to provide a set of steps. A man too tall and lean and gaunt to be anything but an elf descended the steps, his long black duster flapping in the wind. Approaching Gordon, he extended the hand-held probe of a weapons detector, checked the device, then motioned at the Plutocrat with his chin.

"Estd bien," the elf said. *"Entre."*

Gordon climbed the steps up into the narrow space directly behind the flight crew. Both pilot and copilot wore helmets with full, nonreflective visors that masked their features completely. The pair sat like statues, facing their controls and the broad forward windshield of the chopper, never once turning their heads.

The door to the rear cabin swung open. Gordon stepped through. The elf followed.

The cabin was ostentatiously appointed in black and red and gold-crushed velvet on the walls, full carpeting, lush drapes. A pair of men in black mirrorshades and sharply cut gray suits waited to the left and right of the door. One was big enough to be an ork bodybuilder, the other looked Asian and had the build of a sumo wrestler. Impassive faces, casual postures. Nothing Gordon hadn't expected. Nothing he'd not seen before.

The woman seated in the captain's-style chair at the rear of the cabin looked Spanish. She had her sable hair drawn back sleek and flat from her brow. The gold wire lead of a datawire hung from her right temple. She wore black visorshades, a sparkling red jacket adorned with swirls of black, tight black slacks and gleaming scarlet boots. Her name was Sarabande. She was *kuromaku*, a fixer. She motioned casually to the chair facing her from across a small oval table. Gordon accepted the offer and sat down. The subtle thumping of the chopper's rotors grew louder as the craft ascended, swinging out over lower Manhattan and across the Hudson, toward the blighted regions of Jersey City and Newark. Gordon glanced at the drape-covered windows and guessed at the chopper's movements. He also checked his watch: 01:18 hours. The upper stories of Tower Five would be back on-line by now, fully illuminated and operational, while some slag down in Facility Control would be wondering what the hell had happened. "Your business?" Sarabande said. "On chip."

"Muy Men."

Gordon opened the synth-digit replacing the end of his left pinkie and drew out an optical chip couched in a wafer-thin plastic carrier. He held out the chip-carrier. The elf examined it and passed it to his master. A compact console rose from the center of the table. Sarabande slotted both carrier and chip into a receiving port. Several minutes passed. Gordon waited.

"A very complete dossier," Sarabande said finally. "The work to be done will require extensive preparation and will entail a high risk. What price will you pay?" Gordon replied, "Whatever it takes."

"I will require an immediate advance of three hundred thousand nuyen."

"I want multi-level back-up and I want the job expedited."

"Five-hundred thousand nuyen."

"And you guarantee completion." Sarabande showed no reaction. "The work will be attempted by competent parties taking all reasonable steps to ensure success," she said. "That is your guarantee." Gordon nodded. It would do.

2

The bar was little more than a counter jammed into an alley between a noodle bar and a booth selling bootleg simchips. The silver-eyed trog behind the counter had a set of snap-blades strapped to his right forearm and a Remington Roomsweeper bolstered low on his left hip. He didn't take nothing but certified cred. The tequila he served was synthetic, lousy and cheap. So was the soykaf. For the price of a drink or a kaf, you got to elbow in between the other "clients" and stand there under the awning and watch and wait.

Rico ordered a shot and a kaf, then stood watching the throngs cramming the alley, shuffling by, sometimes near enough to brush his front.

This was Sector 3, Newark metroplex. Free zone. SIN-less territory. No passes, no badges, no restrictions. No System Identification Numbers. No straight suits. The people who lived here couldn't hack it in Manhattan because they had no corporate connection, no background, no SIN. No official anything.

Every slag and slitch had their program for survival. Those who walked the razor knew the rules of the game. Here in Sector 3, if you wanted to live, you carried metal, heavy metal, and you didn't make no secret about it. If you had implanted chrome, you made sure everybody knew it, or at least had reason to suspect it. If somebody met your gaze and held it, you didn't look away for even an instant, because an instant was all it took. This was 2055. There were slags walking the streets who would cut out your heart and feed it back to you before you could know you were dead.

Rico leaned back against the bar, one hand dangling near the butt-grip of the Ares Predator 2 slung from his hip. He kept his eyes moving. He didn't show anything with his face.

Before long, the silver-eyed trog leaned over the bar to say near Rico's ear, "The man's ready, chummer." Rico nodded.

The alley led onto Ridge Street. Rico joined the jostling, hustling stream of people heading that way: chipheads, gangers, groupie wannabes, day laborers, cheap muscle, anonymous gutterpunks. Every slant of human, ork, elf, troll, whatever. They went dressed in cheap paper uniforms, studded synthleather, gleaming mylar, glistening spandex with chains and ribbons and glowing fiber optics. Face tats and body color. At least a few of these slags were here because they wanted in on the biz. Sector 3 might be impoverished, over-crowded, crime-ridden, the seventh and lowest circle of a decaying urban hell, but it was one of the best markets in the plex. Anything could be had for the right amount of nuyen. And some things could be had for practically nothing at all. People said this part of the plex used to be lined with little two- and three-story houses, brownstones, tenement apartments. Nice places where nice families lived. Rico doubted it. The traces were few, and most of what people said usually amounted to pure drek, like what comes out the butt-end of a bull.

Sector 3 was all steel and crete now, rising up seven stories with retrofitted pipes and conduits, all of it scorched by the acid of the nightly rains and stained black and brown by soot and all the other garbage in the air. Garish neon signs glared from every direction, the night burned as bright as day. Stores and shops filled the ground floors of the buildings. Booths and stalls flanked the sidewalks. Ad stands lined the curbs, sound tracks reverberating, echoing. The street itself was divided in half by four- and five-story coffin hotels that ran from corner to corner, served by rusted metal gangways. Vehicle traffic was banned. You caught an auto-cab in the underground, or the subway, or you walked. Rico paused to look as the staccato stammer of automatic weapons arose suddenly from the general direction of Abington Avenue East. He saw only the mass of people surrounding him, passive, stone-featured faces. He took his lead from the crowd and continued on. The rising shriek of belt-screamers alerted him to the DocWagon High Threat Response team coming his way, bruising path through the congested street. The two orks with the team ran interference. Rico shoved into the crowd at his left to get out of the way, then turned the corner onto

Treadwell Street.

At mid-block was a four-story brownstone with a porch and steps sided by black metal railing—a remnant of the times long gone, if what people said was so.

On the brownstone's porch waited a pair of razorguys in studded blue synthleather. They were prime cutters, chromed to the max and willing to prove it. Rico knew that for a fact, he could have guessed it at a glance. The cutters held themselves like real gilletes, like they had whatever it might take to meet." any challenge from the street. They watched Rico start up the steps with what looked like casual indifference, but as he reached the porch, they stepped into his path—no hesitation, no doubt about what they were doing.

Stop or fight, that was the message.

Sometimes a man had no choice but to fight. This wasn't one of those times. Watching the cutters' eyes, Rico said, "I'm expected."

"We know," one said quietly.

Moments passed. Rico waited. Custom had to be satisfied. Certain things had to be done in certain ways. You didn't just walk up the steps to the man's house and breeze right through the front door. Rico knew all that and had no objections. If nothing else, respect demanded it.

Another prime cutter came to the door, looked out, motioned Rico inside and led him through the house. No one asked to check his weapons or suggested he give them up. Respect worked both ways.

They came to an expansive atrium rising to a translucent roof four stories overhead. Colorful exotic birds flitted around, darting among the limbs of a few tall tress or watching from various perches high up on the walls. The birds alone were probably worth a fortune. The rest was like something you'd only see on the Museum Channel: bushes, flowering shrubs, beds of flowers. A waterfall. A path winding through it all like a stream of pure white liquid marble. Rico's escort paused at the entrance to the garden and motioned him ahead.

The path led to the center of the garden, a circular patio surrounded by pillars set with busts of slags from ancient history. Rico recognized two of them—the busts of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. The man he was here to see liked to talk about slags like that sometimes.

The man was known as Mr. Victor. He sat looking at Rico from the round transpax table at the center of the patio. He wore his thin black hair drawn back flat against his head to the nape of his neck, where it blossomed into the brief bushy extravagance of a ponytail. That was the only extravagant aspect of his appearance. The rest was severe, even grim. He wore a suit and tie of jet black, a crisp white shirt, no jewelry of any kind. Based purely on his appearance, he might have been an undertaker or a corporate exec. In truth, he was far more.

He smiled in greeting and waved briefly at the other transpax chair at the table. Rico nodded and moved to sit. "How are you, my friend?" Mr. Victor said. "I'm good."

"One of the best." Rico shrugged.

"Only the truth, my friend." Mr. Victor smiled faintly, then snapped his fingers sharply and gestured. The house-boy standing nearby brought a tray of coffee, which he served in small china cups. Not kaf, not synthetic. The real thing, its aroma rich and flavorful. Like wine, Rico thought. Wine from the finest vineyards of France. It smelled that good. The taste was indescribable.

Mr. Victor waved a hand and the houseboy went away. "I regret that I had some other business to attend to this evening," Mr. Victor said. "That is why I could not see you immediately. Forgive the delay."

"*Seguro*," Rico said, nodding definitely. "But you don't owe me no explanations."

"I owe you much," Mr. Victor's expression turned sober, men abruptly filled with disgust. "These slags I saw before you came... they make me ill. They are not men, you understand? They are like dogs. Eager for any scrap I will feed them. There is nothing they would not do for a price."

Quietly Rico said, "They have no honor." Mr. Victor nodded, "No honor. No morals. No respect For themselves or anyone else. One job is the same as the next. They would kill their own *madrás* for enough nuyen. They call themselves runners. 'Shadowrunners.'" Mr. Victor turned his head aside and leaned over and made as if to spit "They step over the line into darkness, these dogs. They are criminals. I would not deal with them except that I have nothing against setting dogs on other dogs. Criminals against other criminals. I hope you do no hold that against me, my friend."

"I should judge what you do?" Rico replied. "I don't think so."

"That is your right. Your right as a man. I respect you. I respect your opinions. Tell me what you think."

Rico did not have to think long. "I think you got good reasons for whatever you do. How you deal with criminals is your business. Not mine."

"You hold generous opinions, my friend."

"Maybe. Where it is due."

Mr. Victor sat still a few moments, looking off across the garden. When he spoke, he kept his voice quiet, private. There was a sadness in his tone. "It's difficult to find work for a man such as you. There is always work in the shadows, but some jobs you will not accept. I am always on the watch for the right kind of work, you know this. Jobs appropriate not just for you, but for you and your team of specialists."

Rico nodded.

"You have heard the name L. Kahn?"

"*Seguro*," Rico said, again nodding. The name L Kahn was well known throughout the Newark metroplex. With that name came many rumors but few verifiable facts. Rico understood the name to be a Johnson, like a cipher. A name to be used where real names were never used. The man behind the name "L. Kahn" was said to have juice, connections, money. It was said that he had contracted for some of the biggest jobs ever pulled in the Newark plex.

"I can arrange for you to meet this man."

Rico didn't doubt it. Mr. Victor had juice of his own. "What's the deal?"

"My friend, I am a businessman," Mr. Victor said. "I am the man in the middle. I bring prospective clients together with specialists such as yourself. Whether the client is a businessman like me or the party offering an original contract is of no importance to my trade. You see why I am reminding you of this?"

I

"You only got some of the details."

"Si, a few. L. Kahn asks to be connected with an experienced team possessing a broad range of capabilities. He has said that the contract is for a high-risk job, and that the pay will be commensurate to that risk. I am led to believe that the assignment comes from high places. A success here could add great weight to your reputation."

"What's the run involve?"

"It was described to me as being in the nature of a recovery job. Naturally, I thought you would approve."

"What's being recovered?"

"That is for L. Kahn to say."

"Could be a datasnatch."

"It could be many things, my friend,"

"I heard L. Kahn contracted for the Winter Systems job."

"That is only rumor."

"Still..."

Winter Systems had contracts for police services in Manhattan, Union City, and other places around the New York-New Jersey megaplex. The Winter Systems *job* had involved the kidnapping and murder of several Winter Systems execs, and, incidentally, a conspiracy that had touched practically every major corp in the megaplex.

The murders were what mattered to Rico. He did not do killing for hire. Neither did he do kidnapping. Neither did anyone in his group. "You trust this slag L. Kahn?"

"Can anyone be trusted, my friend?"

"Some can. Some can't."

Mr. Victor paused for a few moments, then said, "As you well know, there are no guarantees in this life. I would say that L. Kahn can be trusted. More than some, less than others. I have not heard that L. Kahn has ever broken a contract or betrayed a trust. You must decide for yourself, my friend. Merely tell me now whether I should arrange a meet."

Rico thought about it, and nodded, "*Si*."

"Consider it done, my friend."

3

Thorvin didn't much notice the first few bangs and pings against the sides of the van. He was busy. He'd managed to pull the G-6 torque converter out of the drive train of an otherwise ruined Gaz-Willys Nomad. That was like finding gold. The G-6 was built like an anvil, durable as a slab of tempered steel. Finding one amid the wasted, ghost-haunted toxic graveyard of Newark's Sector 13 was a freaking miracle, though it didn't really surprise him. He'd been hunting through the crumbling projects and derelict tenements around the old airport for years. That was how he'd dug up the City of Linden no-parking sign, now hanging in his garage. And who saw any of those standing around anymore? Thorvin knew there were treasures here, minor mechanical marvels, gleaming motes of engineering majesty not apparent, much less

comprehensible to the ordinary eye. He just hadn't expected to stumble over, of all things, a G-6 torquer. The prizes to be had in this sector ran heavily on the side of wafer-guided electronics, appliances, household drek.

Something clanged loudly against the side of the van. With that rose a howling that sounded decidedly unnatural.

Thorvin paused and looked up.

When the van starting rocking back and forth like a boat turned crossways to a heaving sea-accompanied by a storm of clanging and banging-he dropped his chrome ratchet and can of lubricant and ran, tool belts clanking, to the front of the van, hopping over toolcases, a stripped-down engine block, an eviscerated Suzuki Aurora, a partly disassembled Kaydee A.C. condenser twinpak, hubcaps, nuts and bolts, an antique C.R.T., and an old General Products multifuel power generator, *like a freaking kangaroo!*

The ghoulies had come a-calling. Thorvin leaped up into the driver's seat and slapped the black lead from the driver's console into the datajack at the side of his neck. His vision blanked, then returned. The van's external vid-pickups replaced his eyes and ears. The van had become his body.

The ghoulies were there all right, all around him. Pounding on his armor-reinforced, metal-alloy flanks. Using fists, bricks, and metal bars. Skeletal jaws flapping, fingernails like talons, clothes hanging in rags, they looked like rotting corpses just emerged from their worm-infested holes. And Thorvin knew what they wanted. They liked their meat raw. Human was best, decayed and rotting even better, but in a pinch, if enough of them got together, they'd go for anything, even something alive. Even a freaking *dwarf!*

Just the thought of those slimy, decaying monstrosities clawing at his metal-alloy skin sent chills up his rear doors. Back. Whatever. No effing way they'd get inside. He had a Magnum V-12 850-horsepower blower-driven petrochem heart. For blood he had Super-98 octane with injected nitrous oxide. He set his power plant to roaring and slammed his tranny into drive. His rear wheels churned, screaming, sending up a billowing storm cloud of smoke, seizing the road and hurling him ahead.

The gleaming red graphic indicators overlaying his external view went wild. Velocity shot toward 200 kph. Engine revs pegged max. Targeting indicators guided by his onboard combat comp streaked left and right, winking and flashing. A raucous symphony of electronic warning tones, beeps, and bleeps rilled the back of his head, his real head, somewhere inside ... not quite forgotten.

Things bounced off his van-body, banged and slammed and then fell away. Building debris, derelict cars, assorted junk, garbage, and other things, not junk or garbage. Things that squished and splatted. Like bodies. There must be *a whole tribe of the freaking zombie cannibals hanging around*, closing in from all sides. That's what he got for treasure-hunting so near the freaking cemeteries. Suddenly, one stood in the road directly in front of him, a shambling monstrosity with spindly limbs hefting what looked like a freaking shoulder-mounted Panther assault cannon.

Thorvin's own nervous system pegged max.

The M-134 minigun in the pod on his roof popped up and stammered rapid-fire. The ghoulie in the road jerked and spun, then slammed against the crash-grille guarding Thorvin's front end.

An ocean of red-tinted slime splashed across Thorvin's external sensors. Mentally he flinched. The van swerved and pitched, bounding up then slamming down. Things crashed. Fortunately, his all-terrain General Products F-6900 self-healing tires could really take a pounding. He switched on his forward-looking infrared radar and found himself hurtling straight into a building wall.

Panic time.

He cut his wheels right, roared up an alley, smashed through a pair of cyclone fences, and shot out onto a broad open space like a weed-infested parking field.

Bad move.

A half-dozen beat-up, smashed-out petrochem heaps were wheeling around the crumbling, debris-strewn concrete. As many as a dozen motorcycles whizzed back and forth. Every driver and every passenger held some kind of weapon-handguns, rifles, shotguns, SMGs. Thorvin recognized the colors even as the thundering barrage of gunfire assaulted his audio pickups. He'd steered himself right into a freaking war! Chiller-thrillers versus a go-go-gang, the Toxic Marauders versus the Rahway Blades.

Great Freaking great.

A cycle came screaming toward him. Bullets pinged and panged rapid-fire off his front grille. Winking red targeting markers homed in on the cycle. Thorvin opened up with his minigun and hurled himself into a skidding, tire-screaming half-circle.

The cycle exploded.

Thorvin fired himself back down the alley. A storm of rocks, bricks, chunks of metal, and other junk crashed against his sides and roof as he roared out onto the street. Ghoulies again. Just freaking great. He

set his power plant to whining, and went squealing around the very next corner, almost, but not quite, hopping up onto two wheels.

That was Peerless ADH antishock stabilizers for you. Nice. Very nice.

"Shank."

What was that? Somebody saying his name? He didn't know who or why and he didn't really care, anyway. He ignored it. "*Shank!*"

"Dammit, Shank, *wake up!*" Somebody grabbed his shoulder and started shaking it hard. He couldn't just ignore it. He guessed who was probably doing the shaking and realized that ignoring her would be useless. Evonne was usually okay, chill enough to live with. But when she got something stuck up her butt, bad enough to risk waking him up, she could get him so mad that beating her brains out, or worse, almost seemed like a good idea.

Luckily for her, he had nothing to prove. Evonne needed what little brains she had.

The cursing got louder. Hands gripped his arms and began pulling him up, making him sit up. Water splashed into his face, maybe half a liter. It was kind of refreshing, really. He rubbed his eyes, stretched his arms and yawned, and looked around.

The amber-tinted lamp by the bedside cast a glow through the room that showed Shank all he needed to see. He was in his bedroom, which was simply furnished, sheathed in synthfurs and deeply carpeted. Evonne and her sister Kefee stood beside the bed. Evonne looked angry, Kefee upset. None of that was so unusual that Shank paid more than passing notice.

What he really noticed, and not for the first time, was what a hot-looking biff Evonne was-built to last, right down to her girlish set of fangs. A real turn-on, especially when she got sleazy, and even more so when she got mad. Her sister Kefee looked kind of frail, more like a human biff, not very enticing. "They're back!" Evonne growled. Shank ran a hand back over his hair, scratched behind his right ear. "Who?"

"The *bangers?*" Evonne growled, more forcefully than before, staring at him like he should just automatically know what she was talking about. "They're stuffing Chak! Right in the alley!"

Stuffing Chak ...?

Evonne thrust a hand up and out to her left, toward the alley. Kefee just looked scared and said, "Shank, *please!*"

Right.

Shank shook himself awake. Everybody had obviously decided that the problem, Chak getting stuffed, beaten, or whatever, was something Shank ought to handle. It was probably Evonne's idea. No point in arguing. She was probably right. Shank had kind of inherited Kefee and her kids when Kefee's man got wasted in a Bronx firefight. Chak, her oldest kid, was still pretty young, only nine or ten, and, ork or not, that didn't make him much of a fighter. Not even against ordinary humans. Maybe one-on-one, but not against a whole gang. A gang would call for some serious head-banging.

Shank heaved himself to his feet and headed for the door. The women stepped quickly out of his way-and good thing, too. It looked like he had a fight coming on. This soon after being woken up, he had no trouble getting into the mood.

The passageway outside was jammed, mostly with kids and more women. This week most of the adult males from Shank's hall, the ones any good in a fight, were in the Roselle Park jail, off Raritan Road. Something to do with stuffing a bunch of mafiosi. The maf shoulda learned by now to keep their butts the hell outta Port Sector.

"Coming through," Shank grumbled.

People got outta his way, and those who didn't got bumped. They were all jamming up toward the end of the hall to peer around the corner and up the stairs toward the alley. A helluva lot of good that did. Shank waded through the final meter of bodies, then turned the corner and plodded up the stairs two at a time. The steel trap door at alley-level stood open. Shank trod right on through.

The group was right there, barely three meters away, clearly visible against the dusky gray of a moonless night. Chak looked to be the one on the ground taking all the punches and kicks. None of the gangers seemed to notice as Shank stepped up behind them. That made things pretty fragging easy. He reached out for the nearest two and banged their heads together. They dropped bonelessly to the ground. The other gangers noticed him then. Mostly they just looked at him and stared. And gaped. Very scary. Shank grabbed the nearest one by the arm, jerked him off his feet, swung him around, and then slammed him into the building wall on the right. That one fell, too. Not very tough, these bangers. Not very fast either, all things considered. And not very smart,

One lifted a knife toward Shank's nose, and snarled, "Skin you alive!"

Shank grabbed the wrist behind the knife, then jerked the whole arm into the air, lifting the ganger right

off his feet. The slag flailed with his free arm, slapping, punching, and even tried kicking. Shank snorted. What a joke. One punch to the face and the ganger slumped. Shank let him fall.

That left three of the gangers standing. One pulled a gun and pointed it directly at Shank's face, which was really a pretty stupid thing to do. If you wanted to shoot an ork, you aimed someplace that might hurt, not at his rock-hard skull. Shank ducked and reached out and the gun went off. He felt a wave of heat rush past his left ear, but that was it. A second shot went off, but by then Shank had his hand wrapped around the barrel of the gun. Which was all the hold he needed. He jerked the gun free, then grabbed the ganger by his jacket collar.

"Bye-bye," he said, and heaved the slag against a convenient wall, the wall on the left, just to keep things even. The ganger slumped to the ground the same way the others did, like a sack of raw meat. And that left only two still standing. "That pair began backing away, looking scared. Shank pointed the gun, a Colt Manhunter, something particularly appropriate for an ork to use, and said, "Move again an' you're dead." The two gangers froze.

By then, Chak was on his feet and looking back and forth like he didn't know what to do, which probably he didn't. The kid's face was streaked with blood and looked kinda swollen, but it'd take more than that to put him out. Never mind who he had for a mother, Chak was husky for his age and he had balls. *Cojones*, some would say. That translated into staying power.

Shank resisted a smile. To tell the truth, he liked the kid. Chak was always asking about his tattoos and the dust-ups he'd been in with the Dragon Regiment and other mere units down in Aztlan and other places. It was hard to resist naked admiration.

"You all right?" Shank asked.

Chak nodded, breathing hard, maybe a little too hard to speak clearly.

"Get a rope and a knife."

"Kay ..."

Chak nodded and hustled off, but was back in a minute or so. Evonne and her sister and half the crowd from the hallway below followed Chak up the stairs. Shank motioned for the crowd to stay put. He had a gun in his hand and work that needed his attention. He wasn't about to put up with any squawking or unwelcome questions or suggestions. At a wave, Chak brought the knife and rope.

"Tie 'em," Shank told him. "Them two first."

Shank motioned at the pair of gangers still standing. Chak set to work binding their wrists behind their backs, and none too gently. Shank didn't care about that. Those fragging gangers deserved it. That and worse. What worried him was what to do next.

Executing prisoners wasn't his style. He'd had a bellyful of that down in fragging Azzie-land. He'd once thought he'd seen it all, but that was nothing compared to what butchers the Aztlan troopers could be. He'd have none of that here. What were his options? He could call the cops, but they couldn't give a slot about some minor-ass gang problem, not here in Sector 12. And he couldn't just let the gangers loose. By sundown tomorrow, they'd be hot on the butts of the kids from his hall, and Chak especially. Worse, he'd never hear the end of it. Evonne would see to that. He had to do something along the lines of making a permanent fix.

But what?

Goddamn his thick skull, anyway. If he'd been born any dumber, he'd be dangerous just taking a crap. And some of the slags in his old regiment used to rag him about that, too.

Evonne said, "Shank-"

"Can it."

She did.

Right then, something with about a billion-candlepower's worth of headlights, driving lights, fog lights, off-road lights, and side- and roof-mounted spotlights, pulled into the end of the alley and came rolling straight toward him. Shank realized what was behind all the damn lights just about the time the blinding brilliance of it all forced his eyes shut. The thing rumbled like a CMC Banshee winding up for an attack run. It was about as close to a real panzer as anyone could get in the Newark plex without the local militia calling out the helicopter gunships. This one had started out as a shorty Landrover, and still resembled a basic stock model, but just about every part had been replaced, upgraded, or refitted. The custom cargo cover on the roof concealed a pair of weapons pods, plus there were gunports all around and other features, custom features.

Rolling to a halt, lights going out, the van became a ghost, dark and grim, blending with the cool gray of the night.

Shank wasn't scared drekless, or even a little, because he'd helped the halfer now hopping out of the

van with some of the van's custom installations. "Hoi, fang face."

"Horn head."

Who said orks and dwarfs couldn't be chummers? Thorvin might be squat and ugly and kinda single-minded at times, but he was as tough as brick and loyal as nightfall. In Shank's book, that made for a first-rate chum.

"What's with the garbage?" Thorvin asked, nodding at the gangers, toolbelt clanking as he strode out in front of the van.

"They're slotting me off."

"That's a freaking surprise. You gonna ice 'em?"

"Thinking about it. What're you doing?"

"Whaddya think? I'm picking you up."

"Oh yeah?"

"We got a meet."

That sounded good. It meant their top gun had finally got them some biz, or at least some kinda offer, and about fragging time, too. Money didn't go far in the plex, never far enough. Especially when you had another slag's wife and kids to worry about "Where and when?"

"We gotta pick up the man and the deck. Sector 3. Soon as you put on some clothes."

Clothes. Right. "Been over to Sector 13 lately?"

"That's a freaking stupid question."

"Ghouls still hanging there?"

"That's another freaking stupid question."

"Let's dump the garbage there."

Thorvin frowned, looked at the gangers, then back at Shank.

"Load 'em up," he said.

4

The booth was small, just big enough for one person. Brown synthwood paneled the walls. Piper closed the door, then turned and knelt on the cushioned foot of the narrow kneeling bench.

She spent a few moments composing herself, pressed her hair back behind her ears, then slipped the end of a credstick into the chrome-edged port on the side of the bench.

The vidscreen before her came to life. "A New Day" slowly resolved hi bold letters at the center of the screen, then faded. The "day" began with a boiling orange-red sun rising out of a pristine sea, waters fresh and sparkling, an ocean teeming with fish and thousands of other forms of life. The sun assumed a golden tint as it rose higher into the crystal-clear blue sky, and hundreds of thousands of birds flew up over the horizon to wheel in enormous flocks across die glittering ocean.

Music, till then only a distant murmur, arose full and majestic, vibrant and alive, celebrating the glory of life in all its multitudinous forms.

The voice of John Donne IX, a direct descendant of the Saint, and leader of the Church of the Whole Earth, arose with the music, beginning with a direct quote from Holy Sonnet Number 10: "One short sleep past, we wake eternally ... and death shall be no more ... Blessed be the Recreator... the living earth... and the eternal cycle of life, recycling without end ... "Amen ..."

In time, the sermon concluded and the music softened.

The scenes of a lush and beautiful world continued, sweeping from one view to the next Piper lowered her eyes and began to speak.

All the world's problems, as she saw it, stemmed from one thing: greed. People wanted. They were never content with what they had. So titanic corporations sucked resources from the Earth and left only toxic wastes behind. So ordinary people ignored the evidence of their senses, screaming at them from every direction, and worked only to improve their station, their jobs, their material possessions. No one cared about the planet, the poisons in the air, food, and water. Doing anything about that would waste valuable resources, like money, and time, precious time. The power mongers at the top of the food chain had convinced everyone of that. They used the media to exploit people's weaknesses. They saw to it that the common working people would feel too weighed down by the struggle of daily living and the-desire to always have *more, more, more!* rather than worry about mere ecology.

People were weak. Few had the means to combat the tyrants of economic politics, fewer still had the will, the strength of spirit. Too many had been crushed and ground into dust by the steel and concrete jackboot of the megacorporations.

Something had to be done. The megacorps had to be stripped of their power and pared down to size.

People had to be given back control over their own lives and the life of the world in which they lived-*the very planet all metahumanity depended on for survival.*

Tears streamed down her face as finally Piper shouted, pounding on the arm rests of the kneeling bench with her gloved fists.

It left her feeling cleansed, strengthened, empowered.

She was doing all she could. Almost every night. She only prayed that, in the end, her efforts, combined with that of many hundreds, even thousands, would be enough to save the ravaged Earth.

When she stepped from the booth, the narrow church was nearly deserted. The sunset service had ended some time ago. Only a few stragglers still sat in pews facing the altar and, above it, the enormous vid display of the Whole Earth-white clouds, blue ocean, and brown soil-ringed by the green yin-yang arrows, cycling eternally, representing the cyclical nature of life. Piper brought her fingertips together, forming the Globe with her hands, then bowed and turned to go.

A priest in robes of the four cardinal colors-white, blue, brown and green-awaited her at the rear of the Church. He was known as Father John, as were all priests of the Whole Earth Church. Piper did not know his real name, but that did not matter. He formed the Globe and bowed as she approached. She did likewise.

"There's a special meeting tonight," Father John said, quietly. "Our brothers ask that you attend." This came as no surprise.

Practically anyone with any skills at all would be continually in demand somewhere in the Newark plex. Newark had an excess of per diem meat. "Excess people," they were called. The special meeting to which Father John referred would undoubtedly be a meeting of the group known as Ground Wave, the local cell of the Green 4800, an organization of international scope. Ground Wave had need for deckers, ones with the proper perspective. Ones with Piper's degree of experience and skill were needed desperately.

Piper bowed, and said, "I'm sorry, Father. Please excuse me. I cannot attend this evening."

"I trust you've not had a change of heart."

"Of course not." The idea was almost insulting. "I have other obligations."

"What other obligation is there but to the restoration of the Whole Earth?"

That was something Piper could not argue, for Father John would not understand. Life came with many obligations. One might be paramount, but the others could not simply be ignored. She needed money, for instance, if only to eat, if only so she might continue to further the cause. "This is very difficult," Piper said, again bowing. "You're right, of course. I wish I could explain further. It is my fault. Completely my fault. Please excuse me."

Father John hesitated, then nodded. "I presume we may count on you again in the future?"

"Of course." Piper bowed, trying to conceal her expression, her struggle to suppress her annoyance. Father John seemed intent tonight on irking her or on afflicting her with guilt. Of course he could count on her in the future. She'd been working with Ground Wave for more than a year. Piper had more experience with anticorporate activity than anybody in the group. Unfortunately, she was used to this kind of talk. Used to people speaking presumptuously and rudely. Used to people with immensely egocentric personalities. People with the viewpoint that whatever happened to be right for them must be right for everyone. She attended frequent *cha-no-yu*, the tea ceremony, if only to remind herself that some people, anyway, were at least basically civilized.

"*Dozo, gomen kudasai*," Piper said, excusing herself, bowing and forming the Globe. "I must go now, Father. Good evening."

Father John bowed and formed the Globe. "Good night."

The street outside was busy. A veritable river of people flowed steadily along the sidewalk. Traffic filled the narrow roadway, barely moving at a crawl. Garish neon and laser adverts in Japanese and a dozen other Asian languages climbed the fronts of buildings as high as nine or ten stories. Piper made her way up the block and joined the crowd waiting at the corner with Custer Avenue.

Abruptly, a man wearing the signature red and black suit jacket of the Honjowara yakuza stepped off the curb and into the road, blowing a shrill blast on a whistle while extending his arms out fully to both sides. Traffic halted. Piper moved with the crowd that flowed out and across the street. A number of people loudly praised the Honjowara-gumi as they passed the man in the red and black jacket.

"*Domo arigato*," the man said politely, bowing in response to each laudatory remark.

Yakuza, Piper knew, might be vicious gangsters, but they were also very conscious of their public image. The Honjowara-gumi had made this part of Sector 6, Little Asia, centered around Bergen Street, one of the safest hoods in the plex. They performed many public services and would allow no one to abuse their citizens. Gangs and other criminal elements entered the district at their peril.

Piper continued up the next block toward Hawthorne, but only as far as the intricately carved synthwood door of the Holy Savior Buddhist temple.

As she turned toward that door, another man in red and black abruptly stepped up beside her, tugged the door open for her, and bowed, saying, "*Dozo ... Allow me...*"

Piper bowed to the man. "*Domo arigato gozaimasu.*" As she stepped through, the man slipped past her, tugged the inner door open, and bowed, saying, "*Dozo.*"

"*Domo arigato.*" Piper bowed and stepped inside. An acolyte of the temple escorted her to a small chamber where a Buddhist priest waited. For a donation of ten nuyen, the priest led her in a brief prayer ritual and then gave her a quick lecture on the Buddha nature as exemplified by Christ, a lecture she did not really want to hear but felt obligated to endure. She had trouble with Buddhist teachings, even those of the fairly innovative sects of the Newark metroplex. She didn't really believe in any mystical enlightenment-that was her problem. Most people she had encountered in her life seemed all but oblivious to even the most basic truths of their everyday routine. To suppose that even a major event like death would shock them into some form of "enlightened" consciousness required a leap of faith that was beyond her. Still, this was a part of the sorrow of existence. The teachings of Buddhism and the Whole Earth Church had much in common, most notably the emphases on the cyclical nature of life. Piper felt obliged to seek her own enlightenment even if she did not entirely believe *in* the concept. Perhaps belief could not truly come until enlightenment was achieved.

When the lecture ended, she went back outside, then through the sliding transporex doors into the Shinto shrine next door. This visit cost her twenty nuyen. Shinto priests were very worldly and always more expensive than their Buddhist counterparts. The priest went through all the usual routines, moaning, chanting, caterwauling, shaking rattles and waving wands, ringing bells and gongs and blowing whistles.

For her money, Piper had evil influences chased away and gained the assurance that the local kami would look favorably upon her. She sometimes found it difficult to believe that any real kami would inhabit a plex like Newark, but even that was easier to accept than the lectures of the Buddhists.

Back on the street again, she walked down to Watson Avenue. Rico waited there.

"You okay, chica?" he said, looking past her right.

"Yes." Piper nodded. "Fine." She slipped a hand onto his shoulder and kissed his cheek. Any greater display of affection would not have been appropriate. Rico preferred to keep his eyes and mind on his surroundings.

"Take care of your duty okay?" he said, glancing down the side street toward Chadwick.

"Yes," Piper said, nodding.

"How's your axe?"

He meant her cyberdeck, not her guitar. Piper didn't have a guitar and, in fact, had little interest in music. Certain of her ancestors had reputedly been great music-lovers, among other things, and that had been enough to turn her off music for good. "I had a roach in the node."

Rico frowned, glancing at her. "What?"

"A geometrically replicating virus."

"Yeah?"

Piper hesitated, gazing at Rico, trying to read his sphinx-like expression, then took a deep breath and said, "Roaches duplicate everything in memory, themselves included, till there's no more room left, this one got into my operating code and ... it started laying eggs. That's why I kept getting locked out. Memory was jammed. I couldn't power up. I had to jack in with pother deck and go over everything with a microscanner."

Rico turned to look up toward Hunterdon Street. "Guess that's why it took so long."

"Well, yes."

Most of a week, in fact. That wasn't long, considering she'd had more than a thousand megapulses worth of onboard code to review, not to mention forty gigapulses of off-line storage. In fact, with only a couple of smartframes to help her, it was a miracle she'd finished any time this year.

"But you got it fixed, right?"

"Yes, it's fine, *jefe.*"

Rico nodded, but then three men in red and black jackets emerged from the crowd around them and came to a stop facing them. One bowed, glancing at Rico, then asked Piper his rapid Japanese, "Excuse me, is this person troubling you?"

Piper blinked. The question seemed remarkably presumptuous and offensive until Piper realized that Rico was the only Hispanic-looking person-the only non-Asian, in fact-that she'd seen for blocks. The heavy automatic pistol bolstered at his hip didn't do much to help matters. Piper bowed, very briefly, saying

in rapid Japanese, "Please excuse me. This is my personal guard, assigned by my employer. Thank you for your concern."

"Ah, I understand." The man bowed. "Excuse us for intruding."

"Please think nothing of it."

The three men moved off. Rico, watching intently, said, "What was all that?"

"Honjowara clan is busy today. We should go."

"No guano."

At the corner they took the stairway to the underground. A narrow corridor flanked by small shops and booths led past the entrances to the Bergen Street subway, rumbling like thunder and rank with oily smells, then on past the entrance to a parking garage, and then on to the truck and taxi lanes near the underground transitway. The familiar, battered gray and black Landrover van waited right there, along with Thorvin and Shank.

They had a meet to get to.

5

At the heart of the beast...

Market Street, Sector 1.

The burnt-out ruin of the old county court building stood opposite the shining twelve-story tower occupied by Omni Police Services and associated corporate agencies. Everywhere Rico turned his eyes, the charred, the gutted, and the wasted mingled with the bright and glittery. An addict who'd probably traded his legs, one arm, one eye, and an ear for highs "Better Than Life" lay sprawled on the sidewalk in a simchip-induced coma, while trippers in glinting neo-monochrome and flashing crystal jewels sashayed by. Black limos and gangers riding on whining plastic choppers shared the roadway, roaring past the stripped-down wreck of an old CMC stepvan and other derelicts rusting in the gutters.

Overhead, a help with winking lights thumped through the hazy, smog-veiled darkness.

Devil take it.

Time to focus, Rico told himself. The rest of the team was in position, and he was as ready as he would ever be. Rico didn't like getting Piper into something like this, didn't even like her being on the street, where anything could happen, but she'd insisted. She demanded to be in the game personally, in the flesh, whenever she might do some good. Rico admired courage like that, especially in a woman. But it didn't stop him worrying.

He wore a long black duster to cover the heavy auto bolstered at his hip and the extra magazines on his belt. He drew a black bandanna up from his neck to cover his face as far as the bridge of his nose, flipped up the duster's collars.

The club was just around the corner on the tail-end of Springfield Avenue. Running across the gleaming black front of the place in subdued gold lettering was the word *Chimpira*. That was Japanese. A joke. Piper had explained that the word came from other words meaning "flimsy gold". Cheap punks. A slick and mean veneer, but take away the clothes and the attitude, and nothing remained. What made it a joke was that all the cheap punks who used the main floor were nothing but a cover.

Trolls guarded the main entrance, and a small crowd of yakuza cutters kept watch on the trolls. The presence of the yak muscle meant that the big boys, the real powers in the Newark plex, the ones who had named the club, roust be meeting on the top floor. It also indicated that one or more of the vehicles lining the curbs or the windows in the buildings along the street would be occupied by U.C.A.S. feds: F.B.I., Secret Service, whatever. Surveillance teams. Techs and vidcams. Watching the comings and goings. The feds had been trying for years to get at the heart of the organizations running the plex. It was a losing game.

Rico walked to the black tunnel of the main entrance. The razorguys standing around, including the trolls, all wore something obscuring their faces: shades, scarves, bandannas, a variety of Halloween and theatrical masks, some glowing in the dark. That was the style. You didn't go to Chimpira with a naked face.

In the dark shade of the entrance stood a slag wearing a broad-brimmed hat, black trench, and a mask like a cartoon mummy. The odd pins and devices stuck to the lapels of the slag's trench coat had nothing to do with Chimpira-style, or any other kind of style. Unless it was arcane-style.

Surveillance mage.

As Rico approached, one of the trolls put out a hand nearly the size of a cinder block, and growled, "Whaddya want?"

"Got biz."

"You a cop?"

"Frag that."

"What's the biz?"

"Private."

The mage nodded.

"Twenty, cred."

Rico handed over a certified credstick.

The troll motioned him past. "Have a great effin' night."

Angst-rap thundered through the entrance tunnel. Trids along both walls advertised pachinko, simsense, whores, and anything else a body might crave. Money talked, guano walked. At the end of the tunnel waited a pair of biffs wearing only skimpy gold chains over their glossy sable skin. They smiled and cooed hello as Rico stepped through the sliding black doors into the club's interior.

"Welcome to Chimpira," flashed a laser display. "Visit our Simchip Suite for the Ultimate in Simmertainment!" The music only got louder. Lights flickered and flashed. Fractal displays on the walls sparkled with kaleidoscopic color. And this was just the front room, like a lobby. A hexagonal counter occupied the center of the space. The biffs there had hair of flaring incandescent light, changing from red to yellow and green and shaped like short, stubby worms crawling all over their heads.

Five passages like enormous, grotty tubes led from the room in five different directions. Rico took the one all the way to the right. The walls of the passage throbbed with light, like a vein. Scarlet fog flowed around Rico's legs. At the end of the passage waited a white biff wearing silvery spandex and fingerless gloves and boots to match. Silver-studded bands ringed her ankles, waist, wrists, and neck. Her eyes were like violet pits, infinite, her expression like stone, emotionless. Her hair looked like white fuzz, shorn practically to the scalp. She had a fine figure, slim but shapely and obviously well-conditioned. Rico paid her figure little attention. Too dangerous.

She was called Ravage. Rico had seen her around, had heard talk about her. She walked the razor bodyguard, courier, collection service. She was supposed to be teflon slick, fast enough to blur. People said she didn't bother with mere guns because she had all she needed under her skin. Boosted reflexes, skillwires, cyberspurs, maybe an implanted pistol. How much damage could this lithe body actually do? Rico wished he had more than just guesses. If she had a gun with her tonight it didn't show. She stood with feet planted and spread wide, her arms at her sides, her head erect, alert. Violet pits aimed right at him. Rico paused about two steps away.

"You solo?" Ravage said.

"Your guess."

"My guess is you're obsolete, old man."

There was nothing in the voice, no malice, not even a shade of menace. It didn't matter. What she said didn't matter. Not from a woman, it didn't. A woman who talked like her didn't merit respect, or anything but a straight estimation of the dangers she might pose. Rico lowered his eyes to the modest prominence of her breasts, then to the juncture of her legs. That was his reply. Ravage didn't seem to notice.

"Road kill," she said.

Rico forced a grin. "Anytime, *muchacha*."

"Soon as I'm free."

She turned her back and started walking like Rico didn't worry her at all. The studded bands around her body caught Rico's eyes. Some of those studs could be optical pickups. Ravage might well have a 360-degree cyberview of the world. Chipped to the max and fluid as a snake. Nothing would surprise him.

She led him onto a low balcony overlooking the club's main floor. Ranged along the right were softly backlit alcoves outlined in glaring neon. Ravage paused at the fifth one down, and Rico got his first look at L. Kahn.

He sat behind an oval table, on a semicircular bench seat that filled the rear of the alcove. The alcove's subdued lighting cast his face and front in shadows, but only until Rico's Jikku Shadowhunter eyes adjusted. Low-light augmentation with glare compensation pulled L. Kahn's sculptured features out of the shade. He looked Amerind, with maybe a touch of Black-Af blood. A thick black wave of hair dangled down over one side of his forehead. Skinny braids hung in front of his ears. He had heavy brows, a substantial nose, and a broad, full-lipped mouth. His medium brown suit looked pure Armante. The jacket's thin collars rose into massive flanges that curved up and over his shoulders. A cloak curled around his sides, concealing his arms above the elbows.

"Your player," Ravage said.

L. Kahn looked at Rico and gestured toward the right side of the alcove's curving bench. Rico sat

there, Ravage moved to sit opposite. L. Kahn tapped the keypad on the table before him, and the pair of nude slitches dancing around on the tabletop-forty-centimeter-tall laser displays-abruptly winked out. "Interesting locale for a meet," L. Kahn said slowly. Rico replied, "Ain't you been here before?"

"I prefer more secluded climes." Rico didn't much care. The main fact on his mind was that job offers sometimes turned out to be setups, traps laid by people bearing grudges. It paid to be careful. Chimpira might be on the hairy verge between darkness and light, but it was safer than some small room off a back alley. The yaks didn't take kindly to murders on the premises. Neither did they admit cops. That the slag calling himself L. Kahn had actually shown up tended to indicate that he was who and what he was supposed to be, rather than some blade out to cap on a contract.

"You got nothing to worry about," Rico said. "You ain't gonna do nothing but talk and pass cred. I'm taking the risks and I don't know you from drek."

L. Kahn gazed at him steadily for several moments, then spoke, his voice a low drawl. "I have contracts to fulfill. Clients to satisfy. The risk is different in form, but shared by all. You were recommended to me by a reliable source. That is why I'm wasting time with you now."

"I'm wasting your time?" Rico said quietly. "I don't know your name. That implies your name probably isn't worth knowing."

From a biff like Ravage, it wouldn't have mattered. From another man, it went too far. L. Kahn's tone made it much more than a casual remark or a simple statement of fact. Rico hesitated about two seconds, then leaned toward L. Kahn and spat in his face.

L. Kahn didn't move a muscle. He didn't have to- Ravage was already moving. Rico didn't catch the first stirring, but the next instant he saw her coming closer, then pitching the table over and out of her way.

Could he get his Predator free of the holster in time? He had maybe a fraction of a second to decide.

The instincts that come from experience answered the question for him. If you're going to blast somebody, you don't bother closing the distance, not in a situation like this, with everybody at point-blank range. That meant Ravage wanted it personal. Rico could almost feel the chrome-steel punch or kick being readied, building up in the distance somewhere, like an earthquake, closing in fast.

Rico thrust his right arm forward, clenching his fist and bending it at the wrist. Muscle memory did the rest.

Ravage's left hand became a claw, blurring in front of his face, on a collision course. She had razors there, Rico realized, jutting out from under her nails. They would slice through his eyes and cheeks, then maybe return to tear through his throat.

The blurring hand halted barely two centimeters from his face, then hung there, motionless. Ravage might rip his face to shreds, but she would see her guts spill to the floor for the privilege. Rico held the curving chrome blades now jutting from the backside of his forearm just short of the slitch's groin.

Rico grinned up into her face.

"Do it," he rasped.

The violet pits of Ravage's eyes showed nothing, not even a glint of emotion. Her voice was almost mechanical, murmuring, "Road kill."

Rico waited. Instants passed like minutes. Standoff or double killing? Rico had been to this place before. Sometimes it seemed like his whole life was composed of moments like this. His heart hammered, but he had no trouble facing the prospect of his death. Like somebody once said, *A man's fate is a man's fate*. What would be would be. If he died, it would at least be a man's death, an honorable death, giving as good as he got.

A new voice suddenly arose, growling, "The slitch backs off or you're dog meat, chummer."

Out the corner of his eye, Rico saw the large figure now standing where one corner of the alcove met the floor of the balcony. Shank's big hands gripped a massive automatic, an Israeli LD-100. The red blip of the weapon's laser sight shone steadily, unmoving, on the bridge of L. Kahn's nose.

"Ravage," L. Kahn said calmly.

Another long moment passed, then Ravage backed away like a wave slowly retreating from shore. The razors at her fingertips vanished. At near a whisper, she said, "Next time you'll have to be fast, old man."

Rico didn't want to hear about next time. It didn't matter. Whether he could even come close to matching Ravage's speed next time they clashed wasn't important. He could be dead a thousand times over before then. He could have a heart attack right where he sat just remembering how quickly she'd gotten into his face. If there ever was a next time, he'd be smart to dust her on sight, and from as long a range as possible.

L. Kahn dabbed at his face with a brown handkerchief, and said, "Let us call a draw a draw and get

on to biz."

"We still got something to talk about?"

"If we didn't, you would be dead."

"You got a dangerous mouth, my man."

"I can afford it."

Abruptly, a pair of small red blips caught Rico's attention. Waving around and around in circles on his chest. A third blip ran in circles up and down Shank's side. They weren't part of the stroboscopic light effects from the club's main floor. They were targeting sights. Rico ran his eyes around, vision shifting to infrared to microchip-enhanced, but he couldn't spot the shooters. Too much ambient heat, too many bodies on the main floor, all moving asynchronously. L. Kahn had pros backing him up. At least three of them.

Where the frag was Piper? Rico wondered. Was she safe? He hoped she was under wraps as good as L. Kahn's shooters.

"Ask your friend to relax," L. Kahn said. "We'll talk." Rico motioned with his chin. Shank was down on one knee, using the skimpy railing that guarded the edge of the balcony to gain what cover he could from L. Kahn's shooters. With a growl and a sneer, he slid his automatic under his jacket. Ravage set the table upright on its pedestal and returned it to its place. She did that one-handed, and the table looked heavy. She smiled as she sat down opposite Rico. It was just a glimmer of a smile. On her it looked like a death grin. "So talk," Rico said.

L. Kahn nodded. "Explications first. My clients are powerful people. When they make a contract they expect it to be fulfilled. And I will see them satisfied. If you take my money, you will complete the contract in full. When time is an issue, and for this job, time *is* an issue, I accept no refunds. You will do the job or face the consequences."

Do the job or die. Almost common enough to be considered standard terms. "You think I'm an amateur?" Rico snarled. "I don't need guano like this. You tell me what the job is and I'll tell you if I'm interested."

L. Kahn seemed unaffected: cool and calm. Rico envied the slag his self-control. Nothing seemed to undo him, even spit in the face. "The job is a bustout."

"I don't do snatches."

"It's a recovery."

"Keep talking."

"The subject to be recovered was in fact snatched. The job is to bring the subject home. This particular subject is highly ranked in a particular field and is therefore of high value. The snatching entity has threatened the subject's spouse, thus forcing the subject to contribute substantially to the snatching entity's various enterprises."

"You're talking about corporate entities."

"Don't ask for specifics unless you're accepting the job."

"Sure. Where's this spouse you mentioned?"

"The spouse remains under the protection of the home entity and will not be a factor in completing the contract. Your only concern will be to recover the subject and deliver the subject unharmed at a specified time and place."

"What's the security threat?"

"It has been assessed as Code Orange."

"A or double-A security."

"Correct."

"So it ain't Fuchi-Town."

"Obviously."

The immense complex that included the five sky-raking towers of Fuchi-Town in lower Manhattan had triple-A security, also called Code Red. Fuchi used everything to keep the facility secure: armed guards, electronics, magic. You didn't go up against security like that unless you had a back door or the possibility of making one—and even then it would probably still be a suicide run. "Tell me about your Code Orange."

"Are you accepting the contract?"

"Not without more data."

"You have all the data you need."

"Not to talk money."

"Then you are accepting the contract."

"With conditions. If you don't make the money worth the risk, forget it. If you lie, forget it. If this turns out to be a snatch, forget it. If your subject ain't a willing subject, forget it."

"Have you ever run against Code Orange security." Rico cursed, then said, lowly. "Don't insult me again or those shooters won't save you."

"You have many conditions for a man in your line."

"Remember it."

The plex was full of amateurs, children with dangerous toys, who went running off on fool's errands because some stone-faced slag like L. Kahn flashed some nuyen. Rico knew better. You started your fight right here. You stood your ground. If the man didn't Uke your terms, you walked away. You had two choices in this life. You could live slow or fast. Given the choice, Rico liked it slow, clawing every bit of the way for everything he could get. It was that or nothing.

Moments passed. Rico tried to decide who looked more like a statue: L. Kahn or Ravage. Both seemed cut from the same chunk of stone.

"I will agree to your conditions," L. Kahn said finally, "but I have a condition of my own. You have given me tentative acceptance of the contract. I will tell you more of what you want to know. If any part of what I say reaches the streets, you're dead." Rico hesitated, then said nothing. It made no sense that a slag with L. Kahn's rep would keep bringing up points, terms and conditions that any teenage virgin would know. That fact, nagging at Rico, finally inspired insight. He realized he was being worked. L. Kahn apparently knew some things about him, like his sensitivity to personal insults and his difficult-to-manage temper. L. Kahn had been baiting him right from the start, and had intentionally brought him and Ravage into near-lethal collision.

It cast that little death grin of Ravage's in a whole new light. The slitch had known. L. Kahn was scoping him out. Testing him. "Keep talking," he growled lowly. "The facility where the subject is kept makes primary use of passive electronics," L. Kahn said. "There are multiple back-ups and fail-safes. Guards are armed and of good-to-average caliber. They are stationed at checkpoints, entrances, and exits, but make only perfunctory patrols of the perimeter and facility interior. My assessment indicates that in order to succeed you will need both matrix cover and technical expertise in physical penetration."

"What about magicians?"

Magic was always the wild card. In a world of uncertainties, it was the least predictable element. "There are several mages on premises," L. Kahn said, "but none have been incorporated into the facility's security system."

"Sounds pretty weak."

"There is one more factor. The facility's security posture is monitored. Should there be an active alert caused by intruders, additional security forces will respond to the site. These forces are rated as military-equivalent. They are commando-trained, heavily armed, and come with integral astral support."

"What's the response time?"

"Minutes."

"How many minutes?"

"Lead elements could reach the facility in four or five. Astral support would likely be in the second wave."

"Is that a fact or an estimate?"

"The Sixth World has no facts. Only suppositions."

They soon came to the matter of money, nuyen, the one indisputable fact of living. Rico bargained hard, got more or less what he wanted, and accepted the contract. L. Kahn passed him a chip containing the specifics of the job. The only thing left to do then was to verify L. Kahn's up-front payment in certified credsticks, and plan and execute the run.

"The Chinese have a saying," L. Kahn remarked at the end. "May you live in interesting times. You make for interesting negotiations, Mr. Rico. I'll remember your conditions. You remember mine."

Rico glanced at Ravage and left.

6

"Bird away."

The roof-mounted launcher fired her away from the concrete earth. The rush of acceleration coursed through her titanium-composite airframe. The thrust of her quad turbofan engines, already blazing with power, carried her into the night.

She climbed, engines to max, aiming her nose at the shroud of haze and fumes that hid the stars. Transparent red digits tumbling before her eyes ticked off altitude, energy, and a dozen other transient statistical indicators. Part of her noted those indicators, but only in passing. Mere numbers could never quantify the glory of flight, or the greater truths hidden in the dark. She unfolded her pinions, stretching her

wings out full, and banked her engines, cutting power to practically nothing, gliding almost soundlessly into a slow turn that inspired a twinge of pity for all those million souls bound to the earth below.

Now that she was finally aloft, she could breathe. Flying recon drones hardly compared to the quantum rush of driving Federated-Boeing Eagles and Strike Hawks outfitted with military-grade ordnance and full electronics suites, but she could live with the difference. She'd flown her first dumb-boy when she turned fourteen. It was reassuring to note that if she took any triple-A, if she suffered any massive system failure, it wouldn't be her own flesh and blood body that went spiraling at Mach Two into the concrete earth.

For one thing, this CyberSpace Designs Stealth Sniper recon drone couldn't manage anything like supersonic velocity, for another, her flesh and blood body was far below her, still stuck in that frigging wheelchair, inside the command and control vehicle of the Executive Action Brigade.

She could see that vehicle now, through the light-gathering lenses in her belly pod. The heavily modified Ares Roadmaster with the sat dish on top, parked in a shallow gulch, an empty lot, between ferroconcrete huts.

Voices whispered in her ears. "Status on Air One ..."

"Just coming on-line, sir ..."

"Tell that fragging air jockey to get her butt engaged ..."

Mentally, she could also see the scene inside the Road-master C & C. The dim lights, the bank of consoles. Colonel Butler Yates, commander-in-chief of the Executive Action Brigade, pacing back and forth. Major Skip Nolan, the EAB's exec, monitoring communications between the ground teams, checking in with the comms operators, then leaning over her shoulder, she the one real rigger on the team.

Abruptly, Skip's voice murmured into her head, like he was right there with her, gliding through the night. "Get on-station, Bobbie Jo," he said softly. "Colonel's nervous tonight."

She smiled and said, "Affirmative."

The smile was for Skip. She hoped he read it. Everyone else in the world called her B. J., even her own mother, but that was never enough for Skip Nolan. He always wanted more, something special, if only to remind her that there was something special between them. She liked that. It made the whole world seem warmer, nicer, somehow.

As for the Colonel's nervousness, she could only agree. The Brigade had once been one of the foremost mercenary units in the western hemisphere, though under another name. Since the annexation of Mexico by Aztlan and the end of various squabbles in South America, the mere business had gotten very low-key. The Colonel had been forced to dispense with most of the air wing while turning in desperation to the corporate security field. The Brigade's lack of specialists and the Colonel's lack of contacts had made that move chancy. The transition had been rough and it still wasn't clear if the move would pan out.

Bobbie Jo checked her orientation, swung across the black stroke-marks of a dozen streets, then flattened out and slowed to a hover above the confluence of roadways that marked her station.

Hovering in stealth mode ate fuel like fire ate oxygen. Fortunately, she had talked the Colonel into equipping the high-performance Sniper with long-range fuel tanks.

"Air One on station, Colonel..."

"It's about time, dammit..."

Springfield and Market Streets came together like 8 great V, slicing through the jumble of buildings and cross-streets at the core of the Newark sprawl. It seemed ironic because that V pointed across the Passaic River to Jersey City and the soaring towers of Manhattan Island. The enclave of power and money. Where everyone wanted to be. Most of the millions in Newark would never get there.

"Status, Air One."

That was Skip, sounding very official. The Colonel must be leaning over her shoulder or breathing hot and hard down Skip's neck. Bobbie Jo focused her downward-looking eyes and went to work, computer-augmenting the best views.

The club stood on Springfield. The front of the place was all dingy and black but for the large gold letters hanging above the main entrance, reading, "Chimpira," whatever that meant. It was supposed to be a hangout for yakuza and other miscreants. Most notably, the miscreants the Brigade had been hired to shadow.

Target indicators winked rapidly in front of her eyes, picking out movement on the ground, computer-directed to single out human-sized targets only. Her view plunged to sidewalk level thirty-seven times in a row for a camera click glance at every face, every moving body, then every two-legged body anywhere near the front of the club. That included the three trolls and eleven Asian norms, all males, immediately in front of the club. None of her real targets were among them. She fired her gathered data

back to the C & C. The Colonel would have his status report and the Brigade's new fugitive unit would undoubtedly find some use for the digitized images in her burst transmission.

An hour passed. The Colonel kept demanding more data from Skip, and Skip kept hounding her for more digipics. She circled the club. When the first of the miscreants, the supposed leader, finally appeared, Bobbie Jo fired her alert signal to the C & C.

Target One moving Target One moving ...

She fired digipics in a continuous stream back to the C & C. Target One exited via the front of the club. Through her computer-enhanced closeups, she saw that he was a Hispanic male of medium height and build and that her images of him matched exactly the digitized pics in her ground-based memory. An Asian female soon followed him out of the club. That was Target Two. Tall and good-looking. Light-skinned for an Asian, but there was no mistaking the slope of her eyes. The two of them met in the alley beside the club and moved to the alley at the rear of the club. There they met Target Three and Target Four: a heavily built ork male and a long-haired dwarf male. Together, they moved through the alleys to King Boulevard and around the corner to Stirling Street. There they entered a gray and black ghost of a van.

Target Alpha moving, all targets onboard ...

She repeated that.

Brigade comm traffic murmured rapidly in her ears. Ground-based surveillance units' were moving into position to follow the van, designated Target Alpha. They didn't have much time. Target Four was a rigger and very hot with wheels. Even as the last of the group climbed into the van and closed the side door, the van was rolling, picking up speed, smoking tires and really moving out.

Bobbie Jo prepared to follow. No need for stealth mode now. Her on-board combat comp set three green target indicators to winking in front of her eyes. Those pointed out the pursuit vehicles. Ground One, Two, and Three, dark mid-sized sedans with stock New Jersey plates. Standard procedure called for one sedan to close with the target vehicle, follow for a short distance and then turn off, while another one closed in.

It didn't work out that way. The van blew the light on Howard and roared up South Orange Avenue. Bobbie Jo's warning was all that kept the pursuit vehicles from being left in the dust. As the cars raced to catch up, the van turned left onto Fourteenth Street and into a gridwork of streets and cross-streets lined with cars and crammed with buildings. The van careened through the grid at breakneck speed, gaining ground with every turn. It broke out onto Springfield Avenue, blew a series of red lights, and in another minute was flying down the entrance ramp to the South Newark Transitway.

Abruptly, Bobbie Jo heard a muted stammer that sounded like autofire weapons, then a voice, distant but urgent, exclaiming, "Ground Three! Ground Three! We're in the middle of a gang bang-up!"

The other two cars were out of the grid and racing up Springfield, but they were nowhere near getting the van into visual range.

"Air One status!" Skip barked.

No choice.

The van was disappearing into the dark of an underground section of the transitway. The pursuit cars would never catch up. Target Alpha was flying. Bobbie Jo punched up her engines and dove, turbofans screaming, to the roof of a tandem-trailer truck just then sluicing down the incline and into the dark of the transitway tunnel.

It was like pitching into an attack run.

One moment she had only the dark haze of the night above her, in the next, she was sandwiched between the roof of the truck's lead trailer and the massive girders supporting the ceiling of the transitway. She had about a half-meter of airspace above her and about the same below. One errant breeze, one minor electronic fluctuation, and the girders above or the truck below would smash her into oblivion.

That scared the hell out of her, only she didn't let herself feel it. She reminded herself that she really wasn't there. Her body was safe. Only the electronic sensorium of the Sniper drone was at risk. But that didn't help. She kept on, redlining her emotive indexes. The truck provided cover. The broad roof of the trailer and the glaring lights of the cab would keep her hidden from anyone within easy visual range. She searched ahead with her eyes. Target indicators winked, then she spotted the gray and black ghost-van veering across two lanes and into the gray-lit tunnel of a transitway exit. *Target exiting target exiting ...* Her target indicator winked rapidly, then blinked out. She didn't dare follow. The exit tunnel was too confining, and she'd be spotted. The targets were pros, and the van was believed to be equipped with advanced electronics that might very well include short-range antiair radar. Bobbie Jo did what she had to do. She stayed with the tandem-trailer truck for another eight hundred meters. The instant the transitway

surfaced again, she punched up full power. The steady whine of her engines rose to a cyclone scream. She arced up and back, soaring over the, city, then quickly flipped to bring her belly pod to bear on the ground below.

A dozen target indicators winked in front of her eyes.

She was still scoping them out, sweeping back and forth across the city, hunting the target, when Skip called her back to base.

The Colonel was not happy.

Rico grimaced, clenching his teeth. Barely an hour had passed since he'd accepted the job from L. Kahn and already he didn't like it. The whole thing could be a set-up.

"You sure you saw a drone?"

"Of course I saw it," Thorvin snapped, steering the van around one final corner onto Mott Street. "Any moron with freaking infrared goggles coulda spotted it. I oughta know a freaking Cyber Designs Stealth Sniper Series 53 when I see one. I broke one of the freaking things down about a year ago just to see how it worked. It ain't top of the line, but it ain't half bad either. It's serviceable. All right for standard recon. It just hasn't got anything like the kind of electronics to beat what I got in this van."

"Yes, but whose drone was it?" Piper said. "And who was it eyeing?"

Shank grunted. "Maybe it's just a coincidence."

Rico turned his head to look out the passenger-side window, into the side-view mirror, then at the dark, decaying buildings slowly passing by. Piper's questions struck right at the core of the problem. Rico wished he had answers to match them. He had plenty of guesses, but he didn't like those guesses any more than Shank's suggestion about coincidence.

L. Kahn could have arranged to put up a drone just to send a message that he'd be watching, alert for treachery. It would be a stupid thing to do because Rico would take it as a sign of betrayal, but then L. Kahn didn't necessarily know that Thorvin had the gear to spot the drone.

Any fragging thing was possible. Every one of the four of them in the van had at least one warrant out for them somewhere in the U.C.A.S. Cops and feds and practically every corp in the world all had riggers who could put up drones. Some of the local security companies used drones for ordinary surveillance, like night watchmen. And, like Shank said, it was definitely possible that the drone was completely unrelated to anything that mattered. There were dozens of jobs being worked at any one time within the bounds of the Newark plex. Sometimes you couldn't turn a corner without stepping into the middle of somebody's dustup. It just seemed too coincidental to *be* coincidental that a drone had shown up overhead just as they were leaving Chimpira.

On the other hand, Thorvin had lost contact with the drone once they reached the transitway, and nothing else had happened to suggest that they were being followed. "You didn't see no cars following?"

"Not a freaking one."

Still what bothered Rico was the one possibility no one had mentioned: they might already be blown. The corporate "entity" they were supposed to penetrate to make their retrieval might already know they'd been hired for the job. That "entity" might have been watching L. Kahn and might be hunting for the four of them at this very moment.

Preemptive op is what corp security slags called it. They'd be careful, Rico decided. Now more than ever. They'd get off the street and stay off as much as possible until the job was done. They'd check out everything two or three or four times before they started the run. They'd build in backups on top of backups in case anything went wrong. If they found even a hint of evidence that L. Kahn was playing games, they'd handle that, too.

Four a.m., the rain started coming down. Right on schedule. First it drizzled, then it poured. In less than a minute it turned into a torrent. The corps controlling Manhattan seeded the clouds most every night in an attempt to clear the garbage out of the air. Like they said on TV/3V, the rain brought the garbage down indiscriminately, on the just and the unjust alike.

Momentarily, the safehouse came along on the right, a three-story brick building that had been condemned a decade ago, then uncondemned. City records showed it as turned over to New Jersey Consolidated Power and Light. Piper had made it that way.

The place was crammed in between a two-story factory and a nine-story moving and storage tower. It had two brown metal bay doors large enough to accommodate a semi and no windows at ground-level. The door on the right began rising as they approached. Thorvin had the transmit code. He drove the van across the sidewalk and right inside. The door trundled down behind them.

The ground floor looked like a junkyard, one big room filled with mechanical parts and equipment, a pair of Scorpion motorcycles, a spare van. Thorvin called it his emergency repair shop. What he called it or

how he used it mattered far less to Rico than that the rigger should have what he needed to jury-rig repairs when they were on a run.

Rico led the group upstairs. The second floor had bedrooms, a kitchen, and the main room, which doubled as both a living room and conference room. Rico set Shank and Thorvin to clearing up the garbage lying around since God knew when, then handed Piper the datachip from L. Kahn. Piper had her axe. They'd stopped to pick that up. She'd scan the chip, print out a hardcopy, and they could get started with the job.

Piper took the chip, but then slid her arms around Rico's neck and said softly, anxiously, "This one worries me, *jefe*."

Rico exhaled heavily. "We just gotta be careful, chica. I think we're playing with big boys this time. Some damn megacorp."

She nodded. "I'll get to work."

"Good idea."

Rico checked on supplies: food, ammunition, other gear. The devil rats in the basement had been working on the power lines, so he got Thorvin down there to patch things up. When he returned to the second floor, he found Piper sitting on the sofa, axe in her lap. Her eyes rose to meet his.

"Got something?" he asked.

"Surikov," Piper said. "Ansell Surikov. That's who they want us to get."

7

Everybody wanted something.

That's why the crowds stood waiting outside the old stadium beneath the giant TV/3V screen advertising Chromium Retrosocket, coming soon. That's why so many thousands of people jammed the Main Line along Bloomfield Avenue through the western half of Sector 3. And that's why Monk stood in the middle of the traffic lanes, amid a teeming mass of people, with six-story tall coffin hotels on the left and decrepit ferrocrete tenements on the right, all ablaze with flickering, flashing neon signs.

Just a few steps in front of him stood a man on a plastic crate. "What's wrong with society?" the man shouted, waving a sheaf of hardcopy. "Too much coercion! Corporate, government, economic coercion! No one can escape it, not the squatters, not the salarymen, not the execs, not even the SINless! Coercion dooms us all to sterile and empty lives, years with no hope, no goals and no end!

"Neo-anarchism is the only answer! the only way humanity can throw off the chains of oppression! Transcend its degeneracy and rise up out of the mire of the new corporate feudalism!

"We must unite in common cause and seek Pareto optimality!"

Monk frowned.

Pareto what?

A bit further along was a woman shoving a pushcart up the street while she hawked weevo warts, which, when applied with a solution of three percent sodium bicarbonate, would make all men handsome and virile and all women beautiful and fertile.

Weevo warts ... Monk wondered what those were.

After that came pyramids and crystals, positive and negative ion generators, a grow-your-own-clone booth, a tarot reader, a palmist, a noodle stand, cheap body organs and cyberware, another noodle stand, soykaf, a Sidewalk Doc, and a group of masked men big enough to be orks, all wearing the black hoods, jumpsuits, gloves, and boots of the Sanitation Department.

"Where's the *stiff*?" one shouted.

Monk tried not to pass judgment. The writer's business was to watch and listen. To learn the patterns of the world and reveal them to others. To do that, he had to be like a sponge. He had to soak up everything, remember it, and eventually find ways to explain the seeming randomness of existence to others, regardless of the medium he used.

One of these days, people would read his telebooks or watch his tridplays or experience simsense performances that he had orchestrated, and they would find truth.

And that would be a great day.

He could see it already: "One Day in the Life of the Main Line Mega-market of the Newark Metroplex!"

Or words to that effect.

"By *Monk!*"

He grinned.

What happened then caught him completely by surprise. From somewhere amid the noise of the street,

the babble of voices, the reverb of adverts, the rumble of subways and transitways, the roaring of boom boxes and the distant clatter of gunfire, he heard a kind of high-pitched whining sound, but didn't really pay much attention. He didn't think anything of it.

As he turned one way, something hit him from the other direction, first in the leg, then in the hip. The impact itself didn't come as much of a shock. He'd been getting jostled by the crowds for hours, in fact, practically every day of his life. It was what followed that took away his breath.

Whatever had hit him seemed to sweep him right up off his feet. For a second or two Monk felt himself being carried along at near breakneck speed, arched over backward, his arms and legs flying out wide into empty air. Just in passing, he noticed a few things: the blur of a neon sign advertising soykaf, the face of an Asian man, mouth gaping as in astonishment, eyes bulging and staring down at him, a hooded woman battling a pair of gangers over a handbag, the rear of a fat man's bald head, a rat dashing across the sidewalk, threading a path through a half a hundred pairs of feet.

There was that strange whining sound, too. And a kind of exclamation, like, "Hey!" Then Monk suddenly realized he was in freefall. He wasn't quite sure how that had happened. It was really strange. Like he was just floating in midair. Immune to gravity. He caught a glimpse of someone smoking a red cigarette, then spotted a patch of ferrocrete wall, then everything around him was crashing. He was tumbling, rolling, flipping upside-down, smashing into things. His body hit the ground. That kind of hurt.

"Are you all right?" somebody called.

Monk wasn't sure about that. He felt kind of funny. Like he might suffocate and vomit and pass out all at once. He felt banged up, too. He spent a few moments just getting back into the habit of breathing. Once he got that down, he tried opening his eyes and looking around. The first thing he noticed was the pile of plastic trash cans around him. The second thing he noticed was someone kneeling next to him. Someone wearing a leopard-print jacket, pants, and boots. As another moment passed, Monk realized this someone was female and *looking right at him*. His eyes widened. He looked at her more closely. Her hair was frizzled and wild and kept changing colors, winking from red to orange to gold and back again. She had bright blue eyes, a pert nose, and lips like Cupid's bow. She smiled, looking right at him, and showed off teeth as white as... well, anything he had ever seen. She smelled like a fragrant garden. She was... she was...

She was *beautiful*...

"Hey, you're kinda cute."

"Huh?"

She giggled.

Aches and pains faded to nowhere. Monk stared. Women never paid much attention to him. Beautiful women like this one never even seemed to notice he existed. They weren't interested in writers. Didn't consider them good nesting material. They had their eyes on salarymen, execs, and the tall towers and big money over on the other side of the Hudson River.

She lifted a hand to cover her mouth, then helped him sit up. She had slim little hands like a girl.

"You must've been in another world," she said, smiling. "Didn't you hear me beep?"

Monk frowned, wondering what she meant.

"Hey, are you an elf?" Abruptly, she brushed at his spiky hair and leaned over as if to look at the side of his head, maybe at one of his ears. His ears *were* kind of weird. Pointy like.

"Uh ..."

"My father was a dwarf. Can you believe it?" She looked him in the face again, then smiled and thrust her arms out to her sides as if to invite him to look her over. Monk couldn't help accepting the invitation. She was slim and just plain gorgeous.

"Wuh ... wiz," he said, breathing hard.

She giggled again, then smiled warmly, right at him. "I'm Minx," she said. "Who're you?"

"Monk," Monk blurted.

"Wiz!" she said, softly. "You know, you remind me of the flower children. They were always in another world. They were these people back in the twenty-hundreds who said we should make love, and mostly just that." She smiled like she thought that was funny. "And they meditated, too. A lot of them wore tie-dyed clothes like you."

"Yeah?"

"Sandals, too."

Monk looked down at the colors splashing across his Fixe Rescue tee, then down the lengths of his faded blue rippers to the black and red sandals on his feet. Flower children? Wasn't that what people called weed-eaters? elves? "I ..."

"Hmmm?" Minx looked at him inquisitively.

"I think ... something on the ... the California Channel ... about ... uh ..." What had she called it? Them ... "Flower children."

Suddenly, Minx covered her face with both hands and bent forward at the waist. She was laughing, Monk realized, laughing so hard that when she straightened up again she had to wipe at her eyes and gasp for breath. "See!" she said. "See what I mean!"

Monk wondered about that.

"So where do you live anyway?" Minx asked, fluffing out her hair, then smoothing it back again with delicate movements of her hands. She paused to look at him, and said, "Monk."

"Huh?"

"Wanna go to my place?"

Monk stared, feeling a strange heat rise up the back of his neck and into his face. This couldn't be happening. This beautiful, gorgeous, captivating woman couldn't be talking like that. He must have missed something, misunderstood, misconstrued something she said. But then Minx took hold of his arms and half-pulled him to his feet. She seemed pretty strong for a girl.

And she was small, really tiny. Her head barely reached his chest and he wasn't tall at all. But it only made her seem more gorgeous. When she shook back her hair and looked up at him and smiled and slid her hands up his chest, Monk felt his heart begin to pound. Like it would leap right out of his body.

"You're a lurker," she said. "You watch and listen. I like that."

"Huh?"

She laughed.

Just a few steps away lay a red and black Honda scooter. It matched Monk's sandals. Minx pulled it upright, touched the starter and revved the engine. This is what had bowled him over, Monk realized. The scooter. "Come on, Monk, you booty," Minx said. "Get on." Booty?

There was barely enough room. Monk eased himself onto the scooter's seat right behind Minx. There was no way to sit there without touching her, without feeling the soft swell of her hips against the insides of his thighs. The sensation was indescribable and left him feeling short of breath.

Abruptly, Minx looked back, tossing her frizzed-out hair, and pulled his arms around her waist. "Don't be shy," she said. "I'm a girl, you're a boy. Scan it?"

"What?"

"Hang on!"

The scooter whined and they were off, flying out of the alley and up the Main Line. It was a ride Monk would never forget. The scooter weaving wildly back and forth, crowds of people rushing past on either side. Arms and elbows and other parts of people's bodies banged off Monk's head, shoulders, and legs. Things began moving so quickly he couldn't keep track. It became a blur, a churning sea of people and buildings and the occasional vehicle, a series of near-misses that defied comprehension. Monk remembered the rat he'd seen threading a path through hundreds of feet just minutes ago. It was like that. No one could possibly steer a scooter through the crowds on the Main Line like Minx was doing, and yet she was doing it.

A huge black Department of Sanitation truck loomed up suddenly before them-the scooter was heading straight for it. In the final seconds, Monk glimpsed a crew of black-clad men tossing plastic body bags into the back of the truck.

Monk stared wide-eyed, and shouted.

"Yaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

In the next moment, or what seemed like the next moment, the scooter was in a back alley and purring to a stop. Minx slipped out of the circle of his arms and stood up. Monk stood up, too, but his legs were vibrating like the ground near a subway station. Minx smiled and chained the scooter to one of the metal struts of the seven-story coffin hotel rising between the rear of the buildings.

"Some ride, huh?" she said.

"Yuh," Monk answered. "*Clam.*"

"Wizzer." Minx took his hand, then stepped up close. Monk swallowed. "This is my private place, okay?" she said quietly. "So don't tell anybody you know."

Monk shook his head.

"You're so booty," Minx said, smoothing a hand like cool cream across his left cheek.

Booty ...

Abruptly, she was tugging him by the hand up the metal stairs and onto the gangway fronting the fourth story of coffins. Three steps along the gangway, a pair of ork gangers were tussling, growling, and swearing, arms and shoulders interlocked. Minx ducked between them and tugged Monk right along with

her.

"Hey!" one of the orks roared. "*Smoothies!*"

Something swept Monk's right foot out from under him, but Minx dragged him up by the arms and yanked him ahead at a run. Halfway along the gangway, she stopped, pulled out a credstick, slid the stick into a slot, then pulled open the hatch of a coffin. "Quick," she said.

"I'll tear ya to bits!" somebody snarled from behind them.

Monk didn't look back. He ducked into the coffin, banging his head on the hatchway. Minx followed, not banging her head, and slammed the hatch shut.

Someone started pounding on the hatch from outside, but Monk hardly noticed. The inside of the coffin was wild, a deluxe cubie, with enough space to actually stand up beside the bed! Storage cabinets ran down the left. Telecom and trideo were set into the wall opposite the hatchway. The low bed, the ceiling, and walls were scarlet red and covered with overlapping twenty-by-twenty five centimeter photos.

The photos caught Monk's eye, snared his attention. They were amazing. He'd never seen anything like mem. The first few he looked at, taped on the wall above the bed, looked like shots of ... traffic accidents. Bodies. Dead people sprawled across dark-stained pavement, hanging out of demolished vehicles. The next few pics he looked at seemed to have been taken inside buildings. These showed bodies, too. Some with missing limbs. Some missing heads. One or two didn't look like bodies at all, not at first, because they were so horribly mutilated they didn't look like anything even remotely human. "Hey," Minx said.

Monk turned around. Something flashed-light, brilliant white light Dazzlingly bright. When his eyes finally cleared and he could see again, he found Minx smiling at him, holding up a little camera for him to see.

"Gotcha," she said, smiling.

She had a strange look in her eyes.

8

The little night-glo red-on-white sign on the back alley wall, read, "CyberDok: Top Chrome, Vat Organics, Primo Rates."

Shank touched the buzzer beside the black metal door. Momentarily, a small red bulb on the intercom winked to life while another one lit up on the security camera above the door. The intercom squealed and whistled. "We're closed," said a remodulated voice with clashing harmonics. "Slot off."

"Open the door."

"Shank?"

Shank grunted. People with sec cams ought to look at their monitors.

The door buzzed and slid aside. Thorvin stepped right through, cutting ahead, brushing Shank's hip. That was typical. Shank frowned, then put out one long leg with a slight hooking motion, briefly catching the halfer's ankle. Thorvin tripped, stumbled, caught himself, then turned to look back and snarl, "Watch it, ya freakin' tusker!"

"Eff you," Shank growled.

"Flatline."

Shank grinned and followed Thorvin through the doorway into a small, dimly lit waiting room outfitted with a trio of molded plastic chairs and a plastic trash can. Holographic posters on the wall advertised suborbital and semiballistic flights to exotic locales. That was it for decor.

Shank figured it was enough.

A wall panel slid aside, revealing a doorway, and a smoothie. Her name was Filly. She was big for a female norm, and not bad-looking either. She wore a black and red tee chopped off just below where it mattered, a matching thong, and a pair of black socks. Her smile looked kind of sarcastic. "Dok's into some slag's cerebral cortex," she said. "What's tox?"

"We got a job," Thorvin said.

"Nice for you," Filly replied.

Thorvin grumbled something incoherent. Shank explained, "Rico wants you and Dok in the game."

"Big job?"

Shank nodded. "Heavy opposition. Some corp."

"It's always a corp. What's the pay?"

The pay was an equal share. Everybody always got an equal share because everybody on the job shared an equal risk of getting dead. That was how Rico worked things. Shank wouldn't have it any other way. He told Filly the numbers. For a few days' work, it would be a good piece of change. Assuming

nobody got killed.

"Come on," Filly said. She turned to lead them ahead. Shank moved to follow her lead, but again Thorvin scuttled in before him. They followed Filly down the hall past Dok's office and examination room to the operating room door. Shank knew the layout, he'd been here before. The building was narrow and deep, and Dok and Filly had the first two floors all to themselves. For just two people, that was a lot of space. Shank guessed the CyberDok business must be okay. Nobody getting really rich, but nobody starving either. In fact, Filly's twisting, swinging butt looked pretty damn well-fed. And well-exercised too, not fat, not skinny, but soft and firm and nicely shaped.

At the end of the hallway, Filly put a finger to the print-scanner on the wall, and the door to the O.R. slid open.

Gleaming chrome cabinets and counters ringed the room. The operating table stood at the center of the floor. The slag lying there on his back was enclosed in a transparent isolation chamber that resembled a contoured coffin. A metal ring surrounded his head like a halo. Maybe a dozen skinny rods of different lengths stuck out of the ring at different angles, and, Shank realized, out of the slag's head.

Dok stood at the head-end of the table dressed in a black and red Jersey Annihilators Urban Brawl tee, shorts, and sandals. His silvery slash-hair and beard made him look like an old man, maybe a little before his time.

"Been scanning the Brawl, Dok?"

Dok looked back over his shoulder and grinned. "I do love to see the body parts fly. Hoi, Shank. Thorvin."

"Dokker," Thorvin said.

"What're you into?" Shank asked.

"A little gray matter," Dok replied. "You might want to keep back a few steps. I'm extracting a cortex bomb."

Dok had his hands encased in a pair of gloves that extended into the isolation chamber. He seemed to be slowly, carefully twisting one of the rods stuck into the slag's head. The monitors at his left elbow showed different views: something that looked like a worm lying in a mass of goo, something that looked like a pin lying in a mass of goo, and various masses of goo, some gray, some red, some yellow, some colored kind of like puke.

Shank edged a bit closer. "Ain't most cortex bombs rigged to blow if you mess with 'em?"

"That's what they tell me."

"What kinda charge?"

"It looks like a Chiba Black. Probably a micro C-9 charge. A few grams of explosive."

"So that's what? A blast radius of about half a meter?"

"Enough to blow this slag's brain to hell."

"Maybe a few of your fingers too, Dok."

"It's a possibility. These're Securemed gloves. Kevlar H-insulated. I probably should have gone deluxe."

On one monitor, something that looked like a pair of pliers slowly drew something that looked like an ant out of a mass of goo on what looked like a strand of spider's webbing.

"What's that?" Shank asked.

"The detonator," Dok replied.

"You had to ask," Thorvin grumbled.

"Rico wants us in on some job," Filly said.

"Is that a fact?" Dok replied. "Good job, is it?"

"Pay's okay," Filly told him.

"We'll be busting some slag outta corp hell," Shank explained. "Least that's how it figures."

"Wage slave making a break for freedom?" Dok asked.

"Naw, the slag got snatched about a year ago. It's an intercorporate thing. The slag's real corp wants him back."

"Does Tie want to go back?"

"The info we got says the corp that snatched him is using threats against his wife to keep him in line. I don't guess he'd be too happy about that."

"Probably not. Everything else scan okay?"

"Piper checked what she could. You know what this drek is like. It looks chill. About the only thing left to do is go in and meet the slag face to face."

"What if he doesn't want to go?"

"Then I guess we're in deep squat."

Dok looked back again and grinned. "Nothing new about that, is there?"

"Not much," Shank agreed. "You in?"

"I guess I could use the change."

"Got any idea where to find Bandit?"

Dok frowned, then said, "Good fragging question."

Farrah Moffit knew how she looked. Even lying in the dark of the bedroom on the broad expanse of the black satin-wrapped bed, she could see her own image clearly, as if reflected in a mirror.

In a sense, she had become a caricature of herself. Her body had been blown up, filled out, reshaped, and pared down-all with precise surgical attention to every detail-until she resembled less the woman she had once been than a man's lustful fantasy. A holographic dream, a vision of fleshy carnal cravings. There were reasons why that had been done, good reasons, and reasons she more than accepted, but she could never quite get past the idea that all these cosmetic improvements demeaned her. It told others that she probably lacked the native intelligence to get what she wanted without resorting to the lure of her body, that she had probably gone to bed for everything she had ever achieved. Whether that was true or not hardly mattered. The message was clear. She saw it in people's eyes every day. Envy, resentment, contempt...

A significant sum of nuyen had been spent on her flesh. Practically every part of her body had been modified in some way. Her hair had become a veritable forest, lush and prodigious, tumbling over her shoulders and halfway down her back. Her eyes been given such a lavish growth of lashes they seemed unreal. Her lips, made voluptuous, permanently puckered. Her breasts easily large enough to equip a cow, perhaps two. Round and prominent. And the list went on and on. Even her skin had been changed, given a light golden tan that would never fade.

She could hardly move without being reminded of the changes, without some portion of her body making the differences plain. She supposed that, at heart, she would never be completely satisfied with it all. There was indeed such a thing as *too* voluptuous. Her shape, her figure, her entire *look* was rather outrageous.

The telecom beeped.

Rather than fumble in the dark and risk bending one of her luxury-length fingernails, permanently implanted, she drew a breath, and said, "Telecom answer.... Yes."

The device beeped again. A moment of quiet passed, then the voice of Ansell Surikov came from the speakers. "Darling?" he said. "Are you all right? The visual's off. You sound-"

"I'm fine," Farrah said lightly, interrupting. She smiled and made her voice soft and expressive. "I've just come out of the bath. I haven't any clothes on."

"Oh, I see," Ansell said, sounding amused.

"Will you be late tonight?" Farrah asked.

"A little while longer. I'm hoping you'll still be up when I get there."

"Aren't I always waiting when you come home?"

"Of course you are." Ansell chuckled. "You must think me a mad fool, darling."

"No more than I, darling."

Ansell said he would be home soon, then wished her good-bye and broke the connection. The telecom beeped and switched itself off. Farrah lay there in the dark a few moments, gathering her will, her ambition, and energy, then she sat up slowly and shook back her hair.

"Lights."

The lights came on, the onyx lamps scattered around the room creating pinpoints of light that gradually swelled into a fuller illumination. Farrah rose and walked through the connecting door to her wardrobe. The mad fool who had called her on the telecom would be expecting a lush, sensual woman to meet him at the door. If instead he met a naked nymph, one with her proportions, he might have a coronary and drop dead at her feet. And that would be too infuriating to bear.

It still surprised her to consider how easily she had made the transition from mere wage slave to full-fledged corporate prostitute. That was such a dirty word and yet it fit so well. She found that she didn't care, didn't even mind the connotations. She'd grown up in the corporate environment. For the sake of economic reward, she'd traded practically everything she possessed to one corporate unit or other all her Me. Now she had included her body as part of the arrangement. Simple as that. The recompense had been more than adequate, enough to turn any ordinary prostitute green and blue with envy. And if her current project worked out, she would have nothing to worry about for a long time to come.

The advance security team arrived to check the apartment for bugs and unauthorized personnel. That was standard procedure. Farrah merely verified that the three-member team had the right corporate

affiliation before letting them through the door.

Ansell arrived ten minutes later. His personal escort remained behind in the hall.

Farrah smiled, now wrapped in a neo-monochrome gown of scarlet red glinting with a thousand points of light. The gown emphasized every lavish curve of her figure, baring her arms and shoulders and a striking depth of cleavage. Ansell gazed at her for several long moments, then dispensed with his trench coat, tossing it onto a nearby settee with a grand sweep of his arm.

"You look *ravishing*, my dear," he said, smiling, stepping toward her.

Farrah waited till he laid a hand on her shoulder and leaned close for a kiss, then, from behind her back, she drew out a pair of crystal goblets and a bottle of Bordeaux Superieur, Chateau Haul Brion ...

Ansell hesitated, then lifted the bottle and looked at the label. "My dear," he said with a smile, "this is the twenty-nineteen. It's barely coming into its prime." Farrah inclined one finely drawn brow. "Live a little."

"Dare we?"

Faintly, Farrah nodded, and smiled.

It was the sort of extravagant gesture the man could not resist, Farrah knew. With a wild grin, he took the bottle of vintage wine in hand and declared passionately that, *yes!* they would break the seal this very evening. *At once!*

His darling wife must not be denied. The impulse of the moment would be fulfilled. And one impulse led to others.

The living room glimmered with soft light. Ansell set about opening and decanting the wine. Farrah drew a voluptuous 20-centimeter Montecruz Individual cigar from the humidor behind the bar, clipped the end, then passed it unlit to Ansell.

"The best of the best," he softly declared.

"Only the beginning," Farrah replied.

"Yes," Ansell replied, smiling archly. "The beginning."

At the touch of one key, the entertainment console initialized a preprogrammed routine. The lighting dimmed. Laser light slowly waxed and waned, filling the room with brooding colors. Music arose, Arabic in flavor. Farrah stepped to the center of the room and began a dance, sinuous as a serpent, supple as warm, flowing honey.

As Ansell laughed and applauded, Farrah reached behind her neck and opened a clasp. His laughter soon changed to cries of delight, for he obviously knew what was to come. Farrah's gown gradually descended into wisps of fabric adorning the lush carpeting around her feet. She continued on, now clad only in the skimpy costume she had worn beneath the gown. In time, she discarded that, too.

The dance led inevitably to the bedroom.

Ansell moaned with pleasure.

9

The lock wasn't complicated. Raccoon's magic fingers reached inside with ease and found the critical element, a simple spring-loaded bolt. One flick and the bolt was open, the door unlocked. But there was more, an alarm, and something ... a sort of trap. Magic pervaded the frame around the door, not the door itself. Clever. It might have worked, too, if Raccoon weren't just as clever. Disabling the alarm took only moments. Neutralizing the clever spell that would ... what? Cause sleep. Cause anyone opening the door to fall asleep. Neutralizing that took a few minutes. A very clever spell, indeed. Yes, a spell worthy of Raccoon.

When finally the door swung open, Bandit paused, watching, listening, breathing deeply of the incense-laden air that came drifting into the alley. Nothing seemed amiss. It looked as though he'd defeated this clever combination of security. Very pleasing, very rewarding ... But, if his information was correct, the greater reward awaited him inside.

He stepped through the doorway, nearly silent on plastifoam-soled shoes, and into a room that looked much like any other room. The light-intensifying lenses of his mask showed him a small, crowded space divided into three aisles by tall shelf units, a large workbench, some cabinets, hundreds of various small containers, cartons, and boxes. A storeroom. To his astral perceptions, the place was dark, all but emotionless, dead. It was made of things that were lifeless: plastic, metal, and concrete. Substances torn from the earth and so deprived of life. If not for the radiant life energy flowing weakly through the doorway and the faint glimmer from a potted plant on the workbench, the place would have been pitch-black.

The light-gathering lenses of his mask let him scan the labels on the containers. He saw names like U.C.A.S. Fetish, New Magic, Arcane Instruments, Genuine Focii. Bandit recognized the names and knew that the corporations they named produced nothing of any value. He moved to the door on the other side of

the room, slipping through it to enter the talismonger's storefront.

Here was life, glowing, radiating, from various points around the shop. Many of the display cases and shelves were filled with tourist trinkets from the boxes in the back room: drums and rattles, knives, wands, crystals, phony bones, plaster shells. Pretty ornaments to amuse the ignorant Baubles and toys for children or relatives somewhere in Duluth. Some of the talismans and potions and painted charms were very real, imbued with true power, shining with magical life, but none were of a quality or power that would interest one who followed Raccoon.

Bandit turned to the stairs, the old wooden stairs leading up from the side of the shop to the room on the second floor.

Here was the true hoard: old wooden tables and shelves and antique, glass-fronted cabinets all shining brightly with power. What they said-the derelicts and street urchins and burnt-out magicians he had overheard on street corners-all of it was true. Raccoon could spend many hours here examining the many glowing items, but that would be unwise. Bandit knew what he wanted, and it lay in plain sight, right on the table in front of him.

The Mask of Sassacus, said to confer great powers of influence and persuasion, perhaps bound up with special spells. Bandit hesitated even to touch it, but instinct and desire and the danger of discovery wouldn't let him hesitate for long. Cautiously, he lifted the mask in his fingertips, then held it up to his face to see what change that might make in his vision. He learned nothing for his trouble, but assented great power. He could almost taste the power. He would carry this mask away and learn its secrets. That would tell him its value.

With great care, he slipped the ornate mask into a pouch slung from his belt. In its place, the spot left empty on the table, he put a small crystal dragon with glinting red eyes. Inside this decorative container was the powdered essence of the reproductive organs of a wyrd mantis, a giant Awakened insect of Europe.

The powder glowed with power, but it had no value to Bandit. His magic would be tainted by anything with the least connection to insects or insect totems. That did not mean that the powder had no value to anyone else. Some might find it a very valuable commodity indeed. Maybe not as valuable as the blood of a dragon, the feather of a phoenix, or the horn of a unicorn, but far more valuable than anything else in this shop. That made it a fair exchange, more than fair, for Raccoon had no need to leave anything. Thievery, as some called it, was part of Raccoon's nature.

The room suddenly filled with light, brilliant light, as from a spotlight. This came from the semi-transparent tubes crossing the ceiling. Bandit felt the light like fire. In one fluid movement, he crouched low to the floor and ducked under the nearest table.

Raccoon guided him well tonight.

Better to hide than to fight.

An old man entered the room. Bandit guessed it was an old man by the pair of spindly legs he espied through the legs of tables between him and the back of the room. He also saw a gun, an old-style revolver, gripped low in a gnarled hand.

"Who's there?" a weak voice rattled. "I know you're here ... Got past my ward ... Sneaky bastard ..."

Bandit pointed a finger and breathed a single word. From the direction in which he pointed came a muted bang and crash, followed by the quick-razor snarl of an alley cat.

"What's this?" the old man murmured. "That old trick. I ain't falling for it."

Bandit grinned. The old man must be a magician, and clever. Clever enough to have set the trap on the alley door. Indeed, as he had said, the cat in the alley illusion was an old, old trick. Raccoon used it often. Most people fell for it.

"Somebody's monkeying around," the old man growled.

Nodding, smiling broadly, Bandit reached into his coat pockets, drew out his hands, then softly blew a long, deep breath at the old man, simultaneously extending and opening his hands.

"Huh?" the old man said, "Now what... another..." He stood unmoving for several moments, then yawned loudly. The spindly legs stumbled backward a few steps, slowly settled onto their knees. Finally, the old man came fully into view as he bent to the floor, lay down, and fell asleep.

In a few moments, he was snoring softly and steadily, his own kind of spell used against him.

Bandit returned to the narrow alley behind the shop. The night was dark and quiet, marked only by the voices of the night: the distant rumble of the subway, the passing of cars on nearby streets, the occasional calls of street vendors and the talk of passersby. Nothing seemed out of place.

A brief walk took him across High Street, through Nishuane Park, jammed with the stalls and booths of talismongers and occultists, to Harrison Avenue. He felt like getting some food.

In front of Seven Hexes Pizza, he noticed a gray and black van. He walked right past it and around

the corner into the deep shadows cast by the tall ferrocrete tenements lining Sutherland. The van followed. As Bandit stepped into the dark recess of a tenement doorway, the van glided to a stop at the curb in front of him. The passenger door of the van swung open. A big ork in an armored black vest and black fatigue pants stepped onto the sidewalk and joined Bandit in the shadowed doorway. People called this ork Shank. A dwarf called Thorvin followed along.

"Hoi, Bandit," Shank said.

Thorvin grunted.

Bandit watched these two closely. Their presence here roused his curiosity. They rarely came looking for him except when a special opportunity arose. A glance at their auras revealed only that they seemed calm, untroubled, in harmony with the plex.

"We got a job," Shank said. "Rico wants you in the game."

Interesting. Bandit knew this Rico, too. Rico was clever, in some ways as clever as Raccoon. He had a woman, an Asian woman, who was perhaps more than she appeared. Not entirely human, perhaps something other than human. She was clever, too. "The decker," Bandit said quietly. "Is she in?"

Shank frowned, then said, "You mean Piper?"

"Yes." That was the name.

"Sure she's in. She and Rico're planning the run right now. You want in?"

"Likely," Bandit said. "Good money?"

Shank told him about the money. It was good. Bandit didn't really care. Money was useful for buying food and renting hiding places, but that was all. He only asked about money because it was expected. People who didn't want money were not trusted. "The run will take us where? Someplace interesting?"

Shank nodded, slowly. Seeming puzzled. "Yeah. Sure. I bet it'll be real interesting. Heavy security. Some corp facility."

"High-security facility?"

"Ain't that what I just said?"

Shank meant yes. This was very good, indeed. High-security facilities had high security in order to guard valuable things. Things that might be taken, things that might be hoarded. Or sold. Or traded. Or examined for what they might mean. It was difficult to know what might or might not have value with just a first look, so many things had to be taken to a safe place where they might be hidden and examined carefully. Often with magic. Long magic. What the uninitiated called "ritual magic," as if such magic could be done by rote, without thought or inspiration.

"You interested?" Shank asked.

Bandit nodded, just once. "When do we start?"

The night streamed with energy, throbbing, alive. Maurice slowly ascended, then descended, his astral form rising as high as the walls of the surrounding buildings, men settling down to several meters beneath the black concrete of the alley. All appeared in order. The energies of the astral plane flowed smoothly and harmoniously. No malign species of phantom or magically active being seemed to be in the vicinity.

There was of, course, one minor fluctuation, one small disturbance in the flux of astral space, originating from within the warehouse to his right, but this he had expected.

He had come prepared.

He returned to his physical body, his mundane form. This brought him a sense of dissatisfaction, no less than the necessity of leaving his studies tonight in order to "practice" his Art in the sordid world of the mundane. As he regained his sense-awareness of the physical plane, he sat once again in the rear of his Mercedes limousine. The limousine waited, lights out, in an alley off some street in Sector 2, near the airport, the ocean terminals and piers. "Biffs remain in the car," he said. The five women sharing the rear of the limo with him grumbled briefly in discord. Much as he might have expected. They were his wives. They attended to the innumerable inconsequential details of daily living, thereby freeing him to pursue his arcane inquiries. They had also produced a number of children, who, in time, would also serve him. They expected to accompany him everywhere, imagining that their service to him earned them various inalienable rights.

On a night like this, when certain undeniable facts of existence invaded the hallowed domain of his research, he would grant no latitude, tolerate no dissension. The biffs would do as he said or else face the consequences. Fortunately for all of them, Daniella, his first wife, had the capacity of understanding to order them all into silence.

Daniella would keep them in line.

With one meticulously manicured finger, Maurice pointed. The door to his right clicked and swung open. The faint shimmering in the air by the limo's ceiling drifted out through the open door. Maurice followed it outside.

The night was cool, the air rank with offensive odors. The ground vibrated faintly as with the distant rumble of machinery or passing subway trains. Maurice tucked his ivory-handled walking stick under his arm and tied the sash of his dark, caped coat. A trivial exertion of will returned him to his astral perceptions. He found his ally, radiant with etheric energy, facing him from just an arm's length away.

The ally, recently summoned, was proving to possess a peculiar blend of naivete" and eccentricities. Though bound to Maurice's will, his service, the spirit showed signs of developing a uniquely willful personality. It preferred to be addressed as a female. With Maurice's permission, it had assumed an astral form like that of a curvaceous young white woman with long, gold-brown hair, and wearing a flowing halter-top dress that fell to mid-calf. It wished to be called "Vera Causa." Maurice found this troubling.

The spirit spoke to him mind-to-mind, asking, *Your desire, master?*

Guard, Maurice thought.

Yes, master, the spirit replied. *I guard you always. Master is kind and spirits are grateful.*

Indeed.

Returned to his mundane physical perceptions, Maurice extended his walking stick and moved up the alley. To his right the big black metal door of a warehouse stood partly open. He paused to examine both door and doorway, which appeared to be unguarded, astrally and otherwise. *Master, be cautious*, his ally warned. *Danger here. Much violence.*

That was certainly true.

The open doorway led directly to a landing at the top of a flight of stairs. A faint luminescence from the radiance of the surrounding city carried in through the doorway to dimly illuminate the landing. The stairs, however, descended into pitch blackness. Maurice called forth his magelight with a flick of one finger. The light swelled radiant and full, growing from a mere pinpoint to the size of a globe mounted atop the head of Maurice's stick.

Lifting the stick out before him, Maurice descended the stairs. Again, his ally warned of danger, of the violence that lingered here. Maurice knew the source of this violence. It was the man he had come to see.

The stairs led into a corridor unlit but by Maurice's magelight. Some distance ahead another door waited partly open. Maurice paused to examine it, then stepped through.

That put him in the main chamber, a room two or three times the size of the average simsense theater. At the distant end burned a single candle. Just beyond the candle's small flame stood a man stripped to the waist. He had a mass of wavy blonde hair and a well-muscled, athletically proportioned body. He stood with his feet together, arms at his sides, face turned toward the black of the ceiling hanging closely overhead.

Behind the man, Maurice perceived the huddled form of a woman, nude. Quite dead. "You come again."

The voice carried quietly throughout the space. It was that of the man. He went by many names, but, as Maurice knew, his real name was Claude Jaeger. His aura was a seething torrent of dark-hued energies. Maurice had encountered homicidal maniacs with clearer auras, but Jaeger was far more dangerous than any lunatic killer. Death clung to him, not hie a leech, but as the source of his power.

With a shout, Jaeger suddenly turned and lashed out, perhaps with a kick. The movement was so swift, Maurice could not be certain. A dark shape to Jaeger's right, about the size and shape of a fire door, rang like a bell. Sonics slapped the walls of the surrounding chamber and reverberated. The door, or whatever it was, fell to the floor, clanging loudly, separating into two pieces.

"Does this form of exercise please you?"

Jaeger turned toward Maurice with a face as cold as the concrete underfoot. "It is not exercise," he said. "And, yes, it pleases me greatly." He paused for a moment, then said, "Would you care to try? I have another door."

Maurice considered briefly, then dismissed the thought Jaeger followed the path of a child, that of a physical adept. His art, as he called it, was devoted to improving his physical power. His exercises included breaking inanimate objects and living bodies such as human beings. The practice of the art eluded explanation for the simple reason that the art itself was absurd. It was eminently practical, no doubt but had no value beyond the purely mundane. Jaeger himself was like a weapon, effective, but essentially devoid of the desire for truth or for anything more than mere physical stimulation.

"We have work," Maurice said.

"What work?" Jaeger snapped harshly.

Maurice ignored the intemperate tone. He had difficulty enough trying to decide how he might best elaborate, what words would achieve the desired effect. As a general rule, the spoken word displeased him. Speech could be unbearably precarious, intolerably inexact. He much preferred the mathematical precision

of the arcane arts, the One True Art. It alone could be trusted.

Quietly, and precisely, he said, "Our client is staging a sensitive operation. We are to back up the back-up, you might say. In case something should go wrong."

Softly, resonantly, Jaeger chuckled. "I would say it in terms very different from those, mage."

Maurice supposed that was so.

10

Unlike the old, three-story brick building on Mott Street, the big CMC stepvan really did belong to the New Jersey Consolidated Light and Power Corporation. It was painted in the corporate colors of blue and yellow, marked with various ID numbers, and loaded with equipment.

New Jersey C.L. & P. had lost track of the stepvan for the moment, Piper had arranged for that. According to her, the corp had one of the worst matrix security systems of all the corps in the Jersey-New York megaplex, but whether that was true or the corp just wasn't up to her standards, Rico didn't know. In the end, it probably didn't matter.

Rico took the passenger-side seat, braced one foot against the dash, and gave Shank a nod. Shank hit the remote that set the big bay door in front of them to trundling up, then drove them toward Doremus Avenue, at the north end of the port, where they picked up the Jersey Turnpike.

It was just after 23:30 hours. The truck lanes were laden with heavy, swift-moving traffic-massive two- and three-trailer tandem rigs, container rigs, Roadmaster articulated and straight trucks, cargo vans and stepvans. Rico turned his head to glance back at the trio on the bench seat to his rear: Bandit, Filly, and Dok. Like him and Shank, they were outfitted with day-glo orange hardhats and vests, all marked for C. L. & P. The five of them were just another repair crew in a sludge-bloated ocean of technicians and crumbling infrastructure. No one would look at them twice.

The highway carried them across the Passaic River and onto the Kearny Peninsula, one of the most heavily industrialized areas in the plex. Rail yards, factories, storage tanks, and warehouses, all constructed on a mammoth scale, slid past on either side of the highway. The warning lights of factory stacks and the flame-stroked steeples of chemical plants rose high into the orange-phosphorous glow of the night.

Another bridge and the Hackensack River, then into Secaucus, another industrial zone, this one sprawling up the backbone of Jersey and Union Cities, and on up the Hudson to well beyond the G.W. Bridge.

The backside of Union City was far enough.

Shank turned the stepvan down the ramp to Paterson Plank Road, then up West Side Avenue.

North of the sewage plant, the road became a broad boulevard. It was a kind of Executive Row, like a little slice of Manhattan tucked in between chemical and food processing plants and the compacted, decaying streets of Union City's Zone 2, West New York. Broad plazas glowed with light. Fountains glittered and sparkled. Shining towers rose like polished chrome from the halos about their foundations to dominate the skyline.

Just past Sixty-ninth Street, Shank slowed the stepvan, flipped on the amber warning blinkers, and swung the vehicle across the boulevard. He drove the truck, one wheel at a time, up over the curb and onto the gold-lit plaza set in front of the imposing headquarters of Shiawase Compudyne, a division of the Shiawase Corporation of Kyoto, Japan. There was one very important feature of Compudyne's North American operations. Rico stepped from the stepvan to find it right there beside the truck. Set amid the golden tiles of the plaza was the round black insert of a manhole cover.

Shank tugged the cover up and dragged it aside. Dok and Filly began setting up the requisite safety-orange guardrail to surround the open hole and then pulled out the orange-and-red-striped compressor that would pump fresh air into the hole. Rico opened a Sony palmtop computer marked for New Jersey C. L. & P., paused to glance around the plaza, then began tapping the palmtop's keys.

Five minutes passed. Shank climbed down the hole and into the utility passage under the plaza. Dok and Filly passed several duffel bags of gear down to him, then began setting up the air compressor. Rico was still tapping the palmtop's keypad when some slag came out of the Shiawase headquarters building to investigate.

The slag wore a suit and a plastic-laminated ID marked for Shiawase Compudyne security. Rico kept tapping keys on the palmtop till the man stepped up beside him.

"What's tox?" the security officer asked. "There a problem?"

Rico paused to look the slag up and down, then went on tapping the palmtop's keys. "Central office says we got a trickle discharge on a Kay-seven quad feeder. Probably just rats, but we gotta scan it. Might take a couple of hours."

"You got a work order or something?"

"That's top secret," Rico replied. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to waste you."

The guard looked at him sharply. "What?"

No sense of humor. Frowning, Rico looked at the slag again, and said, "Yeah, I got an order. What's it to you?"

"Just doing my job, chummer."

"What job?"

"Shiawase security." The slag pointed at the ED slung from his lapel. "Maybe you're really eco-freaks planning to terror-bomb the place. Gotta scope it out. You scan?"

Rico grinned sarcastically and shook his head. "You freaking guys are all alike." He tapped some keys on the palmtop. "You wanna see my order? Here's my order. You can call that number there if you wanna scan it deep."

"Thanks." The slag looked at the palmtop's display, then pulled an ultrathin cellfone out of his jacket pocket "This'll just take a sec, chummer."

"Null sheen. I get paid working or talking."

The line rang twice.

"Thank you for calling the repair bureau of New Jersey Consolidated Light and Power. All our customer service representatives are busy. Please hold the line and the next available representative--"

"Repair operations. Jane speaking. May I help you?"

"Yeah, hoi, my name's Mike Kosaka. I'm with the security department of Shiawase Compudyne. I've got one of your crews on my premises. I'd Wee to verify what they're doing here."

"Whenever repair crews are dispatched, sir, they are issued a work order code. Please ask the crew supervisor for that code."

"Uhh ... hang a sec ... That'd be gee as in gulf, two-four-nine-oh-seven-five."

"One moment, sir."

"Sure."

"... That is a valid work order code, sir. Repair supervisor Ramos and his crew have been dispatched to your location to investigate a suspected line malfunction. This should not involve any interruption of service to your facility. Estimated time for completion is approximately four hours. Have you any other questions, sir?"

"Ah, nope. That'll do it. Thanks."

"Thank you for calling New Jersey Consolidated Light and Power."

"You happy now?" Rico said.

The security officer smiled and nodded. "Thanks for your time."

"I get paid for working or talking," Rico said. The security officer nodded again and turned to go. Rico looked to Dok and Filly, and said, "Let's get that *air* line going."

Filly plugged the orange-and-red-striped air compressor's power line into the socket on the side of the van, and the compressor sputtered to life.

A smartframe handled the telecom call—a program construct requiring only a modest amount of active memory. The moment the call was complete, the frame switched itself off.

By then, Piper was streaming down the datalines of the Secaucus Local Telecommunications Grid. The planar geography of the matrix here reflected the real-world terrain. System constructs like giant factories and massive towers rose toward the starry dark and the distant nebula of access nodes to the regional grid. Piper noted the hexadecimal addresses passing around her, then cut a hard left to the matrix equivalent of Executive Row.

Constructs like office towers and mansions soared up around her. The one she wanted looked like a small castle crowned with a decahedral globe, the insignia of Kuze Nihon, a multinational conglomerate headquartered in Tokyo. The castle itself and the computer systems it represented belonged to Maas Intertech, headquartered off West End Avenue in Secaucus.

Piper drove straight at it. They wouldn't see her coming.

Once the slag in the suit departed, a pair of guards in crisp blue uniforms appeared hi front of the paired doors of the main entrance of Shiawase Compudyne. The obvious implication was that Shiawase had decided, for whatever reason, to tighten up security a little, or at least put on a nice show. The guards stood there like soldiers on parade. They didn't bother Rico one bit.

Tune to start breaking some laws. Rico didn't care much about the law, because the law worked for the corps and the people who wrote the laws, the ones with money and power. Right was right and wrong was wrong. Any man with morals knew what was right and what was wrong, and, with a little thought,

could figure what had to be done about it. Sometimes it took a few busted laws to get things set the way they should be.

Whether the law agreed or disagreed was something for leeches like lawyers to argue about. Bandit followed the last of the bags of gear into the hole. Dok, meanwhile, had dropped the big orange-and-red-striped hose from the air compressor into the hole, then joined Filly in feeding a line like a heavy-duty extension cord into the hole. The air line and power cord were just stage dressing, making things look right, no less than Rico getting into and out of the stepvan numerous times and tapping the keys of the palmtop.

Five minutes more and Rico put his genuine C. L. & P. hardhat on again and climbed down the metal rungs of the access shaft to the utility passage below.

The passage was almost three meters high, but little more than a meter across. That was just the available space. Cables, pipes, and conduits ran up one wall and down the other, making the ceiling maybe a half-meter lower than it otherwise would have been. Small lighting fixtures ran down the right-hand wall at intervals of about ten meters. These were lit.

At Rico's feet lay several black duffels. He picked up the one marked with a big numeral one and started up the tunnel. Even with the bag of gear, walking was no problem. Trying to run through a space this narrow would be another story, but Rico wasn't planning to do any running.

About a hundred and fifty meters up the tunnel, Shank had hung an IR blackout sheet from the ceiling. No one looking up the tunnel would see beyond that sheet, regardless of vision enhancements. Rico checked while approaching, shifting his Jikku eyes to IR. The sheet's only purpose was to prevent anyone who came down the manhole from immediately detecting what was happening beyond the sheet.

Another hundred meters further on, a second tunnel led off to the left at ninety degrees. Shank waited there at the corner, suited up and ready for action: ballistic mask, flak vest, Colt M22A2 assault rifle slung from his shoulder, Wallacher combat axe and other gear slung from belts and crossed bandoliers.

"Status," Rico said.

"Don't ask me," Shank grumbled. "All he's done is stand there like that."

Dressed in his black trench coat and wearing his sword, Bandit stood about five meters into the side passage. Maybe an arm's length in front of his face the tunnel ended in a brick wall. The pipes and conduits lining the tunnel passed right through the brick barrier.

The plan called for Bandit to use his shaman abilities to scan ahead into the tunnel beyond the brick barrier. Just as a precaution. Once sure the tunnel was clear, they would take down the brick barrier. Rico watched Bandit and wondered. The problem was being able to tell when the shaman was actually doing magic, when he was out of body, and when he was just staring, thinking, maybe working out some problem.

If there was a problem, Rico wanted to know about it now. "Bandit," he said.

Abruptly, Bandit shook his staff. The elaborately decorated head of the staff briefly rattled, then Bandit murmured something soft and low, his voice rising and falling like a song. The song descended into silence. Bandit stood stock-still for several moments, then swung his staff to the horizontal, and held it pointing at the brick barrier.

Nothing much seemed to happen. Rico waited till Bandit turned back and looked at him, then said, "Ready?" Bandit replied, "When you are."

The System Access Node had the look of a spacious lobby, enormously broad, fronted by transparent panes, and outlined in computer-simulated representations of sizzling neon.

Across the front of the SAN lobby, a hundred transparent doors slid open and shut as datapaks and message units in the form of green-uniformed messenger icons arrived via the rounded conduits of a hundred datalines.

Inside the lobby, the messenger icons waited on violet-shaded lines pulsing through the floor, leading to the service desk subprocessing unit at the head of the node lobby. White-uniformed control modules slaved to the SPU directing the messenger icons to the chrome-mirrored walls at the left and right of the lobby. The messenger icons moved briskly up the lines, then across the front of the service desk to the sides of the lobby, where they vanished into the mirrored walls.

All very orderly and precise.

Piper stepped forward, following the pulsing violet line in the floor. To the messenger icon directly ahead of her, she said, "Excuse me, please."

The messenger icon looked back over its shoulder, then stepped briskly out of her way, shunting to the violet line to their immediate right. The message icons there adjusted position so as to maintain then: proper intervals. Piper advanced. The other messenger icons ahead of her in line looked back and shunted out of her way as well, permitting her to walk directly to the service desk SPU at the head of the node. One of the white-uniformed control modules there watched her approaching and bowed.

Bowing in return, Piper announced, "Priority user requesting interface with Facility Engineering subprocessing unit."

A window framed in gleaming orange opened directly in front of her face. The enormous floating eyeball of a Watcher 7K access IC gazed directly at her. Standard U.M.S. iconology for Intrusion Countermeasures programs, as expected. Her own masking utility was already on-line. She wore the elaborate costume of a traditional Japanese geisha: makeup, hair, kimono, and sandals. Her kimono, a brilliant white, was decorated all over with the decahedral logo of Maas Intertech's parent unit, Kuze Nihon.

The giant eyeball of the Watcher IC retreated into its window. The window closed and vanished.

"Circuit twenty-two oh-five," said the white-uniformed control module behind the service counter, pointing left.

Piper turned and followed another gleaming violet line to the wall of mirrors, then stepped straight into the wall. Firing herself down another dataline and out across the amber-gridded night of the Maas Intertech computer network.

The run was on.

11

Rico motioned at the brick barrier.

Shank stepped forward, edged past Bandit, and attacked the brick with his Wallacher combat axe. The brick and mortar split and crumbled like an old plaster wall in some derelict tenement. After the first few blows, Shank began using his free hand to tug chunks out of the barrier, the pieces bursting into dust between his fingers. The noise level was minimal. Rico gave Bandit an approving nod, but the shaman didn't seem to notice.

Dok and Filly came hurrying along the main passage as Rico was suiting up. Kevlar mask with integral headset, commando-style harness, flak jacket. Predator 2 heavy auto, Ingrain 20T submachine gun, both with integral smartlinks.

For tonight's special work, he and the rest of the team also carried Ares Special Service automatics, medium autos with silencers and extended fourteen-round clips. The clips held Armamax gel-stun rounds loaded with special chemical agents. If the impact of the round didn't disable the target, the chem agents would, absorbed directly into the bloodstream through armor, clothing, skin, and damn near anything else. Unconsciousness would result in about three seconds. Sometimes less. People with a dozen armor-piercing slugs in their meat sometimes went on shooting for longer than that, so the delay wasn't really an issue. No more than with any other bullet.

And the mortality issue took precedence, in any event. The Armamax slugs disabled without killing. Rico wasn't into wetwork, murder by another name. He and the rest of the team would switch to hard ammo if and when they had no other choice. When it became kill or be killed.

But only if it came to that.

The objective was to get in and out before anyone even knew they were there. Smooth as a teflon slide, painless as a razor's slice. Surgically precise. Leave the heavy bang-bang warfare scag to the amateurs out in the streets.

By the time Dok and Filly had their gear set and ready to go, Shank had dug a hole through the brick barrier almost big enough for a troll.

Rico fingered his headset. "Time check."

Piper replied, "Zero-one-zero-three hours."

"Right," Rico said, glancing around at the team. "Lock and load. Namecodes only. Stay alert."

Slides snapped and clicked. Spring-fed ammo clicked into firing chambers. Rico slipped past Bandit and motioned Shank into lead position. They advanced past the ruined barrier, keeping to intervals of about three meters, weapons at ready. Dok and Filly would handle rear-guard. That put Bandit right in the middle, right where he belonged.

This passage was just like the main one, but with one crucial difference. It led directly to the principal utility and engineering building of the Maas Intertech facility. The walls were seeded with vibration and motion sensors. Taking them out was part of Piper's job. She should be in the Maas Intertech computer nexus by now, doing her thing.

If she wasn't, the five of them in this tunnel were meat.

Every system cluster, like every individual system, had weaknesses, and those could be exploited.

Piper's map showed that the interconnected mainframes that composed the Maas Intertech computer cluster had one serious flaw. R & D mainframes were the most vigorously protected, rated at Security Code Red-4. Intrusion Countermeasures guarding the access nodes to these systems would be black, as

vicious as IC ever got. The corp knew where its most important assets were located and spared no expense in defending them. The primary security mainframe, however, was merely Code Orange, tough but by no means impenetrable. And the main engineering system, which monitored and controlled the facility's physical devices such as water, light, and heat, was only moderately defended by Code Green security. And that was the cluster's flaw.

Besides controlling heat and light, elevators, automatic doors, and the like, the primary engineering mainframe was also responsible for such operations as supplying power to security monitors and related devices. The flaw that Piper would exploit.

The sculpted interior of the engineering CPU had the look of a power station control room or maybe the bridge of a trideo starship. The heart of the node took the form of a chief engineer icon seated at an immense, semicircular control console. An array of huge display screens ranged across the walls facing this console. Data blazing like electric neon streamed continuously across the wall displays and the main console displays. From millisecond to millisecond, the chief engineer icon would reach out with a stark white hand to adjust some console control or to enter a brief series of commands via the console keyboard.

As Piper crossed the threshold of the CPU node, a window outlined in brilliant green opened directly in front of her face. The enormous eye of another Watcher IC access program faced her squarely. Her masking utility had already changed her iconic appearance. She now wore the dark gray zipsuit of a Maas Intertech exec. The identity card clipped to the lapel of her jacket read, in big bold print, PRIORITY USER, CLEARANCE AA. The window closed, the Watcher vanished. Piper stepped up behind the chief engineer icon. This icon ignored her. Representing the most crucial decision-making circuits at the core of the CPU, it relied on Intrusion Countermeasures to defend it from harm. It lacked both the ability to identify unauthorized intruders into the node and the capability to do anything about them.

Piper initialized a custom combat utility. She called it Power Play. In the consensual hallucination of the matrix, she drew an enormous, gleaming, chrome automatic pistol with a muzzle the size of her fist and put it against the back of the chief engineer's head. In another version of this reality, thirty megapulses of command/override program code infected and interpenetrated the firmware programming of the CPU.

The chief engineer icon hesitated, turning its head just slightly as if to look back at her.

"I'm in charge," she told it.

"Affirmative," the icon replied. "Instructions?"

"Continue normal functions. Do not interfere with any modifications I may make to system operations. Do not initiate any special activities or security alerts without my approval."

"Affirmative."

The chief engineer returned to making adjustments of the various controls. Piper reached out with her free hand and tapped a key on the console. One of the huge display screens on the walls facing the console went black, then blazed with light as the stark white iconic face of the security CPU came into view.

"Identify," the security CPU said.

"Engineering CPU," Piper replied.

"I don't recognize your icon."

"Manual override has been invoked. Authority assistant director Facility Engineering, code seven-seven-nine-four-nine, clearance double-A. Facility engineering is marking power systems microanomalies and is now beginning level-one manual and computer-directed diagnostic checks."

"I understand."

"Be advised that facility technicians will be performing unscheduled maintenance in utility passage One Main at zero-zero-four-five hours, and in other utility passages and service corridors throughout the facility. Disregard all sensor alerts from these locations until further notice. Engineering personnel are on site and will advise when the situation has been corrected."

"Acknowledged."

"End of line."

Piper broke the link with the security CPU, then spent something less than a millisecond shutting down the security sensors in utility passage One Main and other locations critical to Rico and the rest of the penetration team.

It was just a matter of pushing the right virtual keys.

From five thousand feet, the plex looked like a dark ocean of hazy orange, lit by the brilliant red strokes of fire at the top of chemplant stacks and the hundred million glinting, gleaming lights of towers, buildings, and plants.

The Hughes Stallion helo cruised smoothly through the spectral dark. Inside the chopper's command deck Thorvin kept his sensors moving, his throttle back. No need to rush. Not yet Direct-vision overlays cut

up the terrain below into its discrete parts: Jersey City to the south, Newark to the southwest, Union City, the Hudson River, and Manhattan to the east, the Passaic-Ridgefield sprawl directly to the north. Thorvin noted that in passing. He had plotted a hexagonal course around the Secaucus industrial zone. He watched his course and kept his sensors searching for any suspicious air traffic.

The comm cut into his thoughts, first, a beep, then Rico saying, "Beta ... time check."

What freaking time was it anyway?

Didn't matter...

Thorvin checked his radar and navcomp, initialized the chopper's autopilot, then flipped the main switch on his remote-vehicle multiplex controller.

No more helicopter.

Instead, he had the body of a Sikorsky-Bell Microskimmer, a kind of saucer-shaped drone the size of a trash can lid. Sensors provided a full, 360-degree global view of everything around him, disorienting, but only for a moment.

Dok and Filly were just then lifting him free of the carrypak strapped to Shank's back and setting him down on the floor, which looked like ferrocrete. The penetration team was to one of the underground utility tunnels beneath the Maas Intertech facility. From a few centimeters above the floor, the top of the skimmer's sensor pod, Shank still looked like a dumb trog.

"Beta," Rico said, "Take point."

No problem.

Thorvin wound up his turbofans and slid forward, weaving around the ankles of Shank and Rico and advancing to the end of the passage. Directly ahead was a cavernous labyrinth of massive conduits and equipment rising three stories from the floor, all rumbling like a roadtrain on a quicksilver run.

This was Maas Intertech's power and water hub. Thorvin shot straight for the ceiling, then vectored right for a quick recon. Security cameras had every service aisle and catwalk under surveillance, but that was Piper's problem. Thorvin's problem was the odd dozen technicians moving throughout the hub.

He contacted Rico via direct laserlink to guide the penetration team through the maze.

The cat-and-mouse game couldn't last. There were too many techs and they never seemed to stay in one spot for more than a couple of moments. Sooner or later, one or more of them would turn the wrong way and see the wrong thing. Rico knew it-it was inevitable-but he played the game as long as he could. The longer he and the team went without putting people down, without doing anything that would rouse 'suspensions, the better their chances of getting out of this alive.

They were moving up a service aisle between conduits at least half a meter in diameter, stacked up two stories on both sides of the aisle, when Thorvin reported, "Contact ahead, passage right, three meters in."

No choice, no alternate routes, no time to wait for the contact to wander away. Rico tapped Shank's shoulder to get his attention, then quickly pointed and gestured to indicate the new threat, somewhere around the corner of the passage coming up on the right. The instant Shank nodded, Rico turned and motioned Bandit forward. A quick whisper and Bandit nodded, then did something with his hand.

About five meters ahead of them, something banged and clanged. That was followed by what sounded like the sharp, shrill shriek of an alley cat.

"What the *frag* was that?" a man exclaimed.

A big slag wearing a gray and blue technician's jumpsuit stepped into the aisle just ahead, first looking up the aisle, then back.

Rico saw the man's eyes widen, but Shank was ready, crouching, Ares Special Service gripped and uplifted in two big blocky hands. The weapon thumped. The technician grunted, lifting a hand toward his ribs, then stumbled and collapsed.

"Larry?" a woman called. "Larry! Oh-!"

A woman in the same style jumpsuit stepped hurriedly into the aisle, bending toward the fallen man. Shank fired again. The woman jerked, falling onto her hands and knees, then, head lolling, slumped to the floor.

Here was one advantage of soft ammo. The two techs would be out for maybe an hour, but nothing about them gave any obvious evidence as to what had happened. No damage to clothes, no apparent signs of injury. Nothing that would necessarily instigate a full-scale security alert. The pair could have passed out drunk. Inside this power and water hub, they could conceivably have contacted some toxic substance or even high-voltage electric and been accidentally stunned or knocked unconscious. Whoever found the fallen techs would probably take a long, hard look at the surrounding pipes and equipment for signs of some technical malfunction. That was good because it would waste time, and one man's loss was another man's

gain.

Before this was over, they'd need every millisecond of advantage they could get.

Control of the engineering CPU was just the beginning. By manipulating aspects of the engineering mainframe, Piper could extend her control and manipulate other aspects of the Maas Intertech facility that might impinge on the run.

The chief engineer icon, the critical circuits of the engineering CPU, was now working for her voluntarily. In addition to performing its usual duties, it was monitoring the progress of the penetration team, it was also disabling security monitors and sensors in an ostensibly random pattern designed not only to safeguard the team and prevent discovery, but also to conceal the team's objective.

Abruptly, a warning tone sounded.

"Medic alert," the chief engineer informed. "Automated signal. Sublevel two, section seven, Advanced Water Purification unit."

"Intercept the signal," Piper said.

"Negative. Signal dispatched via radiolink. Facility MedStat responding, E.T.A. three minutes."

That was too fast, because the site of the alert was too near the penetration team's location. Piper brought up facility maps on the big display screens on the walls. The Maas Intertech emergency medical unit responded from a central suite. They would have to enter the Engineering Facility through a ground-floor entrance. "Cut power to all north-facing ground-level entranceways and lobbies for the next five minutes. Advise security CPU that we are experiencing scattered power outages related to the anomalies detected earlier. Also, reroute all priority A, double-A, and triple-A engineering terminals to the database management CPU."

"Acknowledged," the chief engineer replied. "Executing. Except I don't have authority to reroute triple-A priority terminals."

"If you had that authority, which key would you use?"

"The big red one there."

Piper reached over and tapped it.

Utility Passage Nine Main led out of the north end of the engineering building and into a series of auxiliary tunnels leading to the engineering sublevel of Residence Quad One, which was composed of four residence towers rising to fourteen stories. The majority of Maas Intertech's corporate citizens and their families lived on-site in this and other quad condoplexes.

The game of avoiding facility technicians ended at the service hatch for Elevator Three West. The hatch swung open as they approached. That was Piper's doing.

The inside of the elevator shaft was about twelve meters square-not a lot of room for five bodies that included a husky ork and a shaman who didn't seem to be paying complete attention-but they'd all been through this drill before.

Secure hatchway. Secure weapons. Secure kevlar-reinforced web-straps to body harness. Crouch low and wait.

They didn't have to wait long.

Cables along both sides of the shaft began to move. A low-pitched humming carried down from above. Rico's microchip-enhanced vision drew the image out of the darkness. The elevator above them was descending, dropping down fast from something like the eighth floor. It didn't stop till it was just centimeters above Rico's head, about half a ton of metal just hanging there, waiting.

They went to work.

This elevator car, like most, had a solid steel floor designed to absorb impact. Cutting a hole through that would take time, minutes they couldn't afford. The run was already twenty minutes old, fifteen from first penetration. By the odds, they didn't have much time left.

A soft electronic tone sounded inside Rico's headset, followed by Piper's voice: "Time is zero-one-two-eight." That was a warning, and it echoed the warning of Rico's own instincts. It meant that things were happening in the Maas Intertech computers that would inevitably lead to some kind of alert condition. Not right this minute, but soon enough. When it happened, whatever happened, they'd better be on their way out.

The strap now connected to Rico's body harness ended in an industrial-grade suction cup. Rico slapped the cup against the bottom of the elevator, pulled the cup's metal latch and locked it. The cup flattened out against the steel of the elevator. Rico bent his knees till his whole body weight pulled on the cup. It held.

The moment the rest of the team was ready, Rico keyed his headset. "Time check."

"Time is zero-one-two-nine." The elevator hummed and ascended. The floor of the shaft fell away quickly. Hanging from a single thin strap, having nothing to grab on to if the suction cup or strap gave way helped make it seem that way.

Two stories up, then three. The saucer-shaped drone Thorvin had running followed them right up the shaft, hovering maybe a meter beneath their feet. Rico looked up, but there was nothing to see but the flat steel plate of the elevator. Four stories, five, then six. Almost there. Rico drew his Ares automatic. At his right elbow, Filly did the same.

Seven stories.

"Stand by for landing," Rico said.

The elevator slowed, then stopped, perfectly positioned. They hung directly in front of the doors to the ninth floor. Rico braced his feet against the edge of flooring at the bottom of the doors and lifted the Ares, gripped two-handed. Filly Mowed suit. A moment passed, then several more. The doors didn't open.

Shank grunted. Impatient.

Maybe half a minute went by, time they couldn't afford to lose. Either Piper was having serious problems in the matrix and couldn't spare the time to pop the doors, or there was another problem. Maybe people in the hallway outside. Maybe security personnel. Maybe an alert had been declared.

The only way to find out without risking more radio traffic was to get-

"A man and a woman," Bandit said. "Up the hall. On the left."

"What're they doing?" Rico asked.

"They're bored."

"Bored like guards standing watch?"

"Maybe."

Rico gave it a minute. They couldn't afford to do anything that might give them away, but neither could they wait. Someone would find the techs they'd put down. Someone would notice an elevator apparently gone out of service. Someone would consider a bunch of seemingly unconnected events, have a sudden flash of intuition, and hit the PANICBUTTON. The longer they waited, the more likely that became. It posed a danger to Piper as well. A decker could die in the matrix. And this was a classic case of how that might come about.

The minute ticked off. Nothing changed. Rico made the unavoidable decision. "Right. We advance. Four, take left, I take right. Two and Three, stand by to jump."

Filly acknowledged.

Rico keyed his headset "Alpha, pop the doors on my mark. Counting two, one, mark."

The doors slid smoothly apart, revealing the hallway beyond, extending out maybe fifty meters. Standing in front of a doorway about halfway along on the left were a male and a female in loose-fitting gray suits and black mirrorshades.

As Rico brought his Ares into line, his smartlink put a gleaming red triangle over the male's chest. The auto thumped once. Filly's auto thumped at nearly the same instant. The male fell to his knees, then rolled onto his back. The female went down like a bag of rocks.

Thorvin's drone flashed past, humming.

Dok and Shank swung themselves forward, planted their feet on the floor of the hallway, popped their harnesses and then knelt down, training their automatics up the hallway to provide cover.

Once they were set, Rico followed them out, with Filly close behind. The two of them then turned back to tug Bandit clear of the elevator shaft. Filly reached out and popped Bandit's harness. It was a few precious moments, but that couldn't be helped. Bandit tended to do things in one of two ways, like an expert or a dunce. Left to himself, he'd probably hang there under the elevator for a couple of hours before figuring out how to get out and then actually getting around to doing it.

Rico reminded himself, not for the first time, that the shaman's strengths far outweighed his weaknesses. And everybody had weaknesses. It was built-in.

Inside the brilliant cube of the Engineering CPU, a window outlined in green suddenly opened and the giant eye of a Watcher program gazed straight into Piper's face. Things were starting to happen now, all over the Maas Intertech computer cluster. The power failures she had ordered had been noticed. Programmers and technicians were trying, without success, to get into the engineering mainframe. The security CPU had doubtless put the cluster on passive alert. It knew something serious was wrong, but it didn't know what. It needed more data.

The giant eye gazing into her face was evidence of that.

Piper drew a balloon from her jacket pocket, stretched it, blew it up, and tapped it toward the Watcher IC. The balloon undulated and expanded. The Watcher's eye drifted aside to avoid it, but couldn't. The

balloon speeded up, enveloped the Watcher, then just held it. The watcher's eye moved back and forth, but drifted slowly and steadily upward-inside the balloon-toward the glaring white ceiling of the node, then just hung there, immobile.

"Security CPU requesting node-to-node interface," the chief engineer icon reported.

"Denied," Piper said. "Lock out all external systems."

"Affirmative."

The clock was running down.

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The door to Condo 9-B shot open just in front of Rico's face. He stepped through and aside, dropping into a crouch. Shank followed. That was just being careful. Bandit reported the condo empty except for the master bedroom.

Two occupants. One male, one female.

Their target had company tonight, and that was no surprise. The corps could be real generous with perks. If Surikov had lacked the means or just the plain luck to find some companionship on his' own, the corp would probably provide whatever kind he required. That was how the corps worked. Threaten your spouse if you don't do the job and serve up whores when you did. Whatever got them what they wanted. That was it,

The bedroom door snapped open. Shank went first and Rico followed. A hazy, orange-tinted light surrounded the bed like a veil. Two bodies moved there. Rico's vision overlays showed him the contours of the bodies right through the veil of light and the liquid satin bedsheets. Male on top, female below.

Even as Rico brought his Ares to bear, the female looked right at him, gaped, and put a hand to her throat Rico saw the movement and guessed what it meant, but there was no way to stop her without risking hitting the man on top of her.

He couldn't risk the shot A soft bell-tone sounded. Red strips running up the corners of the room flared red. "A security condition has been initialized," a hushed female voice announced quietly from somewhere near the ceiling. "Remain calm. If this is an actual emergency, do nothing. Security personnel are responding. Do not be alarmed. If you have initialized a security condition in error, please dial one-one-one and identify yourself to the security supervisor." The slitch on the bed was wearing some kind of PANICBUTTON around her neck. Now she smiled as if self-satisfied. The male looked back over his shoulder, jerked with surprise, and rolled off the female. "Three," Rico said.

Dok moved to the bed, put a burst injector to the female's leg, and fired. The slitch exclaimed, then went limp. Rico pointed the muzzle of the Ares at the male. "Identify."

The man looked about fifty, distinguished, thinning hair and close-trimmed beard stained with gray. Some extra weight around the middle. Not a big man. Not a small one either. He gasped, drew a couple of panting breaths, stammered, "Surikov ... Ansell Surikov ..." He stole a glance toward the female, eyes wide with uncertainty, fear. "What is this? I insist..."

The vocal stress analyzer on Rico's commando-style watchband pegged too wildly for a good reading. The slag was really worked up. Rico nodded at Dok, who started making his checks, a quick retina print and DNA scan. The checks weren't foolproof, just the best they could do under the circumstances. The correct patterns had come with L. Kahn's chip dossier. Running the checks took about half a minute. "We're positive," Dok said. Rico nodded at Surikov and said, "Who's the Garden?" Surikov eyebrows jumped. He blurted, "That's my *wife!* How ..." A Garden of Earthly Delights. A private thing, Rico knew, between Surikov and his wife. He knew that from the chip dossier provided by L. Kahn.

"How do you know-!"

"We're here to take you home, Dr. Surikov," Rico said, lowering his Ares. "Home to your wife."

Surikov stared at Rico for several long moments, then rubbed a hand over his mouth and made an obvious effort to get hold of himself.

"You wanna go, right?"

Surikov hesitated, then nodded and said, "Just tell me how to proceed."

Rico pulled a pack from his belt, broke it open, and shook it out. A bright orange jumpsuit with built-in plastic shoes, all in Surikov's sizes. "Put this on. Make it fast."

While Surikov was doing that, Dok checked him out again. "Vitals're okay. You on medication?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Let's do it," Rico said.

Bandit ran his eyes around the living room. The furnishings put forth a character of luxury and fine living, but that was a lie. The walls, drapes, sofas, carpet, the onyx sculptures and semi-holographic pics

were all dead, made of plastic and other artificial, materials. There was nothing of life here except for the power and water running through the walls, and that was the vague clue to the truth about this room. It was not a fine space for living, as it might appear, but rather a plastic container for corporate slaves, a sort of coffin, really. Just a bit over-sized.

There was nothing of value here, except possibly Surikov. Bandit turned to watch Rico and Dok hustling the scientist up the hall and into the living room. Surikov was worth a lot of money. That might buy valuable things.

Bandit slipped a hand into one of the pockets inside his coat. His fingers found a small silver figurine, like a man made of wicker. Something that might have value for a druid or a witch. It had no value for him and so he placed it on the small platinum-hued table at the end of a sofa. He would leave it in place of Surikov. The little wicker man. A fair exchange.

"Five, move it!" Rico ordered.

Bandit nodded understanding.

Five was his assigned namecode.

Through the apartment to the hallway door, Rico hustled Surikov along at a brisk walk, but the man's physical condition was a problem. He wasn't young and he didn't exercise-that was in the dossier, too. He'd probably survive the stresses of the next few minutes, but anything might happen if he had to get really athletic. The plan was to avoid pushing the slag too hard until there was no other option.

"Time is zero-one-three-four," Piper reported via radiolink. That meant security forces were responding. Rico didn't need to be told. The voice still droning from the ceiling kept him keenly aware of the time trickling away and the danger, getting more real every second.

As Rico reached the door to the hallway, Thorvin's saucer-shaped drone shot off toward the end of the hall opposite the elevators. Shank and Filly dropped into combat crouches. Rico glimpsed the door at the end of the hall swinging open, and the sudden, dazzling flashes of the flare-strobes mounted on Thorvin's drone. Rico turned Surikov toward the elevators. A stun grenade detonated to their rear. Rico hoped it was from the drone.

Elevator Three West now waited in line with the floor, doors wide open. Rico let Dok hustle Surikov onto the elevator, then turned to look back down the hall.

The drone's strobes were flashing. Another stun grenade banged, and some slag in a uniform staggered back through the doorway by the stairs. Rico took aim on that doorway, Shank and Filly came charging up the hall and past his shoulders. The instant they passed by, he turned and dove onto the elevator, and the elevator doors slid shut.

The drone would be left behind to delay and confuse on-site security forces. It was expendable.

The elevator rose.

Surikov was breathing hard and looking worried. Dok checked him again and burst-injected something into his arm. "Stay calm," Dok said. "We've done this before."

"I'm afraid I haven't!" Surikov blurted. "Tune is zero-one-three-six," Piper reported. That meant trouble. Maas Intertech had security forces on-site, but they were lightweights. The real trouble would come from outside. Kuze Nihon maintained a unit called Daisaka Security, and Daisaka's rapidresponse teams provided a back-up umbrella for all of Kuze Nihon's subsidiaries in the Jersey-New York megaplex, including Maas Intertech. Those teams, commando-trained and equipped, would be only minutes in arriving. Rico wanted to be long gone by then.

Daisaka's uniformed forces wore flash that featured the likeness of the black annis ape, a very territorial creature who was known to overturn cars before ripping them to pieces.

The elevator slowed to a halt at the fourteenth floor. The doors slid open. A pair of men in light gray security uniforms stood there, right outside the elevator. For an instant the guards just frowned, but then abruptly reached for their sidearms. Shank and Filly's autos thumped simultaneously. Both guards fell.

Rico led the group out of the elevator and cut a sharp left. The door beside the elevator opened onto a narrow stairway that led directly to the roof.

Down out of the hazy orange dark of the night came an olive-green Hughes Stallion chopper running without lights.

They loaded up quick.

13

The room was dark, but Rico's custom Jikku eyes turned the darkness into a dusty gray like twilight. He eased himself out from under the covers, then up off the mattress he and Piper used for a bed. The building on Mott Street wasn't a regular doss, the furnishings nothing more than what they absolutely

needed. A simple mattress was good enough to sleep on. A ragged old couch was good enough for sitting. Rico walked over to the couch, then sat down and lit a cheroot. The tea still sitting in a cup on the low table before the couch had gone cold.

Piper's little slim-stemmed pipe lay in the ashtray next to the tea. Rico remembered how strange it had seemed the first time he saw her toting the thing. While running hot wire and other dirty games down in the Carib and South America, he'd seen women toting all kinds of smokers-but a pipe? That was different. Piper said she'd picked up the habit from her mother, but she never talked much about her mother. Rico gathered that her mother was Japanese, and attracted to elves. Piper talked even less about her father, but what little she said usually came with a lot of acid. Rico had guessed that her father was an elf and about as treacherous as any corp. The few times she'd mentioned him, she always ended up talking about corps, and how none could be trusted.

The bedsheet rustled. Piper lifted her head, looking around, then rose onto one elbow. "*Jefe?*" she said softly.

"Go back to sleep, *querida.*"

"What time is it?"

"Almost five."

The time didn't matter. He and Piper weren't on watch for another two hours. They'd gotten clear of the Maas Intertech facility, dumped the helo, and run around a while in Thorvin's van, checking for shadows. No pursuit had appeared. Sometime tonight they'd contact L. Kahn, exchange Ansell Surikov for the rest of their money, and be done with the deal.

"You should rest, *jefe.*"

"I'm resting. Go back to sleep."

Runs like these were rough on Piper, Rico knew. She couldn't concentrate only on the matrix. She had to deal with the meat world, too. Security setups, progress of the penetration, coordinate things. Make sure the right elevator was at the right floor at just the right time. Give Thorvin a go, not early, not late, so the chopper and the ride home would be exposed for the least amount of time possible. It was a lot to deal with. A lot of pressure. Probably the worst of it was that no one, least of all Rico, could really know just what she went through, because when she went into the matrix, she went alone.

It humbled him. It made him feel like his skills and abilities weren't really any big deal. Most men were made to fight, to face pressure, conflict. They were born that way. But for a woman to go through what Piper did ... that was something special.

"We did good," she said softly.

"So far," Rico agreed.

"The kami were with us."

"It ain't over yet."

"What's bothering you, my love?"

"I don't know." Rico felt restless, uneasy. Instinct said the run had gone too smoothly. No one had gotten as much as a scratch. That rarely happened. The price of a run against a major corp could usually be measured in blood. Had they simply been lucky? Was some surprise still to come? Something that would make up for the easy way things had gone so far ...

His brain kept reminding him about the team and the plan. The team was experienced and the plan had been a good one, worked out in detail. There had been plenty of weaknesses in the Maas Intertech facility, and the plan had exploited them. On that basis alone, the run should have gone smoothly.

"I don't think I'm gonna sleep till we get rid of this slag," Rico said.

"You" re too good a leader."

"I'm responsible."

"You're not a god."

"I'm doing all I can do. That's *my job.*"

That was all anyone could expect, no more, no less, and his adamant tone cut Piper short, hie he knew it would. They'd had this talk before. Rico had no illusions about his capabilities. He couldn't know how things would turn out. He couldn't see into the future to discover how they were being used-*if* they were being used-or how L. Kahn or somebody else might be planning to betray them. Rico's job was to see that they came outta this alive, the whole team, and Piper especially. That made it hard to sleep or rest, to do anything but worry about what was coming next.

"I'm gonna check around a minute."

"You need rest, *jefe.*"

"This won't take long."

A moment to pull on his pants, another to pick up the Predator 2 lying on the table beside the bed. A few more to do what he needed to do. He stepped across the hall to the second bedroom. Surikov was in there, asleep, stretched out on a mattress. He looked okay. Dok said he'd survived the bustout in good shape. A little tired, a little over-excited, but no worse for the wear. Dok and Filly had the room to the right, at the end of the hall. They looked okay, too. No lights anywhere. That was standard. Rico moved up the hall to the main room. Shank stood at one of the windows overlooking Mott Street. He held the butt-end of an M22A2 braced against his hip. Thorvin stood at one of the rear windows with an SMG. Bandit sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

"How's it scanning?" Rico asked.

"Wiz, boss," Shank answered.

Thorvin grunted and nodded.

Rico paused in front of Bandit. The shaman's eyes were open and staring straight ahead. "Something in the air," Bandit said. "Feels bad."

"Like trouble?" Rico asked.

Bandit looked up at him, and said, "Good bet."

The infrared-enhanced cameras in her belly pod clearly picked out the big ork standing just inside the second-floor window overlooking Mott Street and the smaller dwarfish figure by the window in the rear. For almost an hour, the pair had barely moved except to turn their heads, and that made Bobbie Jo wonder. The average gutterpunk didn't have anywhere near that kind of discipline. Most runners she'd spied on here in Newark and other plexes had the discipline of the typical rock'n roller. They were more interested in breaking out the beer and the whiskey at every opportunity. After a run like the one against Maas Intertech, most would've thrown a party, complete with bootleg chip and recreational psychochems.

A quiet voice, the words, "Good bet..." came to her over the radiolink. Probably via the listening post set up in the tenement across from the runners' hideyhole. A laser mike directed at a window. The runners seemed worried about something. Bobbie Jo could understand that. Skip Nolan's voice quietly arose. "Air One, status."

"No movement," Bobbie Jo replied. "No change." And no more banter over the radio. It had died out over the last hour or two. The team inside the Command and Control vehicle was tired. So was Skip. She could hear it in his voice. Bobbie Jo was feeling a little worn herself. The runners had slept most of the day prior to their run against Maas Intertech and were sleeping in turns right now. The units of the Executive Action Brigade had been working fourteen-hour shifts since the beginning, since picking up the runners at that yakuza bar, Chimpira. Now only Colonel Yates seemed to have an excess of energy and that was because tailing the runners had changed from a silicon glide into serious biz. The runners had gear they weren't supposed to have. The chopper they'd used to get out of the Maas Intertech facility hadn't been so wiz, just ordinary radar, but the van, that gray and black phantom, *it* had presented problems. The dwarf rigger who did the team's driving and probably most of its repairs had the van outfitted with some kind of wild military-grade sensor gear. Getting the equipment to sleaze it had cost the Executive Action Brigade a few more nuyen than Colonel Yates had been prepared to spend.

Bobbie Jo could still hear the man cursing, cursing everybody, especially the runners and the Brigade's current client "If those scummers pull any more crap, we'll ice 'em! We'll ice 'em all!"

Talk like that worried her.

Icing the runners would be murder pure and simple, and, if nothing else, in direct violation of their orders, their contract with the client. That would make everything they'd done so far a waste of time and effort. They'd forfeit their contract and any money they had coining, and the Brigade's rep would slip a few more notches. Bobbie Jo didn't think the Brigade could afford it.

Abruptly, her ground-based combat comp went into active mode. Targeting indicators began winking in front of her eyes. She felt a shock of surprise strike straight into her gut as apparently random movements below her suddenly resolved into the semblance of a pattern.

She saw matched sets of vehicles, dark blue sedans with vans, moving rapidly along the streets that bracketed Mott Street. If she read their movements correctly, all those vehicles would arrive at opposite ends of Mott Street at almost the same instant. She broadcast her alert signal. Even as her squeal hit the air, two dark-clad figures appeared on the roofs of buildings facing the runners' Mott Street hideyhole. Those figures moved toward the front of the roofs as if to take up sniping positions. Focusing her lenses and zooming in, Bobbie Jo saw that one of the figures wore a dark uniform with shoulder flash that included the likeness of a black ape.

What the hell was going on?

Ground teams reported more movements, furtive movements through back alleys, uniformed persons

with automatic weapons taking up positions.

This was crazy. It suddenly looked like a commandostyle raid was about to hit the runners' hideyhole, right here in the middle of Newark's Sector 2. It didn't seem possible. Yet now she heard Skip firing off orders to Brigade units on the ground, declaring toe approaching vehicles hostiles, and then she saw the big bay door at the front of the runners' hideyhole rolling up.

"Ground Four and Five," Skip said. "Intercept hostiles."

Where Mott Street met Raymond Boulevard, a dark brown Brigade sedan suddenly shot right onto the roadway, broadsiding one of the hostile sedans, only to be struck in the tail by the van accompanying that car.

Then, the runner's gray and black van came roaring out onto Mott street at mid-block, turning toward Fleming. The hostiles coming up the street from that direction, a car and a van, abruptly split left and right, skidding sideways and effectively blocking off the roadway. The runners' van didn't even slow down. It slammed against the sedan's front left side, bounded up onto the sidewalk, then down again, and went roaring straight at the corner.

Autofire punctuated by the thumping of heavy weapons was breaking out all over the place.

Thorvin had the power plant to the max as they hit the street, engine roaring, tires screaming, laying a trail of smoking black as he turned up the block. He saw the big sedan and the van coming straight at him, splitting left and right to block the roadway. No way he was stopping. The combat subroutine of his onboard computer performed an immediate analysis on the sedan and put a rapidly winking red indicator right where he should hit the sedan for maximum effect.

It was quite an impact. Nearly shook the datajack right out of his skull. Cost him an outboard sensor array. But he had the speed up to eighty kph by then and-freaking hell-the physics worked! He caught a glimpse of the sedan spinning half a circle as he bounded up over the curb and tore a path down the sidewalk and straight to the corner. Just a simple matter of mass versus energy, really.

Corner coming up fast.

Skid turn-no other way around it.

Bullets pounded off his skin as the tires gave a banshee wail and sent him sliding sideways around the corner.

Alarm bells in his ears.

An image leapt into the back of his mind, something like a jet fighter swooping low over the buildings off to the left of the intersection. A red schematic flashed in front of his eyes: A CyberSpace Designs recon drone.

"Bird's with us again!" he snarled.

"Burn it!" Rico barked.

A targeting indicator winked-locking on. Thorvin popped the M-134 minigun out of his roofpod and opened up. Three bursts, and the drone went spinning wing-over-wing, down and out of sight.

Bobbie Jo felt the slugs battering her airframe, then the flare of fire from the long-range fuel tanks. Alarm indicators flashed and flickered. The skin over her right wing split and burst into tatters. The concrete ground came swirling toward her.

She screamed. Blackness swallowed her.

14

Another bone-rattling impact and they were clear of the attacking forces converging on Mott Street.

Thorvin had the power plant opened up wide, and the noise was deafening. The roar of the engine rising into a stammering whine that chipped "away at the nerves like sustained autofire. Hanging onto his seat with one hand and his Predator 2 with the other, Rico clenched his teeth and stared into the passenger-side rearview mirror. He tried not to think about the people bouncing around in the rear of the van. There wasn't time.

"Splash one drone!" Thorvin bellowed over the scream of the van's engine. "I'm heading for the freaking *you-know-what?*"

Rico nodded. "Do it!"

Surikov cried out from the rear. The slag was scared and rightly so, but he and Dok would have to deal with it. Bandit's warning that someone was about to bust the Mott Street safehouse had come none too soon. The hostiles had moved in on foot and in cars and in vans and had even thrown up a drone. Probably, it was Daisaka Security, the security arm of Maas Intertech's parent corp, Kuze Nihon.

Nobody with organized paramilitary forces brought out the heavy guns just because they felt like partying. There had to be a reason for the attack, and Surikov was the only one that made sense. But the

point that bothered Rico most was not who or why, but rather *how* the opposition had gotten to them at Mott Street. How had they been found out?

Two possibilities came to mind. One was that someone might have tailed them to the safehouse, despite Thorvin's declarations to the contrary. Rico didn't think that very likely. Two, Piper might have been traced through the matrix. She was equally sure that nobody had traced her, but that didn't mean she couldn't be wrong. Rico didn't think much of that possibility either, for the simple reason that where the matrix was concerned, Piper was usually right. Was there something he'd overlooked? And what in fragging hell could it be? He couldn't believe that anyone on his team had given them up.

One thought came to mind.

He looked at Dok. "Check the slag for a snitch."

"What?" Dok exclaimed. "*Now?*"

"Do I look like I'm *joking*?"

Dok stared for a moment, swaying with the violent motions of the van as it skidded around a corner, then, he bent, broke open his medpack and went to work.

They already knew that Surikov had implants: datajack, chip memory, subprocessing unit. A really advanced skillwire system. Lots of tech dreck to expedite and accelerate his scientific research. L. Kahn's chip-dossier had mentioned it. What it suggested to Rico right now was that Surikov might also have been implanted with some kind of electronic microtransmitter, something that Maas Intertech or Daisaka Security could home in on if the slag ever got "lost." or snatched.

Stuff like that wasn't common, but for top execs and ramjamming research slags like Surikov, neither was it unknown. Rico cursed himself for not anticipating the possibility and getting Surikov checked out sooner.

Surikov was lying flat on the floor. Dok bent over him, hanging onto a cargo strap. Two seconds later, the med scanner in Dok's hand began to beep shrilly, and Dok looked up, wide-eyed.

"Come on, Monk! *Hurry!*"

Minx grabbed his hand and tugged, propelling Monk forward, down a flight of stairs leading to a subway station. Only at the bottom of the stairs Minx turned right instead of left, yanked open a metal door marked, PLX-3, AUTH PERS ONLY, and tugged him right through the doorway.

The door slammed shut at his back, then everything went black. Minx tugged him ahead at a run. Their feet echoed against the floor, a smooth, hard floor that seemed basically level, though cluttered with stuff that rustled around his ankles and crunched under his sneaks.

Minx slowed. Something heavy banged and something metallic squealed. A door swung open. They stepped out onto a concrete safety walk that ran along one side of an underground roadway. Monk couldn't recall having ever seen this part of the transitways before. The roadway, only two lanes wide and divided by white dashes, extended off in both directions for a few hundred meters before curving out of sight. The pavement looked really clean. No litter anywhere.

Minx looked back and forth, up and down the roadway, then thrust back her wildly frizzled hair, now glowing red and orange, and grinned.

"This is it," she said.

"What?"

A rumbling arose into a roaring like a race car. A gray and black van came screaming around the curve to the right, blew on by them and disappeared around the curve to the left. Minx frowned.

"Huh?" Monk said.

As the van disappeared, a storm of amber blips began washing across the walls of the transitway, appearing from around the curve to the left. The roar of the van faded away, then swelled. Another truck, a sort of tow truck, came screaming around the curve to the left. This time Minx nodded, glanced at Monk and pulled him ahead, under the railing guarding the safety walk, then down onto the roadway.

The tow truck roared like a semiballistic jet, amber strobes blazing from above the cab and from inside the massive front grille. Monk watched that grille coming closer and closer and closer until it seemed huge, titanic, and it suddenly occurred to him that the truck wasn't slowing down and he was standing right in front of it. Abruptly, Minx yanked him aside, and the tow truck's tires screamed and white smoke billowed into the air.

"Come on!" Minx shouted.

The tow truck screeched to a halt, the door swung open, and Minx all but pulled Monk up the steps and into the cab.

The truck roared ahead. The acceleration was incredible. It thrust Monk against the back of the broad bench seat, holding him there till he could hardly breathe. He glimpsed a pair of black-gloved hands gripping

a steering wheel and the front dashboard, blazing with controls- lights, graphic indicators, LED dials and gauges-all winking, gleaming, flaring and flashing incessantly. He stared wide-eyed at the broad white lines of the roadway streaming toward him in a blur. Exocentric Ruminations blasted from speakers all around.

"Who's your friend?" someone shouted. "Real booty!"

There was that word again.

Minx grinned. "This is Monk!" she yelled. "Monk, this is Harry! Harry the Hack, people call her! She's the best hack in the city!"

"Yeah?" Monk shouted, wondering what a "hack" might be.

Minx nodded, smiling.

"Used to drive a cab!" Harry exclaimed. "Never managed to lose the tag!"

Minx sat back, and Monk leaned forward to get a better look at Harry. She had gold-blond hair drawn back into a thick braid. She also had the perfect, cosmed-generated face of a Maria Mercurial novastar, complete with languid bedroom eyes and a small dark mole a little above and beside voluptuously full ruby lips. She wore a shiny, studded black jacket and black engineer boots. She took a quick drag on a brown Sunset Neon cigarette, then looked across at Monk and grinned.

"What the hell are you looking at!" she shouted.

Monk looked at the dashboard. A TV/3V show was playing on the vid there. "As The E-Mail Turns," rolled across the screen. The first scene showed a glowing neon man in a glowing neon room pushing glowing neon envelopes around on a glowing neon desk, and muttering incoherently. Monk hadn't ever seen this show before. If it made any sense, it escaped him.

Something barked. Monk looked aside to see Minx giving a hug and a kiss to a huge dog with glaring red eyes and vicious white teeth. "We call 'im *Prince*!" Harry shouted.

Prince of Darkness? Monk wondered.

Minx, and Harry burst out laughing.

Abruptly, the corridor of the transitway vanished, and they were sluicing through a sea of automobiles and trucks. The tow truck roared and squealed. Horns blared, sirens wailed. Monk caught a glimpse of a bus hurtling straight toward the right side of the tow truck's cab, a solid wall of cars charging straight toward the tow truck's nose, and a crowd of people abruptly scattering from all around the tow truck's front and sides. Buildings, towering buildings, black rain-tarnished retrofitted brick and ferrocrete buildings spun past in a blur.

Monk felt himself wrenched forward, practically out of his seat, then thrust against the passenger door, then back the other way, right across Minx's lap and practically into the jaws of the giant, red-eyes-glaring Prince of Darkness dog.

Minx looked down at him and smiled and gently pressed his hair back from his brow.

"That's the other thing, you booty!" she called over the deafening roar of the truck. "Whenever you ride with Harry, you ALWAYS wear YOUR SEAT BELT!"

There was that word again.

Booty.

"HERE WE ARE!" Harry cried.

For a moment, the tow truck seemed to turn sideways. Tires screamed. Monk, still sprawled across the seat, felt his feet and lower legs drawn inexorably toward the ceiling. Then the truck stopped suddenly, and he tumbled onto the floor under the control console. Minx and Harry burst out laughing.

"Come on, Monk! *Come on!*"

Minx grabbed his hand and tugged him from the cab and down onto some street somewhere in Sector 2, near Port Sector. He could smell the rank river, the Passaic River, that was for sure. Maybe Newark Bay, too. The street immediately around him, lined with old factory and tenement buildings, looked like a disaster area. Cracked-up cars straddled the sidewalks and sat at odd angles all over the street. Bodies lay all over the place, too, some of them still moving. Slags in paramilitary armor stood around shouting at one another. Emergency strobes atop ambulances and Omni police vehicles and other cars and trucks flickered and flashed brilliantly against the dusky suffusion of early dawn. The tow truck growled. Harry had a thick cable stretched out from the rear of the truck to a big blue sedan sitting on its side.

Minx tugged Monk in another direction, straight toward some heavily armored slag sprawled over the curb. The patch on his shoulder pictured something like a gorilla.

A light flashed, and Monk realized Minx had a camera pointed at the slag's body. She bent down for a close-up. A real close-up shot. So close she nearly had the lens of the camera touching the surface of the pool of blood slowly trickling out from the under the gleaming reflective faceplate of the slag's helmet. And then she moved the camera just a bit aside and lowered her mouth ... her mouth ...

"Monk?"

The world began slowly turning around him. He glimpsed Minx smiling quizzically at him and caught sight of Harry grinning and laughing just before the street tilted on end and everything went black.

"You booty ..."

15

The van glided through the back streets of Rahway, straddling the border of Sector 13. The gloomy dawn resembled twilight. The ancient buildings flanking the road cast dark shadows. Rico knew this part of the sprawl as the Dead Zone. Nobody lived here but ghouls and wandering gangers and the odd slag on the run. There was no power and no water but what people found for themselves. The badges didn't hardly know the place existed, and that was probably good for them, the cops. The fog from some long-ago metaphysical catastrophe rolled forever through the streets. Devil rats, some as big as small dogs, peered from the alleys and out of the windows of abandoned buildings. The only light came from the fires in metal storage drums or seeping down from the sky through a pall of dark clouds.

"Freaking dust devil!" Thorvin growled.

A swirl of fog evolved into a storm of dust and grit rattling against the sides of the van. Rico glimpsed a series of grotesque shapes, faces, contorted bodies only vaguely human, flowing over the windshield and around the van like ghosts, but he knew these were just an artifact of the storm. Metaphysical FX. A token of the Dead Zone. It passed as swiftly as it had come.

"Status," he said.

"Clear," Thorvin growled. "Freaking clear. I got a fouled intake port, but we're freaking clear."

The van rumbled and turned across the road and slowed, descending a steep ramp into a sublevel garage. The garage door trundled down behind them. "Building okay?" Rico asked.

Thorvin nodded. "It's clean."

Rico looked toward Bandit, but didn't bother asking for confirmation. Magicians didn't like using magic in this part of Sector 13. Too much static. That was what Bandit said. Rico took his word for it. "Set the watch," he told Thorvin.

"It's set already," Thorvin grumbled.

From the outside, the building didn't look like much, two stories of crumbling brick with rusty-looking steel shutters over every door and window. The appearance was deceiving, though. The place was a fortress, equipped with sensors, offensive and defensive systems, all capable of independent, computer-directed operation. No one would have to stare out any windows here. The building and its automated systems would stand guard for them.

Rico watched his team pile out of the van. Two hours' sleep hadn't done anybody much good. In any run you reached a point where the adrenaline made you think you could go on forever. But close your eyes and relax for a moment and fatigue washed over you like a floodtide. The abrupt departure from the Mott Street safehouse and the wild ride outta there, like a run through a war zone, hadn't helped.

Predator 2 in hand, Rico led Shank on a quick sweep of the building. The place was clean. The van was clean. Every member of the team was clean. And now Surikov was clean. For sure. Checked and rechecked and declared safe.

Surikov had been the problem. Maas Intertech had implanted a microtransmitter into the back of his neck, then somebody had homed in on that electronic snitch's signal to find him. Guano like that sounded simple enough, but it presented the always image-conscious corps with a potential image problem. Regardless of the truth, the corps liked to avoid being portrayed as oppressive tyrants monitoring and controlling every aspect of people's lives.

That Maas Intertech would take a risk on that score implied that either Surikov was more of a heavy jammer than anyone had admitted so far or else the corps were getting more protective than ever of their assets.

Rico blamed himself for not expecting that. The unexpected was an integral part of the game. You planned for what you could and hoped and prayed that nothing important slipped by or that you could fix it before somebody got wasted!

Dok had removed the transmitter, null sheen. Rico had tossed it into the rear of a pickup back in the transitway. Now maybe they'd have some room to breathe. A few hours, anyway.

Thorvin headed into the sublevel utility room to bring auxiliary systems on-line. Rico sent Filly and Shank to the kitchen to get out food and supplies, and Dok and Surikov into the main room, the living room, to lax out. Then he slid an arm around Piper's waist. She met him with a kiss. "I need you to check the newsnets," he said. "Find out what's happening."

"I understand, *jefe*."

No need to explain that she shouldn't do anything that might get her signal traced through the matrix. She understood that this building around them was their bolthole. This was where they ran if they got into trouble. It was never used unless the primary safehouse got blown. Only Thorvin had been here more than a handful of times, and then only to install the security systems and get the place functional.

Piper moved down the hall to the telecom room. Rico checked that the toilet was working, then stepped into the living room. Surikov was collapsed on the sofa, slumped deep into the cushions. He didn't really look bad for a guy his age and weight. A little tired, maybe a little overwrought. Dok was checking him over. He looked up as Rico lit a cheroot.

"Where are we?" Surikov asked.

There'd probably be no harm in telling Surikov that, but Rico had more to consider than just Surikov. He had to think about tomorrow, all the tomorrows he and his crew might ever have. Surikov was on his way home. No way of knowing what he might say to security people when he got there. No way of knowing who might eventually hear what he had to say. Better to tell him nothing, no more than he absolutely had to know. Today's corporate friend was tomorrow's enemy, and ultimately you had to consider all the corps enemies. Corps and corporates served only one master, the almighty nuyen. That was their only loyalty. "We're safe," Rico said. "All you need to know, *compadre*."

"What... what happens now?"

"We sit tight. You relax. You got nothing to worry about."

"I'd feel better knowing something of your plans." Surikov hesitated, looking anxious. "What happens next, I should say. As concerns me."

Rico guessed questions like that were natural. No man liked to feel powerless. If Piper was any standard by which to judge, women didn't like it either. "It's like this," he said. "We make final arrangements to hand you over. Then you go home."

"I take it you're the leader?"

Rico nodded.

"We haven't been introduced."

Rico took a deep drag on his cheroot and slowly blew the smoke out through his lips. "Numero Uno," he said. "Number One. That's what you call me."

"I see." Surikov didn't seem too sure about that. Mostly, he seemed anxious. "I'd like to talk to you about ... about my going home, as you call it."

"What about it?"

"What 'home' are you referring to?"

The point grated.

It had been no big deal to find out where Surikov used to work before he got snatched by Maas Intertech. Surikov had an international rep in biotech and cybernetics, headware design. Piper hadn't needed to go any further than the public databases to dig out his whole history. He'd been working for a subsidiary of Fuchi *IE*. called Multitronics until Maas Intertech decided to recruit him without the option of saying no.

What Rico didn't know for certain, could never know for certain, was where Surikov was really headed. By all indications, he was heading straight back to Fuchi Multitronics. If the run had been intended as a snatch, if Surikov wasn't really "going home," L. Kahn would have been smart enough to tell Rico to go slot, then simply find another team of runners eager for nuyen and not so particular about how they got it.

Rico had taken that as he was working assumption, but it didn't mean he liked making assumptions.

"How much do you know of my background?" Surikov asked abruptly.

"I know where you been. Why?"

"Are you aware that I was kidnapped?"

"Get to the point."

Surikov hesitated, lifting a hand to the back of his neck, the bandage there. Dok had given the slag a local while removing the snitch, so Surikov should be feeling no pain. Maybe the bandage was itching. "I was with Multitronics Labs most of my life," he said. "I grew up under the Fuchi banner, you might say. I'm a company man. I received my baccalaureate at Fuchi University. I hold advanced degrees from several prestigious polytechnic institutions--"

"The point," Rico said.

"My point is that, as you're probably aware, I'm considered something of an authority on intracerebral design, bionetic augmentation. My work is on the cutting edge. To keep that edge, to properly conduct my research, I must have complete freedom." Rico clenched his teeth. "Yeah?"

"If you're planning to return me to Fuchi Multitronics, you'll be doing me and my work a grave injustice."

A corporate bad-mouthing his own corporation. How many times had Rico heard talk like that? He could count the occasions on one hand. He'd made dozens of runs like this one, and in practically every case the object of the run had been delighted to hear that he or she was going home. The way some of them talked, there was no better place on earth to live than inside the steel fists of giants like Fuchi, Aztechnology, Saeder-Krupp, whatever...

But now, anger swelled. Rico spent several moments glaring at Surikov, trying to control his temper, his frustration. He felt the heat rise up the back of his neck and he wanted to snarl, but he forced himself to take a long, deep drag on the cheroot and to blow the smoke out slowly, like he wasn't hardly thinking about getting mad. "I asked you if you wanted to go," Rico said lowly. "Now you're telling me what? You don't wanna go? You wanna go back to intertech? You wanna go independent?"

"Easy, boss," Dok said quietly.

"I want an answer."

Surikov rubbed at his mouth. His eyes were open a little wider than normal. His face looked a bit red, but the color wasn't anger. Some kind of upset, like he was rattled or flustered. Like a woman. "Let me explain," he said a bit breathlessly. "I realize you've taken great risks. On my behalf. I'm grateful, very grateful. I only wish you could have been fully informed of the problem, as I see it, before you began. You see, the Maas Intertech program for research is nearly as arbitrarily restrictive as Fuchi Multitronics. That's my point. Neither of these corporations are appropriate sponsors for the kind of pure research I'm attempting to do. They've held me as a virtual prisoner. They've used me as just another corporate asset!"

Rico took another long, slow drag of his cheroot. It didn't help. It didn't keep the acid out of his voice. "Maybe you'd like to go to the Carib. Sit under a palm tree. Maybe I should go to Camden or Atlantic City. Play some fragging keno. Wait for the axe to fall."

Surikov looked confused. "I'm sorry, I don't-"

"Mass Intertech belongs to Kuze Nihon. They're almost as big as Fuchi I.E. They're a little slotted off at us right now. You're talking about skanking Fuchi, too. You better have a damn good reason."

Surikov said, "Prometheus Engineering."

Rico had heard the name before. Prometheus was major league. It had a seat on the Corporate Advisory Board that ran Manhattan. It also had a 100-story tower like a DNA spiral on Manhattan's west side, which came with a double-A security from NYPD, Inc. "What about it?" Rico growled.

"Take me to Prometheus," Surikov blurted. "Make any kind of arrangement that suits you and your comrades. Demand some payment. A finder's fee, perhaps. Their director of research should leap at the chance to get me on her staff. She runs a very enlightened program. She understands the importance of basic scientific inquiry. Her researchers have free reign."

"And what about your wife?"

"We could take her too. We would have to, in fact."

Rico nodded slowly, taking another deep drag off his cheroot. Surikov's only problem was that he was insane. "Maybe you'll tell us where we can find your wife. Maybe you'll help us bust her out."

Surikov didn't get the joke.

Dok sat very still, almost motionless.

Rico turned and walked out.

* * *

A quick scan of the virtual bars that served as the bulletin boards and rumor pools of the Newark telecommunications grid, the underground grid, yielded Piper some news.

Hours after their run on Maas Intertech, systems throughout the megaplex were still on active alert.

Half the ramjammers on-line were whooping it up, delighted by the certainty that someone had cut pure ice, pulled off something big. The other half, those with biz to conduct and runs of their own to make, were less than thrilled.

Vaux Hall Pirate News yielded two particularly cogent details: heavily armed Daisaka Security forces were cruising the streets of Newark, and a full description of Thorvin's van, including registration tags, had gone out over the regional law enforcement networks. Piper thought that important news, but not threatening, at least not necessarily.

Newark was not like other towns. Omni Police Services had learned that lesson. Daisaka Security would soon find out for itself, if it didn't already know. Its forces would inevitably discover a whole legion of petty monarchs who considered various sections of the plex to be their private kingdoms. Triad bosses, gangers, yakuza, the maf-none looked kindly on intruders.

Little Asia, Sector 6, was itself a patchwork of competing elements, and the competition often grew fierce. Each element had soldiers to back its claims. All had access to the most menacing of weapons. Daisaka would inevitably find itself facing the prospect of armed conflict, little wars for control, and that was good, for it would keep Daisaka busy.

As for the description of the van ... Thorvin was downstairs at this very moment repainting the van and changing the registration tags. This particular van had a number of separate identities, all duly integrated into the appropriate state databases.

Piper smiled and jacked out.

The room around her returned, four blank white walls with a Samsung office telecom, an armchair, and the re-diner beneath her. The telecom had two lines: a hard line into the local telecommunications grid plus a line to the satellite dish concealed on the roof. Her modified Excalibur cyberdeck lay across her lap.

Rico sat in the armchair, taking on his cheroot and looking dissatisfied. Piper took her slim-stemmed pipe from her belt pouch, packed in some tobacco, and lit up.

"What's the scan?" Rico asked in a voice like a low growl.

Piper gave him a quick summary of what she'd picked up, then said, "You look unhappy, *jefe*."

"We're fraggged."

"Why?"

"Surikov doesn't wanna go home."

"Why not?"

"He says he don't like Fuchi Multitronics any more than Maas Intertech. He thinks he'll be more welcome at Prometheus Engineering. Thinks he'll be free to do things his way."

"Corps and freedom are mutually exclusive."

"The slag don't see it that way."

Piper shrugged. "We have our down payment Our expenses are covered. Let Surikov fend for himself."

"We're responsible."

"No one's responsible for a corporate but other corporates."

"The slag's a scientist."

"That makes him nothing more than a sophisticated form of product designer. He's a suit. We owe him nothing."

"We busted him out, *querida*."

"Yes, and that was a favor."

"A slag like him won't never cut a deal on his own. He's a babe in the fragging woods."

"Then let's give him to L. Kahn and be done with it."

"He doesn't wanna go."

"I don't care what he wants."

People who lived the life defined by the corps deserved the same ruthless brand of indifference the corps accorded the rest of society. The corps had proved that a thousand times over: defiling the Earth, poisoning people, wrecking whole economies, condemning entire nations of people to lives of poverty, disease, and abject misery-whatever suited corporate objectives.

A wise man once said, "Let us drink the blood of the enemies of humanity." Foremost among those enemies, in Piper's view, were the corps. Not even the treacherous swine of Tir Taimgire equaled the corps, in terms of sheer villainy. Elves at least had some respect for the Earth.

"You're talking like a real killer," Rico said.

"I should weep and sympathize?"

"I know you better than that."

"We'll be shagged if we don't turn Surikov over. Fuchi has long arms. They'll find us and kill us. Or use us as test subjects in their biotech labs."

"There's worse things to die for than a man's freedom."

"*Jefe*, I don't want to die for a damn suit."

"What about honor?"

"I don't want to talk about honor."

"We took a man's life in our hands. You're saying we should just walk away."

"I'm saying we should complete our contract."

"And the hell with honor."

"We agreed to turn Surikov over."

"We didn't agree to a snatch. And that's what we're doing if we make Surikov go back to Fuchi."

'Cause that's where he's probably going if we give him to L. Kahn. We're forcing him against his will."

Piper leaned her head back against the cushions of the recliner. Her lover's code of conduct, his honor, his morals, would get them killed one day. She'd known that for a long time. She accepted it because acceptance was part of love and she could not help loving Rico. She had always hoped to someday subvert him, take some of the self-righteous shine out of his moral code, if only for the sake of survival, but her influence in that regard had been negligible. It was a testament to Rico's wit and savvy and his ability as a leader that they'd been able to stay alive as long as they had, despite his code. "Talk to me, chica."

"I should give up everything for a suit?"

"I ain't asking you to give up anything. If you want out-"

That made her angry. Rico knew better than to talk like that. "Where you go I go," she said sharply. "If you want to get yourself killed, then I'm dead too." Rico smiled. "You got cojones, *corazon*." Love talk at a moment like this. It twisted her insides.

It made the hidden truth that only she and Rico knew ride up to the forefront of her thoughts on a tide of foaming emotion. The money she earned from runs like this gave her the means to fight the real fight, the war against the corps, the war to save the Earth before it was totally destroyed. She could face the prospect of death in that cause-had already done so and would do it again, and willingly-but to risk dying for something as despicable as a suit, a man like Surikov, whose life work only made the corps more money, that was almost too much to bear.

Rico came and perched on the arm of the recliner and drew her into his arms. She welcomed his embrace. She admired his courage. She wished she had his strength. Now, she could only think of all the things they would be giving away in trying to accommodate Surikov, and it brought her grief.

Where Surikov found his home was not the only issue. There was another problem that had to be fixed if the man was truly to be free.

Any fool could see that.

16

The rain started at four a.m. By five past the hour, the torrent from the sky became a deluge, crashing onto streets that soon turned into lakes. Rico turned up the collar of his long black duster and walked down Treadwell to the brownstone at mid-block. Five razorguys stood beneath the awning there, three on the porch of the house, two on the sidewalk before it. Two of the cutters held submachine guns barely concealed by their long, dark coats.

Rico was admitted at once, escorted through the house, then into the garden at the center of the house. Mr. Victor waited at the round transpex table in the middle of the garden. Tonight he wore a black smoking jacket and held a long fat cigar in one hand.

With a brief wave, he invited Rico to sit. "How are you, my friend?" he said. "I take it all is not well."

"You take it right," Rico replied. "Indeed, there are many who would agree," Mr. Victor said. "You have roused the giants from their slumber. The corps have sent their forces into the streets and there is much animosity being worked out, even as we speak. The great father of the Honjowara yakuza is particularly displeased at those who trespass on his territory. Fortunately, the metro police have seen fit to remain strictly neutral, by which I mean uninvolved. I think it is safe to say that by this time tomorrow, the giants will withdraw their forces from the streets. At least, their uniformed forces."

That much was good news. Rico had enough to worry about without having to consider the prospect of shock troops from Daisaka Security. Covert forces he could deal with. Probably.

"Before you say what you are here to say, let me tell you this," Mr. Victor continued. "I have word that several parties are keenly interested in hiring the team that made the run on Maas Intertech. Word is out that the run was very clean, very precise, incurring no loss of life. You have done your reputation a great service. In the future, I will be able to ask a considerably higher price for your services."

"Assuming we're still alive."

"Is that not always the assumption?"

The question was mostly rhetorical. Rico nodded understanding, then waited. Mr. Victor took a long drag on his cigar, then, with a look and gesture of the hand, he invited Rico to speak. "I need somebody to make contact with Prometheus Engineering."

"For what purpose, my friend?"

"Recruitment. I need to know if they got any interest in a certain individual."

"An individual whom you have recently met, perhaps?"

Rico nodded.

"This can be arranged," Mr. Victor said. "However, I feel I must ask what makes you desire such a

thing. Have you encountered complications?"

"Serious complications."

Mr. Victor took another long drag on his cigar. "The job has turned out to be other than what it first seemed?"

"I don't know that."

"Perhaps you would care to explain."

Mr. Victor might have no contractual involvement in the job, but that did not mean he had no interest. He had directed Rico to L. Kahn. He had made the first contact. For a man like Mr. Victor, a man of honor, that was enough. That minimal involvement made him at least partly responsible for the job, in as far as it affected Rico and his team.

Rico spoke briefly of the complications. It came down to this: he'd been hired to pass Surikov on to L. Kahn. It looked like Surikov was bound for Fuchi Multitronics, but Prometheus Engineering was where he wanted to go.

"A difficult situation," Mr. Victor remarked. "Naturally, you are not content to simply give your man to L. Kahn."

"I ain't gonna force him into anything. I don't work that way."

"You made this clear to L. Kahn in the beginning."

The meeting back at Chimpira was clear in Rico's memory. "I told him I don't do snatches, and if the subject wasn't willing, the deal was off. He told me he don't accept refunds, that not completing the contract was a killing offense."

"Perhaps this is open to negotiation."

"I doubt it."

"As do I, but there is no percentage in placing you and the lives of your team in further jeopardy until the facts are known. It is conceivable, is it not, that Prometheus Engineering is in fact the party behind the contract? In that event, there is every reason for you to complete the contract as arranged."

"Surikov's wife is supposed to be with Fuchi."

"Even so." Mr. Victor paused, smiling faintly. "You cannot assess the odds, my friend, until you know the facts. If you wish, I will arrange for you to discuss the situation with L. Kahn. Perhaps you can arrive at some mutually satisfactory solution."

Rico had serious doubts that any negotiating would help, but he had too many lives depending on him to refuse the suggestion. "That's a real generous offer," he said. "I owe you."

"On the contrary, my friend," Mr. Victor replied. "I owe you. I owe you a great deal."

The sword was black and it gleamed with the brilliant electron radiance of the matrix. It appeared in Piper's hand as if out of thin air and moved with the mercurial speed of thought.

The gray-armored warrior icon before her lifted its massive battle axe even as her sword slashed through the axe's shaft, and then whirled, finding a chink in the icon's armor and slicing through, piercing the icon, which dissolved into a cloud of fading silvery pixels.

A small, bitter victory over blaster IC. Piper released her sword, allowing it to vanish into the nothingness of inactive memory. The walls of the node around her pulsed red. The system, she knew, was going on active alert. There was no point in even attempting to continue. She'd be lucky just to get out alive.

Now, from further up the corridor, came a pack of killer IC in the form of burning orange wolves. They charged, snarling, fangs flashing. Piper hurled a handful of gleaming black stars at the beasts, then turned and ran.

The race was on. Barrier IC like massive portals- glaring with electron fury-crashed down to block the corridor only milliseconds behind her. If she faltered, if she slowed her pace by even half a step she would be trapped, sealed into the consensual hallucination of the system construct and as good as dead.

She was in the Gauntlet, the maze of nodes and subsystems surrounding the mainframes of Fuchi's Manhattan cluster, which had been designed to protect its most vital elements. The CPUs lay at the cluster's heart, surrounded by data stores, immersed in the sea of subprocessors and slaves that served not only the cluster's data operations but the whole of the Fuchi complex, the Black Towers of Fuchi-town, located in lower Manhattan.

A blazing orange portal slammed down two steps ahead of her. She tugged a small fan from her sleeve, snapped it open and dove, thrusting the open fan out before her.

The portal parted like a ripe banana, splitting down the middle.

Jacking out was not an option. It was too late for that. In the time it would take her flesh and blood fingers to hit the Disconnect key or to wrench the datajack from her temple, she would be caught, traced, and brain-fried by nanosecond-swift IC.

In the next System Access Node waited a red and yellow clown. The icon for a smartframe or perhaps a Fuchi decker. Piper had met the clown icon before. The big sunflower on its chest fired acid IC. The big white custard pie in its hand worked like a trace and burn program. Piper hurled a handful of marbles. In mid-flight, the marbles swelled into silvery globes. As the clown moved to evade, the globes flew into orbit around it, immobilizing the icon with a dazzling storm of red and green program code.

The clown's blazing orange hair stood up on end.

I Piper slammed through the node and streaked out across the Manhattan telecommunications grid, free of the Fuchi cluster. The cluster's icon dominated the grid representing lower Manhattan, its form that of an enormous, five-pointed black star, slowly rotating, surmounted by a gigantic tower with five distinct facets, like the facets of a diamond. There was no more dangerous icon in the grid.

She fired herself into the electron-gridded darkness above, seeking the SAN to the regional grid. That led her to the Newark grid and back to where she had begun, and to her original fears and doubts.

Going up against Fuchi, even a subsidiary like Multitronics, was madness. It would make the run against Maas Intertech seem like a stroll through a sunlit meadow. Only a ramjamming neophyte would even consider it, and only because little baby deckers had no conception of the power contained in the Fuchi cluster. They thought sheer enthusiasm, combined with a knack for program code, would see them through anything. It didn't work that way. Piper knew. She had seen with her own electron-surrogate eyes what happened inside the Black Towers. She had heard the screams of deckers who tried to sleaze one too many Watchers or play smoke and mirrors with killer IC one too many times. She had breathed the malodorous fumes from a Mona Lisa jammer hit by so much lethal feedback that the decker's brain began to boil and pour out through her eyes.

If not for Rico, Piper wouldn't even have considered going up against Fuchi. Her lover left her no choice.

They had to do right, never mind that it might get them all killed. It wasn't enough to just turn and walk away, let Surikov do as he would. They had taken "responsibility" for Surikov. They had to see him safely to whatever corporate home he wanted. They had to make contact with the appropriate corporate agent. They had to cut a deal. And even that wasn't enough. They had to get Surikov's wife, too, or the man would remain a pawn of the megacorps.

A man with Rico's convictions didn't belong in the Sixth World. Piper only wished there was some finer' place where they could go, a place where doing right wouldn't get them killed.

Fuchi had developed the first desktop cyberdeck, the first neural interface. The corp had all but *written* the matrix out of whole code. Fuchi's advances in intrusion countermeasures had few rivals, and no real equals. Sleazing anything out of its cluster of mainframe computers was going to take miracle work. Surviving the run would require intervention by the gods.

A direct confrontation with the cluster's awesome mainframes would only get her killed. She had to find another way.

She shot herself into Saganville, the heart of the Newark grid. Here, the gleaming white pyramids of system constructs, thousands upon thousands of them, crammed the datalines and rose a thousand levels into the electron night. Amid this megalopolis of constructs, Piper found a particular network address and pushed her signal inside.

Her iconic self stepped into silent darkness. Scents like sulfur and methane wafted past her. A voice, immeasurably deep and resonant, like the voice of a god, *demanded*, "*WHO ARE YOU?*"

Piper replied, "I am Arielle of Avalon."

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

"I want information."

"YOU WON'T GET IT!"

"By hook or by crook, I shall."

"Oh, really? Well, maybe you will. Then again, maybe you *woo-OOOONNNNNNNNTTTttttt!!!*"

The final word rose suddenly into a cry, then a long, drawn-out scream that faded slowly away. As the scream faded, the voices of a thousand crows arose chattering, rasping, and ranting, raucously laughing.

The darkness before her resolved into a rickety bridge of vines and wooden slats just wide enough for one person to cross alone. The bridge spanned an immense crevasse, infinitely deep and filled with a boiling sea of fire. Piper took hold of the viny guide-ropes at waist-height and began walking across the bridge. Abruptly, the vines parted and the bridge swung downward toward the roaring flames. Piper pulled a knotted cord from around her waist and hurled one end toward the far side of the crevasse. The hook on the end of the cord caught on a rocky prominence. Hand over hand, Piper pulled herself up.

Beyond the cliff-edge of the crevasse was a forest, shining darkly with menace. From the stunted,

twisted trees, gnarled like monstrous creatures, hung the skeletal remains of those who had come before her, the persona icons of the doomed. Immense black birds chattered from the tree limbs and pecked at the tattered remains of the skeletons. A hideous smell like corruption hung heavy in the air. A thick grayish fog flowed slowly along the ground. Piper considered how to proceed.

Many paths led into this horrific electron forest. Danger lurked everywhere, in the trunk of a tree, in the stagnant waters of a malignant bubbling pool, in the huge black figures that loomed everywhere in the darkness, in things unseen, rustling softly through the undergrowth. Disease and death seemed to flow through the air and along the ground just as tangibly as the fog.

Piper found her way to a small thatched hut with a single rounded opening. She ducked her head down and stepped inside. The interior of the hut was gloomy. A small fire flickered at the center of the hard-packed floor. Smoke curled through the air. On the far side of the fire sat a dark figure wrapped in a ragged cloak and hood. This, Piper knew, was the icon of a decker known as Azrael. No one knew his real name.

Back in 2029, a virus of unprecedented power had swept through the world's computer systems, scrambling data and frying hardware. To fight the plague, the government of what was then called the United States created a special top-secret group known as Echo Mirage. The team did eventually beat the virus, but few of the special cadre survived with their sanity intact. They were deckers at a time when a direct neural interface produced sensory overload, and, often, incurable psychosis.

Azrael was reputed to be one of the few to survive Echo Mirage. If that was so, if he really had been with the project, he had not survived the ordeal unscathed. No program he wrote was without eccentricities, and he had a maniacal hatred of governments and corps that often seemed to surpass Piper's own.

"What is your quest?" he rasped.

"I seek information."

Azrael laughed and laughed, breathlessly and harsh, as raucously as the crows, then suddenly blurted, "I know this, woman. You said it once already. Am I deaf? Do you think I'm deaf? What is it you really want?"

"Personnel and security data from Fuchi Multitronics."

"You quest the Black Towers?" Azrael laughed again, uproariously, hysterically. He laughed till he wheezed for breath, then he leaned toward the fire, peering at Piper from under the black shadow of his hood. "You will die."

"I think not."

Azrael shouted, "No one has ever penetrated the Black Towers' security processor *and LIVED to TELL the TALE!*"

"That is untrue."

Azrael laughed again, then whispered, "Maybe you're right. Maybe not. Maybe I can help you. Maybe not. How much are you willing to pay?"

"What do you offer?"

"I have secret information, very secret. Many deckers have died trying to sleaze my secrets from me. How many have died? I can't remember. Many more have gone away wounded and bloody. I have unraveled a multitude. I have infected legions. I have dumped whole hordes. My code is great and my vengeance terrible. Terrible! What would you pay for the secret to the Black Towers? Tell me. What would you pay?"

"What do you offer?"

Azrael cackled, then rasped, "An access node that no one living has ever found. Special code that may make the difference between life and lethal feedback, specially attuned to the Black Towers' frequencies and security subroutines. A key, I offer you a key. Do you doubt it? No one has this key but I. Such secrets, such special code. What will you pay? Define your life in cred."

"What is your price?"

The price was high, as Piper had known it must be, and she had little with which to bargain.

They were somewhere in Sector 15. Shank had seen a sign a while ago that read "Scotch Plains", but he wasn't sure if that was a district name or a street name or what. He hadn't seen much besides that sign, a few trucks, some steel and ferrocete warehouses that looked abandoned, and fences. The fences were usually of the chain-link variety, three or four meters high, and topped by coiling razorwire nasty enough to discourage almost anybody. The only things Shank had seen inside those fences were piles of scrap, mountains of scrap: crete, steel, autos. And a helluva lot of junk.

Abruptly, Thorvin veered the van across three empty lanes of roadway and slowed them to a halt facing a chain-link gateway.

"What're we stopping here for?"

"Need some parts, you freaking frag."

"What for, halfer?"

"Gotta build something for Rico."

Shank looked again at the gates. The sign there in red and yellow. "That says 'toxic waste.'"

Thorvin snorted. "Don't believe everything you read, fanghead."

"Who says I can read, skankface?"

The gates swung open, the van rolled through.

Into a junkyard like the Grand Canyon.

Clad entirely in non-reflective black, Claude Jaeger moved through the darkness like a darker shade of night, a shadow, a ghost, perhaps a trick of the eye, an illusory image without form or substance, as silent as the night.

The place was in Sector 7, amid the jumble of streets between Stuyvesant and Grove, just over the line from center city. It was called "Meat City". The buildings were old and crammed together, with coffin hotels and cubies filling the side streets. Every kind of scalpel mechanic and medtech had an office or clinic here. Some of the docs were frauds, some dealt exclusively in transplants or contraband chrome. Few were legally licensed. Few cared if a person had any kind of SIN or if the implant a client desired was on the federal government's prohibited list.

This was also where a person came if they just couldn't live with that armor-piercing slug stuck under their ribs or if they wanted to trade body parts for money.

The alleys were lined with chipheads and other derelicts, human refuse, squatting in plastic shelters or just lying on the concrete ground, all short a couple of organs and any number of limbs. Corpses went into the ferrocrete Ditch of the Garden State Parkway. Black-clad sanitation crews swept the Ditch clean every day at dawn and dusk. Claude had good reason to know of that. The art of the physical adept often compelled him to contribute to the carnal chaff disposed of in the Ditch.

Tonight, though, he had other business. A small matter by which he would collect some nuyen. The nature of the business concerned him little, so long as it gave him the chance to express himself through his art.

The little night-glo red-on-white sign on the back alley wall, read, CyberDok: Top Chrome, Vat Organics, Primo Rates ...

This was the clinic and residence of John Dokter, former mercenary, and his friend, Fillecia Antonucci, ex-cop. Both were members of the team hired to bust out Ansell Surikov. That made them important. It might eventually make them dead. Precisely what happened depended on events, Claude knew, and on the wishes of Maurice's client, who had provided the data on John Dokter and the other runners.

Next to the small sign, a black metal door. After a pause, it slid aside, letting Claude step into the dark space beyond. The door slid shut behind him. Momentarily, the tall, gangly form of the mage Maurice came into view, coalescing as if out of the empty dark. "This way," Maurice said, pointing with his walking stick.

Doors opened before them. Claude sensed the magic Maurice used to defeat the mechanisms of locks, but didn't know or care about the spells. Such were the province of technicians.

Two stories up, they entered a room subtly lit like a birthing chamber, crammed with hi-tech equipment, a veritable jungle of cables and tubes, consoles, control panels, and numerous transparex tanks, both large and small, filled with discreetly bubbling fluids.

As Claude stepped forward, he saw clearly what hung inside the fluids of the transparex tanks: a human hand, an eye, a leg, a mass of tissue like blubber. Various internal organs. These would be cultured matrixes, bioclonal secondaries, and a potential source of DMA-matched replacement parts for John Dokter and Fillecia Antonucci, should they ever require replacement parts.

A remarkable achievement for a former mercenary. Claude had never seen a setup like this outside of a corporate lab. He could only guess at what all of it must have cost. It was, however, largely irrelevant as far as tonight's work was concerned.

Maurice tapped the keys of a comp terminal. With a soft gasp of air, a small rectangular port opened in the side of the gleaming metal container standing beside the comp terminal. On the tongue that slid out through the port was a metal disk, briefly awash with swirling vapors. Inside this disk, and the second that soon appeared, would be the original tissue samples from which the clonal matrixes had been grown.

Properly handled, and properly utilized in ritual sorcery, these samples would provide a material link to their original hosts.

And that suggested the point of tonight's business.

The meet came down in Sector 4, Newark International Airport. The heaviest security zone in the plex. You couldn't even get into the sector with a weapon unless you met the right guard at the right entrance with the right amount of nuyen. Rico put Filly onto that. She had contacts with the Port Authority cops, and she knew how to talk cop lingua and how to pass the cred.

Thorvin had the driver's seat, Filly the passenger side. Rico had the bench seat in back to himself. Piper, Dok, Shank, and Bandit were waiting back at the Rahway bolthole with Ansell Surikov. Every one of the six of them had agreed to go on with the job as Rico intended. Only Piper and Filly had raised any serious objections, and here was Filly riding shotgun and greasing palms to get them into the airport. Had simple loyalty bought that? Rico could hardly believe it. He had seen so much of the world's treachery that he had trouble believing that such loyalty even existed. Then again, he couldn't think of any other explanation.

It had seemed odd to him that the two women with the crew should be the ones to argue, to object the loudest and clearest to the madness he had in mind. Until he thought about it. Until he realized that most women he had known—even as a kid—seemed somehow more closely tied to life and living than any man could ever hope to be.

The van halted inside the short-term parking lot of the airport's extensive South Terminal complex. Two minutes later a gleaming black Toyota limo pulled up alongside them. "Weapons armed and locked on," Thorvin growled. "Say the word and I'll freaking shred—"

"We're here to deal," Rico said. "Not punch tickets."

The rear door of the limo swung open. Ravage, dressed tonight in a matte black bodysuit, stepped out first, followed by L. Kahn. Rico tugged open the side door of the van and stepped out to meet them. Filly stayed inside the van, but pushed open her door to show off her weapon, an Ingram 20t submachine gun. That was according to plan. Minimal exposure, ready for a fast breakaway.

The side of the van was barely two meters from the side of the limo. One step put Rico almost within an arm's length of Ravage and L. Kahn. If anyone did the wild thing at that range, people were going to get hurt. Rico gazed steadily at Ravage. Impenetrable black shades covered the violet pits of her eyes. Rico remembered those eyes very well. Here was a woman with ties only to death.

"I'm impressed," L. Kahn said flatly, his voice a monotone, "Your fixer has influence. Now that you've gotten me here, what have you to say?"

"We got a problem."

"I have no problems whatsoever. You have my package. Your next step is to move that package, as per my instructions."

"Wrong," Rico said. "That ain't the next step."

Ravage's head shifted just slightly, as if she were flicking a glance at L. Kahn from behind her black shades. Rico couldn't help the tension that suddenly shot through his gun arm. His nerves were jumping. L. Kahn remained impassive, icy. He said, "I suggest that you explain."

Rico nodded, slowly, and said, "The man wants assurances. -He wants to know where he's going."

"That is irrelevant," L. Kahn replied. "You were informed that this job is a recovery. I'm sure that by now you've confirmed the background history I provided, so you're well aware of where the subject was employed prior to being kidnapped by the competition. Need I say more? Do the math. Have the subject do the math himself and he'll see quite plainly where he's going."

"That ain't good enough. The man wants proof."

"What sort of proof would he like? A banner hung over Manhattan? A notice on the newsnets? This is absurd. You're scamming for more money."

Rico clenched his teeth. "Money's got nothing to do with it, *hombre*. The man wants direct communication with his old boss. He wants the word direct. Proof positive."

L. Kahn's expression seemed to harden. "That is impossible. As you well know."

"That's what the slag wants."

"At our first meeting, you accused me of playing dangerous games. I now say the same to you. The price for the run is fixed. If you bargain any further, you're bargaining for your life. And you will lose the negotiations. That is a promise."

This was going nowhere. Rico saw that clearly. L. Kahn had as much as told him that Surikov was bound for Fuchi Multitronics. But that was as much as he'd get. No one would provide proof. That might serve as incriminating evidence should anything go wrong.

This was the Sixth World. Image was everything.

"The other problem is time," Rico said. "The heat's on. I got the man in a safe place. I don't wanna move him till the sec forces're off the street."

"You find corporate posturing, intimidating."

"Maybe you want me to spit on you again."

Ravage tensed visibly.

L. Kahn lifted a hand, as if to hold her in check. To Rico, he said, "I'm prepared to accord you a degree of latitude on the basis of your connections and your reputation. You're now pushing at the limits of my patience. I will admit that the safety of the package is paramount. If you want time, I will grant it. Twelve hours. By the end of that period, the streets should be clear of corporate forces. That is when we will conclude our business. There will be no further delays. Do you understand?"

"I got it, amigo."

"Very good."

L. Kahn got back inside the limo. Rico waited, watching Ravage. The cutter shifted half a step toward him but Rico had his Predator II hi hand, the red dot of a targeting sight centered on Ravage's chest before she could finish the movement.

"Be seeing you," she whispered.

Rico bared his teeth in a grin.

The atmosphere inside the Command & Control vehicle was hushed. Colonel Butler Yates stood at the head of the control section in the rear of the vehicle. He had been there almost twenty minutes, silent and glaring, rapping his swagger stick against his leg, as if to remind everyone of his presence.

Doubtless, he also stood there to remind everyone that the Executive Action Brigade could not afford another frag-up. They had lost track of their targets twice already. A third such incident would likely cost them their contract.

Bobbie Jo felt the pressure intensely. She sat facing her console with a face like stone, but no amount of will or attempt at self-control could stop the sweat from trickling under her arms or from making her hands greasy and slick. The loss of the reece drone during the runners' escape from Mott Street had cost the brigade a small fortune, and the emotional cost to her had still not been tallied. The spiraling dive of the drone had brought her back in an instant to a cloudless day over Tampico in what had then been called Mexico. A heat-seeking missile slammed through her tail. What was left of her Federated-Boeing Eagle went ballistic, spiraling down at Mach Two into an Aztlan oil refinery.

Her legs, like her ride, like the whole damn government of Mexico, were broken to bits and burned almost to ashes. She might have gotten new legs but for the damage to her spine and connecting nerves. The price tag for complete reconstructive surgery was almost beyond comprehension.

If she could just stick with the Brigade long enough, two more years, maybe three, she might manage to get the ante together.

She jerked when a hand touched her shoulder.

"Stand by for launch," Skip said, quietly.

Bobbie Jo nodded, wiped her hands on her blue Brigade jumpsuit for the twentieth time, then lifted the wire lead from her console to the datajack in her temple.

Jacking into the sensor feed of a Gaz-Niki GNRD-101 Scorpion struck Bobbie Jo like the thought of flying an Eagle blind. It scared the drek out of her. Suddenly she saw the world from about five centimeters above the ground. She could see left and right and straight ahead, and up, but nothing to her rear unless she turned her body to look. Her body had become articulated, and long and flat, with four sets of spidery legs, two multi-functional manipulator arms that looked a lot like pincers, and a tail, a sort of stinger, with special integral devices. She could hear a Brigade operative whispering, "Ground Nine in position," from somewhere behind her, but most of all she could feel the vibrations running through the ground, the passing near and far of hundreds of vehicles and perhaps thousands and thousands of people, all moving through the South Terminal of Newark International.

Any one of these people could crush her articulated body beneath their heels. The Scorpion was not built to take punishment. It had no weapons and no armor. It was about thirty centimeters long.

Defenseless. Impotent.

"Go, Bobbie Jo," Skip was murmuring into her ears. "Do it."

She scuttled forward, pushing the Scorpion to max. The wheel of a Mitsubishi Runabout seemed to loom up ten stories higher than her head. The chassis of the car, now passing over her, looked like the ceiling of some immense chamber, criss-crossed by massive supports and gigantic conduits and pipes.

The red winking blip of a target indicator kept drawing her ahead, from one car to the next, one row of parked cars to another. She wrenched herself aside when an enormous pair of human feet suddenly

slammed to the ground directly ahead of her. She raced back into the shelter beneath a car when a turbocharged Westwind 2000 came bearing down on her at lightning speed. She hesitated only an instant when a gleaming red schematic overlay flashed in front of her sensor view, outlining the mottled black and dull green Landrover van before her.

Two meters more and she was under the runners' van-fast as a devil rat. Her audio pickup snatched voices out of the air, first, the runner's leader, then the fixer L. Kahn, saying, "... the streets should be clear of corporate forces. That is when we will conclude our business. There will be no further delays. Do you understand?"

"I got it, amigo."

A beeping sounded rapidly in her ears. Her target indicator soared to the underside of the van. She flicked her segmented tail upward, thrusting up high on her hind legs. The tip of her tail twitched, just once. The dab of cyanoacrylate glue that spat from her tail stuck to the chassis of the van and hardened instantaneously. The micro-miniaturized transponder injected into the glue would be virtually undetectable until commanded to awaken.

Then, with a single burst, it would transmit the van's location to within a centimeter or two.

The sleeper planted, Bobbie Jo scuttled quickly away.

18

"Two, come with me please."

Shank looked up. "Huh?"

"We're taking a ride."

The small group gathered in the bolthole's living room-Shank, Dok, Bandit, and Ansell Surikov-looked at her as if puzzled, but Piper didn't wait for anyone to ask more questions. She had her kevlar-insulated jacket, her deck, and an Ares Model 70 Lite Fire automatic should she need it, and she wasn't going to give herself a moment to back out. She took the stairs to the sublevel garage. A battered Volkswagen Superkombi waited there, die backup vehicle. Taking it out and leaving Dok and Bandit stranded here with Surikov would light Rico's short fuse, but that was too bad. Sometimes Piper also had to do what she had to do. She got into the van and waited. Shank came along in a couple of moments.

"What's tox?" he asked gruffly, cramming himself in behind the wheel.

"We're going to the jackzone."

"Not the fragging Stacks."

Piper nodded.

"Rico ain't gonna like this."

As if she needed to be reminded ... "Please do not argue with me, Shank."

"You're making a datarun, right?"

"I have no choice."

Programs degraded, code was unraveled, secrets revealed. Fuchi I.E. had a corps of deckers who did little else but scan their cluster of mainframes for intruders, security flaws, and other weaknesses. System integrity specialists, they were called. By this time tomorrow night, the code Piper had gotten from Azrael might be useless. She had to use it now, and she couldn't risk making the run on Fuchi from their bolthole here in Rahway, Sector 13.

Technically, she shouldn't have probed the Fuchi cluster like she had earlier this evening. If she'd been traced, it would have been very bad. She had taken a calculated risk.

Shank started the van and got them through the fog and the dark and the swirling dust storms to Edgar Road. That took them straight into Sector 10, a place people called "the Stacks" because it was the heaviest commercial and industrial concentration in the Newark plex. There were also more telecom lines planted here than anywhere else in the plex, and traffic was intense. For deckers, this was the "jackzone" of choice. A crowded local telecommunications grid might confuse a pursuing corporate decker or some trace and burn IC just long enough for a datarunner to get clear. It also provided multiple opportunities for illegal taps. The few people who actually lived in the Stacks occupied small rooms crammed into the rear of commercial plants or in factory lofts.

Only a fool would live anywhere near the matrix address from which they started a run. That would be like requesting an armed assault from an organization like Daisaka Security.

Shank turned the van down Ripley Place. That was little more than a hundred meters from the New Jersey Transit yards and Port Elizabeth. The rumbling vibrations of trains and the stench from the port were as depressing as the litter-strewn roadway and grimy, decaying buildings running down either side of the street.

Down near the corner with Second Street stood a building with a ground-floor bar called Aulio's Backroom. Shank parked the van at the curb, then followed Piper inside.

A narrow corridor led toward the back of the building and the dingy little "Backroom," which was filled with the usual collection of scuzboys and punks sporting the usual gutterpunk fashions. The slag behind the bar wore mirrorshades and a turban and only glanced at Piper and her heavily built companion as they moved past the end of the bar and through another door.

Two flights up, Piper put a wire-lead from her deck to the electronic lock on a door. The lock was jacked into a Sony cyberdeck on the other side of the door. Breaking the Sony's encryption program and the code locking the lock would take a mainframe comp skilled in large-number theory. Her Excalibur inserted an electron key that cycled the lock open in about three milliseconds.

And that was what it was really all about: keys. Another name for information. With information came power. Ignorance brought only misery and death. That was why the world's megacorps took such pains to educate their minions properly, and in the proper corporate creeds. To retain their stranglehold on the Earth's millions, they must keep their iron grip on all the information that mattered.

Piper grunted, and pushed through the door. The room beyond was small and bare. An old recliner sat near a Fujiki telecom. A sleeping bag and pillow lay along one wall. A garbage can overflowed with waste from a dozen or more Staffer Shack meals. Piper kept nothing important here because this place was expendable, and necessarily so.

Shank secured the door. Piper took a seat in the recliner and jacked in. She hesitated only a moment before initializing the cyberprog in her deck, just long enough to say, "If anything happens... tell *jefe* I was thinking of him. Only of him."

Shank grunted. "You sure this is a good idea?"

"There is no option."

Then she was sluicing down the datalines, slipping quietly from grid to grid under the guise of ordinary, low-priority E-mail. Taking the long way to the Manhattan telecommunications grid might cost her a little time, but she preferred to get there discreetly, unobserved, unnoticed. The moment the Black Towers of the Fuchi icon came into sight, she turned aside and entered a small white pyramid, just one of thousands on the Manhattan LTG.

The words "Village Plumbing" flashed in front of her eyes.

Then she was standing in a small electric-white room facing a sculptured dataline. The portal into the open line resembled an enormous skull with gaping jaws. Piper initialized the prog she'd gotten from Azrael. A chartreuse skateboard appeared on the floor before her. The board blazed with the logo: Echo Mirage Express. Her iconic self suddenly exchanged its kimono for boarder gear: helmet, gloves, elbow guards, knee guards, hi-top sneaks. A flashing red and yellow sign appeared before the skull portal to the dataline, reading, "This Way to Fuchi Hell."

She stepped on the board and shot through the skull portal. The skateboard accelerated like a jet, the dataline beyond whipped back and forth like a snake. Sheer velocity tore at her clothes and forced her to lean forward almost horizontally just to keep from being blown off the board.

Abruptly, the dataline ended, the board vanished, her kimono returned, and she was plunging into a gigantic cavern of gray metal shapes and glaring, harsh red light.

Fuchi Hell.

She ripped a cord from around her waist and hurled the weighted end up and around to her rear. The weight caught on something, a pipe. The cord stopped her fall with a jerk. She swung back and banged against a wall of metal, then just hung there, taking in her surroundings. It was like hanging over the abyss, looking into the heart of some industrial monstrosity. The air smelled of molten metal. Enormous furnaces throbbed somewhere far below. Pipes and conduits ran everywhere. Spectral lights flickered and flashed. All the scene needed to complete the hellish image were blazing fires and the moans and cries of tormented souls. Piper could hear those cries in her mind. They were the cries of the millions that corps like Fuchi doomed to miserable lives and wretched deaths.

Hand-over-hand, she pulled herself up, up, up to a gangway sided by a metal railing.

There, she discovered a huge iconic figure in a black hood and long robe with long, full sleeves. The figure arose from the gangway as if from out of a pool of liquid metal. The small red window in the figure's iconic chest winked in alternating sequence, in black, "Mysterious Stranger Smartframe. Beware."

"What do you know of Fuchi Hell?" the figure said.

Very mysterious. Piper resisted a sarcastic sneer, then considered the question, warily. "It's an echo. Like a mirage." '

"Reflecting greater realities."

"Apparently."

The Mysterious Stranger Smartframe nodded, and suddenly drew forth a sword more than two meters long, styled like a scimitar, and inscribed with mystical symbols in winking gold. "Follow."

"Lead."

The Stranger turned and led along the gangway, which led to an elevator, which shot up a thousand stories or more in just milliseconds. The elevator doors opened on a gleaming yellow room filled with row upon row of dataterms and dataterm operators extending off into infinity. "The Central Communications Node," said the Stranger. The elevator shot up another thousand stories. The doors opened on another room filled with rows of dataterms and operators, all orange. "The Central Management Information Node," said the Stranger. The elevator shot up further. Another room, this one red. "The Central Security Node."

Piper frowned. "You're showing me some of the most seriously secured nodes in the Fuchi cluster."

The Mysterious Stranger nodded. "You're welcome."

19

"It was *too ... easy ...*" Piper said, not for the first time, emphasizing the words profusely. "I can't help feeling like we're doing exactly what someone wants us to do."

Rico took a long drag off his cheroot, then looked back to the mirror and went on shaving three days' growth of beard from around his heavy mustache. "You're right," he said. "We are doing what somebody wants. His name is Surikov."

"That isn't what I mean."

"We're doing everything we can think of to stay alive. What else can we do? We're locked in."

"This is Fuchi we're talking about."

Rico put the razor down on the sink, then slammed his fist into the mirrored face of the medicine cabinet. That wasn't enough, so he hit it again. He dented the metal cabinet door, he shattered the mirror, he cut the frag out of his hand. But he didn't care about any of that. Right at this moment, he didn't care much about Fuchi or Piper's instinct about her run into the Fuchi cluster. When he looked at Piper it was to see her standing in the bathroom doorway with her eyes pointed at the floor and her face a pinkish color. That he cared about. He'd finally gotten through to her. He'd stood here and listened to all her explanations and now it was his turn to talk.

"You coulda been dusted," he said. "You coulda been traced. You coulda got Shank killed, too. You both coulda been nailed by Daisaka and interrogated, and then we'd all be dead."

"Please excuse me," Piper murmured.

"This, is supposed to be a team. I'm supposed to be able to trust you." The thought that he ought to be able to trust her more than anyone else on earth burned him enough to strike another match under his temper. He punched the medicine cabinet again. Hard. Piper's face went deep red, but it wasn't anger. It was shame, embarrassment. Rico had seen the color before. He hated himself for forcing her to it, but he couldn't help it.

"You're right," she said softly. "I betrayed your trust. The shame is mine. All mine. I'm very sorry."

"Dammit, I care about you."

"I'm not worthy."

Rico looked at the shattered mirror, but his anger drained away to nothing. "You shouldn't 'a gone off on your own. You shoulda waited for me. We shoulda had a plan. We shoulda *thought* about it. You *ka!*"

"Yes, I understand. Please forgive me."

Reality was harsh. Maybe Piper was on her own when she went into the matrix. That was irrelevant. If they didn't work as a team, they were dead. The world was too dangerous a place for any one person to see all the angles, even those involving just the matrix. You had to stop and think. You had to get other perspectives, other input. You had to think it through all the way, not once, but twice, and all the while stay aware that there was a larger world that might, maybe just by accident, get directly between you and what you wanted.

Rico took a deep drag off his cheroot then clenched his teeth and began picking broken bits of mirror out of his hand.

"You got lucky," he said.

"Yes, you're right." Piper agreed.

Twenty minutes later, Piper had no choice but to swallow her shame and get on with biz. She'd been prepared for this: Rico's anger, her own responses. "Inevitable" was the operative term. She had not dared allow time to degrade the prog that had been her key into the Fuchi cluster. That meant no time to plan, as Rico said. No time to consult, no time for considering other options, no time for what might have been a last

good-bye. She was quite certain that what had angered Rico the most was that last, no good-bye. It was like a betrayal of love. The semblance of betrayal was only superficial, but that did not mitigate the shame she felt. They joined the rest of the team in the living room.

Fortunately, no one asked about the loud banging in the bathroom or what might have caused Rico to cut his hand so badly. That would have been unbearable. Piper jacked her deck into the trid, then used the large screen to display the data she had snatched from the Fuchi mainframes. She had background data, building schematics, security procs and assessments, everything they would need to bust Ansell Surikov's wife out of Fuchi's clutches.

The woman's name was Marena Farris, and Fuchi had a complete file on her. She had originally been an analyst with the Fuchi security unit charged with reviewing corporate personnel.

"That's how we first met, in point of fact," Surikov remarked. "Marena conducted my annual review, perhaps three, four years ago. It was rather a foolish affair, actually. How was I getting on with my staff? That sort of thing. We got to talking, and, well ..."

They were soon married. Surikov claimed that Farris had come to despise Fuchi, its labyrinthine security regulations, the Byzantine corporate structure, and the paranoia all that inspired. Farris took the unusual step of going on indefinite leave so that she would be able to spend time with Surikov whenever he was out of his labs. Piper supposed that if a woman cared enough for a man, she might give up almost anything to better promote their mutual happiness.

Farris lived in a luxury condo tower on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The building was owned by Fuchi, but used primarily by execs and other employees of Fuchi subsidiaries. Security was tight.

No matter. They began developing a plan.

In the dark of the bedroom, Rico capped off a bottle of Nutrimax tonic water and leaned back against the headboard of the bed. With his Jikku eyes, he watched Piper grope around at the side of the bed, then slip carefully under the covers. Her face was a grayish mask. She turned her back to lie on her side.

Rico reached out to smooth a hand over her hair.

"You're still angry with me," she said softly.

"Maybe," Rico admitted. "But tomorrow we might be dead meat."

"Yes ... you're right. Please excuse me."

A moment passed, then she turned toward him and snuggled in against his side, laying her head on his chest. Rico ran his hand over her hair some more. It was smooth and soft like silk. "I don't wanna lose you," he said. "That's why I got so burned."

"You were right," Piper whispered. "I was wrong. I'm so ashamed."

"It couldn't be helped."

"*Jefe*, I don't know ..."

It wasn't worth worrying about, not now. "L Kahn ain't gonna be too happy when we give him the news."

"That is true."

"I don't know about this one, chica. I didn't like it from the start. Maybe it's like you said. We're just doing what somebody wants."

"We can think about that tomorrow."

"Sure. Tomorrow."

The van rushed down the transitway, shifting lanes, veering from side to side, bypassing other traffic. Rico glanced to his rear for about the fourth or fifth time, finding it hard to keep his mind where it oughta be.

Piper shared the rear bench with Shank, but she didn't seem any more aware of him than anyone or anything else. She had her axe in her lap, her head down-turned. Her long, curling black hair had slid in front of her shoulders, obscuring her face. She was past yesterday's trouble, the embarrassment he'd caused. Probably, she was praying. Talking to the kami again. Rico wished that didn't make him so uneasy. There had been a time, before he met Piper, when no one he knew paid any heed to gods till death was right around the corner, staring them in the face.

He'd known Piper for almost five years now and he still wasn't used to her praying.

Getting old. Obsolete? Maybe he'd been born that way. A couple of centuries too late. Into a world where honor meant nothing and a man's pride could be measured by the caliber of his gun. He figured he had some life left in him, regardless. Never mind what that slitch Ravage said.

"This gonna be a charity job, bossman?" Shank said gruffly. "Or we gonna get paid?"

"We'll get paid," Rico replied, lowly.

Shank and the team would get all they were due, and not just their share of the up-front money, even if

Rico had to reach into his own pockets. Right now, the money was the least of his concerns.

Staying alive, at least a step ahead of the opposition, was the number one priority. After that came money. Somewhere in between staying alive and getting paid came his personal resolve to do what had to be done, find Surikov a new home, get the slag's wife busted out so that neither of them would be trapped in the ferrocrete fist of their corporate overlords. Rico just thanked his luck that he had a team he could rely on. Otherwise, everything went to scag, right out the window.

The transitway surfaced into Sector 10.

Time to get serious.

20

The slag in the elaborate red uniform frowned in puzzlement as Filly and Rico got out of the big blue and white sedan and moved across the sidewalk toward him. Filly didn't know his name, but she sized him up at a glance. Doorman. Very decorative but probably not a threat to anybody. Maybe a little basic training in security procedures, such as how to call for help when something bad came down.

Filly motioned at him with her chin. "Security super."

"Right inside," the doorman replied, waving a thumb at the transpex-fronted lobby of Forty East Seventy-third. "What's the name?"

"Rasheen. Mo."

"Thanks."

The doorman smiled and nodded and put his key to the lock that set the double transpex doors to the lobby sliding open. Filly stepped on inside, Rico at her right. She took the lead because she knew the drill. She'd spent nine years on patrol with Winter Systems in the Bronx. She knew the procs, the lingua, and most importantly the attitude-casual, matter-of-fact, like she had every right to do whatever the hell she was doing and there was no fragging question about it.

The lobby was big and open, a dunkfield worth of carpeting, small gardens in the corners. A broad, semicircular counter sat at the rear of the space. The slag seated behind it wore the dark gray uniform of Fargo Security. He smiled and stood up as Filly and Rico approached. From his position at the security desk, the guard could have no trouble seeing the sedan at curbside, marked for the NYPD, Inc., or the matching uniforms worn by Rico and Filly.

"Hoi, chummers," the guard said, still smiling.

"You Rasheen?" Filly inquired.

"Yes, that is right. I am called Mo. Is there something for which I can help you officers?"

"Got a little problem," Rico said, as Filly walked around to the rear of the security counter.

"I am very sorry to be hearing that," Rasheen said, glancing back and forth. "How can I be helping you, please?"

The rear of the security counter was one big console equipped with monitor screens, two keyboards, and a suite of other controls. Those controls had complete override authority for the street doors to the lobby and the lobby doors to the elevators. No one got through the lobby unless the guard here tapped the appropriate key. Piper could commandeer the console from the matrix, but that wouldn't stop Rasheen here from calling a security alert.

Every guard on site carried a radio. Rasheen had a portable right on his console. Also, Fuchi internal security had assigned a special detail to watch over Surikov's wife up on the thirty-fifth floor. That detail would go on full alert if they caught even a whisper of strange things happening. One radio call about a malfunctioning security console would do it.

Filly stepped up beside Rasheen, and "said, "Turn and face the wall."

"We got a warrant," Rico said.

Rasheen went wide-eyed. "I am begging your pardon-"

"Do it *NOW* Filly ordered.

"Please explaining to me-!"

Filly grabbed Rasheen's arm and twisted it. That made him turn to face the wall or lose the arm. Rasheen turned. Rico came around and relieved Rasheen of his sidearm and various defensive weapons. Filly forced Rasheen down to his knees and applied handcuffs.

"You must be erroneously arresting me!"

"I don't think so."

"Please letting me call my director!"

Rasheen would not be calling anybody.

The building at Forty East Seventy-third Street on Manhattan's Upper East Side was called the Crystal

Blossom Condominiums. The mainframe running the building's utilities and monitoring security functions was a Fuchi machine, but had only the most tenuous of connections with the machines installed in the Black Towers of Fuchi-Town. It was operated by the Manhattan Property Management Corporation, a Fuchi subsidiary. Code Orange security. That was tough, but not nearly as tough as the Black Towers' Code Red cluster.

The System Access Node to the Crystal Blossom mainframe looked like the anteroom to a bank vault. The iconic room was gray, the vault door gold. This was standard matrix imagery and it indicated little or nothing about the security status of the system beyond.

Piper entered the node with her masking utility on-line. The guards in their sky blue Fuchi blazers didn't react at all to her presence. From inside her jacket, Piper drew out a huge magnifying glass and examined the guards' program code. The guards-mere access IC-still did not react. Piper drew out a pair of glowing red and green lollipops the size of tennis rackets, each winking with the legend, in orange, ENTRY REQUEST. She held the pops out to the guards, and now they noticed her. They looked at the lollipops and accepted them. And began licking them.

They would continue licking forever-caught in a virtual loop.

Piper drew out a pouch, marked Movable Holes. The hole she selected took the form of a slim black disk whose diameter was about equal to the height of her iconic self. She slapped the disk against the vault door. READY began winking in neon red at the center of the disk. She stepped through-through the hole, through the vault door-and into the dataline beyond.

She had the entire Crystal Blossom system under her command in something just under a millisecond. It was more than just "too easy."

Kami save them. It seemed impossible.

The doorman started tapping on the transporex doors out front and lifted his hands as if to ask what was going on. The doors wouldn't respond to his key. That would be Piper's doing.

One of the elevators dinged, and a uniformed guard came walking into the lobby. He was dark-skinned like Rasheen and the look on his face immediately turned to shocked surprise.

"What is happening here?" he asked, voice lifting wildly up and down.

Rasheen blurted something in some foreign lingua.

The newcomer stopped, looking back and forth. "Why have you arresting my brother?"

"Come're," Filly said.

"Answer please!"

Something from the security console started bleeping. Filly let Rico worry about that. She stepped toward the newcomer, Rasheen's "brother." She laid a hand on the butt of her sidearm. Any normal corporate would take that as a hint and act accordingly. "Don't give us any trouble," she said adamantly. "Put your hands on the wall and shut up."

"You're not arresting me!"

The slag went for his gun.

Filly lunged forward, seized the guard's gun arm, and pounded a shock glove-covered fist into his face. That quickly, she had a full-scale brawl on her hands. The shock-glove treatment didn't seem to affect the fragger. She twisted his arm and slammed him back against the lobby's rear wall. The slag managed to tug his gun free of its holster. Rico stepped up on her left and rammed a fist into the guard's mid-section just as the gun detonated.

All this just to keep up appearances, the likeness of a legitimate arrest by police, to keep that special detail up on thirty-eight unawares.

The roar of the gun affected Filly like the peel of a siren. She felt the adrenaline surge even as Rico staggered back, turning half a circle. She went animal. She pummeled the guard. She slammed his elbow back against the lobby wall to maybe numb the gun arm, and then tugged the pistol out of his hand. She rode him down to the floor on his chest, dragged his arms behind his back, and applied a pair of cuffs.

Panting for breath.

Looking for Rico.

The bossman stood leaning against the rear of the security counter. He shook his head as if to clear it. A dark spot was forming around the tear in the thigh of his right pants leg.

Fragging great.

When the elevator doors slid open, Bandit had the spell waiting, held in the palm of his hand. He saw the lengthy corridor stretched out ahead of him and the two men in dark suits standing near a door on the right. Bandit opened his hand. A noise like an alley cat shrieking arose quick and raw from the distant end

of the corridor. The suits looked, and a pair of thumps sounded from Bandit's left and right. The thumps were from Shank and Dok's automatics. The bullets they fired were not lethal, but the pair of suits up the corridor slumped to the floor anyway.

Not dead. Just unconscious.

Shank and Dok hustled up the corridor. Bandit followed along at his own cautious pace. He saw nothing of any interest in the corridor. Shank motioned for him to hurry.

The door marked 35-8 slid open. Shank and Dok hustled inside, automatics thumping again. Bandit followed. A small, richly decorated foyer led into a luxurious living room. Another suit lay sprawled on the floor of the foyer. Bandit followed Shank and Dok into the living room, running his eyes around, taking in the wealthy furnishings: paintings, drapes, vases, bonsai, crystal goblets, deluxe trideo with simsense. All very deceptive. A mundane could probably live here for years and never realize that he or she was actually living in a crete and plastic coffin, all but cut off from the essential energies of the universe. A quiet exclamation came from another room. Nothing to worry about.

Bandit considered the situation, then took a small, velvety pouch from his duster pocket and laid it on an end table. The pouch contained the extracted essence of a number of herbs and roots used in ritual magic by mages. Bandit had once thought that the combined essences might prove valuable for him, but the expectation had turned out to be false. Useful perhaps for a mage, not for a shaman.

It would make for a fair exchange.

Steinberg was staring at some bowl game on the trid. Tsugaru looked sound asleep, sprawled on the sofa. Steva Karris glanced at her wrist chrono for the fifth time this hour and mentally began ticking off the seconds.

There was nothing more boring than sitting watch on some corporate property, especially one that never went out, never left her assigned corporate quarters, for chrissakes. Steva didn't know the woman's name, didn't even know if she had a name. It was like playing nightwatch for some out-of-the-way corporate facility of dubious interest to anyone. A big yawn. That wasn't to say that she wouldn't do her damndest to protect Fuchi corporate property. She'd just be a little more excited about it if she had some idea that she'd been posted to a job that made a difference.

Her wrist chrono dinged. She looked up as Devoe came up the hall from the bathroom. "You're on."

"So soon?"

Steva nodded toward the foyer. Devoe knew better than to argue. He straightened his suit and headed out.

Abruptly, he was back, whispering urgently, "Alert! Alert! Status five! Code Red!" -

Karris grabbed her Ingram SMG and lunged for the foyer, the others close behind.

Dok had met some wildly sculptured biffs in his time, but this one was the most outrageous he'd seen outside a Tomikon bordello. She was built for sex. Every curve shouted it.

Her name was Marena Farris. She was Ansell Surikov's wife. When the lights came on, she was lying there on her back on the broad black expanse of the bed. She wore some kind of sheer, silky nightgown that covered her to the ankles, but didn't hide a thing, not the rounded prominences of her breasts or even the broad, dark patches surrounding her nipples. Not even the part lower down, beneath her waist. Discreetly veiled in hair as fine as the whitish-blond masses surrounding her face.

She lifted her head. A soft exclamation slipped from her lips. She sat up, one hand rising as if to defend her eyes from the lights.

"We're busting you out," Shank announced.

Farris gasped and blurted, "What?"

The woman was obviously overawed. Who wouldn't be? Dok thought Awakened from a sound sleep by the sudden glare of the bedroom lights? met by a pair of slags in full battle gear? Dok smiled and said, "We're taking you to your husband. He's safe, okay? Don't wor-"

It was too much.

Abruptly, Farris' eyes rolled upward and she fell back on the bed, limp. Dok hurried over and broke out his medikit. Farris' vitals were running strong, remarkably strong for someone in a dead faint, but not so strong that any kind of incident seemed imminent.

Shank grunted. "You carry her."

"Someone'll bust my skull," Dok said, grinning.

"Do it anyway."

"Hai, commander."

"Eff you. Hurry up."

Dok put one knee on the bed and gathered the woman into his arms. She was no lightweight, but then the best-looking ones never were. No doubt his chummer Shank would agree. He only wished that he'd gone for the stage two muscle replacement at mat clinic in Johannesburg, the one with the specialist direct from Chiba City.

Then again ...

Maybe not.

As Shank led back through the condo toward the corridor, Piper's voice came to him over his headset. "Time is oh-two-twenty-four," she said. "Condition Two."

That wasn't good.

Condition Two: Somebody injured. It had to be Rico or Filly, or Piper woulda called Condition Three, and that woulda been panic time because it woulda meant that Thorvin and their ride outta here wouldn't be on schedule-or might not be coming at all. Shank stole a glance back over his shoulder. Dok had caught Piper's warning, judging by the look on his face. Shank gave the old mercenary signal for double-time, pumping his fist. Almost in sync, the two of them leaned forward into a quick jog.

In the living room, Shank stopped, incredulous. Bandit was standing there looking around like a reviewer from *Modern Condo*. Shank cursed. "You're supposed to be watching the corridor!"

The shaman just looked at him, his face as blank as a wall. They'd gone over this part of the plan a dozen times, and Bandit still didn't get it. Shank felt a sudden surge of anger. Slotting sonovabitch. Frag it anyway. No time for jacking around. Someone was blooded-they had to *move!*

He hustled through the foyer to the corridor door, then immediately jerked himself back into the foyer and clear of the doorway. A female voice carried in clear and loud from outside. "Fuchi security! Throw your weapons into the corridor! Come out with your hands up!"

Shank glanced at Dok, standing right there beside him, and said, "We could be in trouble."

Dok smiled. "Glad you noticed."

It was always difficult to keep in mind what the others wanted. They designed complicated plans with ends he sometimes found obscure. Bandit ran with Rico and the others because the runs often proved interesting in various ways, but he was not used to concerning himself with others' desires. He had his own way of seeing the world. He knew that few shared his view of things. He understood that most looked at life in ways that were either flawed or illusory.

Why should he watch the corridor? He had seen it once already. There was nothing there of interest. There was always the chance that something might occur there that might pose a danger, but he had never encountered a danger that he could not escape.

The problem, of course, was that the others lacked his ability.

Quickly now, he hurried after Shank and Dok. He heard someone shout about Fuchi security. Shank seemed uncertain, unsure of what was happening or what to do. "We could be in trouble," he said.

"Glad you noticed," Dok replied.

Bandit projected astrally, sized up the situation in the corridor, then stepped to the doorway, announcing loudly, "I surrender. Don't shoot. I'm coming out."

"Keep your hands UP!" a voice shouted.

Shank growled, but Bandit ignored that. One step more took him through the doorway and into the corridor. The two suits who had been out there before were still lying unconscious nearby. Four other suits had appeared. They were scattered about to the right of the doorway, crouching low like animals in anonymous gray skins, ready to pounce. Bandit supposed they were professionals. They certainly looked like they knew what they were doing. They all held guns. Submachine guns, in fact.

"FACE DOWN ON THE FLOOR!" one shouted.

Bandit nodded, merely to sign understanding. He also murmured words of power, the song of a spell, one of the first he had ever learned. The spell mounted and ignited the instant he finished pronouncing the final word. The suits' arms all suddenly leapt upward. The guns they held jerked free of their hands and sailed back over their shoulders. Snatched away by Raccoon's clever paw. The guns clattered to the floor some distance to the suits' rear. The suits, in that instant, seemed too astonished to do more than exclaim and look around. Bandit's second spell triggered automatically. The suits' pants jerked downward to around their ankles. Another of Raccoon's wily tricks. The guards jerked and swayed and stumbled around, now shouting in alarm, hobbled by their own pants.

Bandit turned and looked back.

Shank and Dok both opened fire from the doorway. The guards all staggered and fell.

They were just knocked unconscious.

Shank grabbed Marena Farris by the shoulders. Dok looked at him in wonder, then took a new hold around the woman's hips. Together, they ran for the elevators. The elevator doors slid open barely two steps ahead of them.

Rico and Filly were already there, guns drawn. Rico's pants leg was wet from about the middle of his thigh to almost his knee. "Got a bleeder!" Filly announced.

Bandit got on. The elevator went up.

Dok bent to look at Rico's leg.

Time is oh-two-twenty-seven," Piper informed over Shank's headset.

Farrah Moffit heard the helicopter and had a fair idea of what was going on, but she decided to do nothing about it.

It seemed like the only sensible course. She was keenly aware of both her deficiencies and her strengths, and she was no combat specialist. With only minimal training in self-defense, she lacked both the physical stamina and the instincts to meet a man or even a woman head-on in any kind of physical contest. She had only an elementary knowledge of firearms. She would be a fool to offer anything more than the most token of passive resistance.

In the meantime, she gathered information, what little she could discern with her head hanging, her hair fallen across her face, her eyes closed, her body limp.

Her supposed rescuers had apparently disposed of the special security detail assigned to watch her, and had done so in rapid order. That made them highly dangerous. But not insuperable. She knew at least one of them was wounded. One was an ork. She'd seen him in the bedroom, along with an Anglo mala with grayish, razor-cut hair. And there was at least one female with the group.

Farrah remembered being carried at a run, presumably down the corridor from her condominium, and then the sound of the elevator doors opening. The timing seemed a little too precise to be mere coincidence. Perhaps it wasn't sheer coincidence. Perhaps these runners had matrix support.

As the whoop-whoop-whoop from the helicopter rotors ascended in speed and volume, she wondered where these people were taking her, and then all at once the truth struck home.

She couldn't believe it.

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Dok had the bullet out even before the chopper finished crossing the Hudson River, the wound patched and dressed by the time they set down in the blighted wastes of Sector 13. One thing Dok knew was how to be fast. Rico was thankful for that.

"The tranq should keep the edge off the pain," Dok said. "It's a local. You might need something more to get to sleep."

Rico grimaced, and nodded. The fire in his right thigh had subsided into a dull ache, kind of like a bone bruise, menacing, but nowhere near as harsh. He could live with it. He didn't have much choice. Gun in hand, he limped across the nine or ten meters from the chopper to Thorvin's van, then waited for the rest of the crew to pile in. Marena Farris was awake and walking but acting more unconscious than not. She was clean, no implanted microtransmitters, no snitches—at least none that Dok could detect. The fact that they were all still alive and had made a clean break from the extraction site seemed to confirm that Farris was indeed as clean as Rico thought. Now, Dok and Filly wrapped Farris in an orange duster and together half-carried her into the van. Filly was sticking like glue to Dok. Probably a good idea.

Thorvin drove them to Sector 10 where they picked up Piper. She was good, null sheen. Then they took the long drive through the transitways up to the northern tip of the Newark plex, just across the line from the Passaic sprawl. The bolthole in Rahway had served its purpose, providing emergency backup and a chance for mem to regroup. Rico did not want the place found out. Time now to change locations.

Thorvin parked the van in a dingy alley between the backsides of two sets of three-story rowhouses in Sector 20, a district called North Caldwell. Rico knew it as a working-class ghetto, home to wage slaves and the less violence-prone of the SINless who dominated the Newark plex. It was also the site of their new safehouse. Shank had arranged for the squat through his contacts with the ork underground. It was a shambles, and it stank, but it would serve.

They were lucky to be alive, lucky the run had gone more or less as planned, lucky to have eluded the air patrols over Manhattan, lucky that no pursuit had developed. And that wasn't all, Rico reminded himself. He was lucky the bullet that hit his leg hadn't cracked a bone or torn any major arteries. Luck like that was rare enough to make him wonder about God, not only the Christian God, but other gods as well.

Looking forward to a few nights or weeks spent in a squalid whore of a safehouse was nothing to complain about.

Surikov was there and waiting. So were the pair of cutters on loan from Mr. Victor, assigned to stand guard. Rico paid them off and headed upstairs for a shower. He had no real interest in watching Surikov's reunion with his wife, and Shank could set the watch.

He'd barely gotten his shirt off before the bathroom door swung inward and Piper slipped inside. She didn't say anything at first. She came right to him, slid her arms around him, and put her head to his shoulder. He knew what this was about, and here in the confines of the bathroom, away from watchful eyes and people he had to lead, he didn't mind it at all. It was good to see she cared, good to feel it, know it. Rico's father used to say that a man without a woman was hardly a man at all. It took a woman's tenderness and caring for a man to really appreciate what being a man was all about. Without the kind of softness a woman could give, men turned into animals.

At a whisper, she said, "Are you sure you're all right?"

Despite everything, his leg, the situation, Rico smiled into her hair, giving her a kiss there. "I ain't complaining."

"You lost so much blood."

"Not that much. What happened hi the matrix?"

"Too easy, *jefe*." Now she looked up at him, her expression worried. "The Crystal Blossom mainframe is Code Orange security, but the IC never came near me. I took complete control of the system."

"Maybe you're just good at your work."

"No one's that good. Or not many. And no one goes against Code Orange without at least tickling the IC. Not unless someone on the inside wants it to happen that way."

Serious guano. Piper wasn't popping off theories just to hear herself talk. If she said that someone must've set up the system to give her easy access, Rico felt obliged to consider the possibility. "Who would want it that way?"

"I don't know, *jefe*."

It didn't scan. No one had any reason to help them bust out Marena Farris. Fuchi and Maas Intertech had every reason to work against them. Both would be losers if Surikov got what he wanted. Prometheus Engineering might conceivably have reason to help, but Prometheus couldn't be involved, not yet, because Mr. Victor was only just making contact.

So, who did that leave as possible players?

One thought came to mind. "What about your contact?" Rico said. "The slag who got you the key into the Fuchi computers? Maybe he was on the inside."

Piper shook her head. "He'd have no reason to help me now. Our deal began and ended with the Fuchi cluster. The Crystal Blossom mainframe isn't a part of that cluster, *jefe*."

"Maybe L. Kahn did something."

"But he wouldn't help us now," Piper said softly. "Even if he had known what we would do."

Rico nodded. Pain and fatigue had him brain-fuzzed. If anything, L. Kahn would be opposed to the bust-out of Marena Farris because once Farris was free, Surikov could forget Fuchi and join any corp he wanted.

"You should sleep, *amante*," Piper said.

Her Spanish always came out awkward, like she had to force her tongue to work in ways it really couldn't handle, but the effort waned him. Rico drew her head to his shoulder and kissed her, and took a breath to speak, but got no further.

From somewhere below came a sound like the thump of a silenced weapon, then a crash like a lamp being smashed, then shouts, Shank's resonant voice among them.

Piper jerked back out of the way as Rico turned and threw himself at the doorway. He grabbed up his gun in passing, not the Ares Special Service, the heavy Predator II, loaded with hard ammo. Any problem that had come to meet them here in the safe house would take hard ammo to put down.

The Predator's smartlink came on line at once. The targeting indicator whipped down the hall to the stairs as Rico darted through the bathroom doorway, dropping into a combat crouch, the heavy auto leveled in a two-handed grip. Nobody there. The problem was still one floor down.

When he reached the living room, he found Surikov sitting on the dilapidated sofa. Blood streamed down the left side of his head to his neck. Marena Farris stood squirming against the opposite wall, straining up on her toes, rasping, straining for breath. Shank had one big hand wrapped around her throat. Dok's face was red like it would pop. Thorvin and Shank together seemed to be trying to keep Dok from getting at

Farris, like he wanted to kill her.

"Fragging slitch! I'LL KILL YOU!"

Filly stood at the center of the room cursing furiously and dabbing with her hand at her cheek, which showed some blood, like from a cut. She was the only one in sight with a gun in her hand.

"The slitch grabbed my piece!" she said, forced to shout to be heard over Dok's near-incoherent cursing.

Rico couldn't fragging believe' it.

Any of it.

He threw an arm around Dok's neck, dragged him back bodily, and flung him down hard, then put the muzzle of the Predator in Dok's face and shouted, "*TLL DO YOU!*"

Everybody stopped dead.

And it stayed like that for a while, everybody hanging, waiting, watching. Rico had a rein on his temper, but it was a short one and they all knew it, including Dok. Rico waited till Dok's wide-eyed look of surprise and fury faded a little, then slowly straightened up.

Certain things had to be said, and they could only be said in his father's tongue. Never mind that only Shank and Dok had any understanding of Spanish that approached real fluency. The words had to come out. It was that or start shooting.

He let them have it

"Fragging amateurs," he growled, once he found his way back to English. "You wanna get us all killed? What the frag! *What the frag?*"

"Easy, bossman," Shank said quietly.

Rico let that pass.

It was too much, the sheer sequence of events, never mind the motivations. Never mind the how-come and the why.

Shank ran it down for him, anyway.

Apparently without warning, Marena Farris had clawed at Filly's face, then grabbed Filly's automatic, then fired it at Surikov. Farris hadn't seemed to know how to handle a pistol, so it was probably pure luck that she'd hit Surikov at all. While Shank was getting the gun away from her, Dok suddenly went off like a jet, which was the only part that made any sense.

Dok would boff anything with two legs and tits, but Filly was his special lady. The only one who really mattered. Man or woman, it made no difference-anybody who fragged with Filly was going to have to answer to Dok. Rico could respect that, but not now. In the here and now it was amateur drek and they couldn't afford it.

"Who's on watch?" he said sharply.

"I got the rear," Thorvin said, turning and walking out of the room. Rico turned and found Piper halfway down the stairs, just standing there watching, wide-eyed with shock.

"Take the front, chica."

Piper moved to the windows at the front of the room and slipped behind the heavy drapes without a moment's hesitation. Rico looked down at Dok.

"You got a patient."

Dok closed his eyes for a moment, like maybe he was holding back another fit of fury, then banged a hand to the floor before getting up and stepping over to Filly. Her little cut didn't look like a problem, nothing compared to Surikov's wound, but Rico said nothing. Going head to head with Dok over his lady would earn him nothing but trouble. You could only push people so far.

"You're okay otherwise?"

"Don't baby me, dammit."

Filly was in a fine mood herself. She had reason, Rico figured. Her frag-up could've gotten somebody killed. If she'd been doing her job, Marena Farris would never have gotten her gun.

Rule Number One: Never lower your guard.

Rule Number Two: See rule one.

Rico turned to Shank. "Put her upstairs. Watch 'er."

Shank nodded. "Right."

Marena Farris said nothing. She was too busy trying to breathe. When Shank let go of her neck, she slumped toward the floor like she had noodles for bones. Shank grabbed her left upper arm, pulled her back onto her feet, and half-carried her up the stairs. Rico would get to her shortly.

First things first.

Dok was checking Surikov by then. Head wounds always bled like pigs. Rico had seen enough of

them to know. The blood sometimes ran so heavy all over a person's face you couldn't tell a man from a woman. This one didn't look too bad. Dok soon confirmed his guess. "The shot glanced off," Dok said tersely. "Took some scalp with it. You'll live."

"It feels like a hammer," Surikov said at near a whisper.

"I got something for that."

"I want him awake," Rico said.

Dok hesitated, then said, "No problem."

Rico's leg was throbbing. It was probably more his own flaring of temper than anything else. Blood pressure, some drek like that. He found himself a chair and sat down facing Surikov. Dok stood up and said, "Look, boss ..."

"Don't say nothing," Rico growled. "You know the score."

"If that slitch-

"You do what you have to do. Just remember the score comes out even in the end. And you ain't gonna get me killed."

"Dok, Filly said. "Just chill."

"I'm not gonna let-!"

"We both fragged up! Let it go!"

Dok let it go. For the moment, anyway. Rico looked at Surikov. For a slag who'd just been shot in the head, he didn't look too bad. A little pale, a little shook up, a little bloody. A few moments passed, then Surikov met his gaze.

"What's your story?" Rico said.

"Excuse me?"

"What the frag's going on?"

"I don't... I don't have any idea." Surikov looked astonished.

"Your wife just tried to dust you." Rico looked at Dok. "She is his wife, right?"

Dok didn't answer.

"You checked her, right?"

Doc still said nothing, but the answer was obvious.

"You didn't verify her identity."

Filly cursed.

"Fragging Fuchi security was right there!" Dok exclaimed. "We didn't have time. We just grabbed her and ran."

"Do it now."

Dok turned and headed upstairs.

Rico had few doubts about what had happened, or what was happening here now. His team's weaknesses were showing.

The truth was that even an old pro like Dok could get sloppy, stupid. The kind of body Marena Farris owned would make a lot of slags get stupid, and Dok was one of them. Filly knew it, and Rico knew it. That was why Filly had cursed. That was also why she'd stayed so close to Dok ever since they'd left Manhattan tonight. Given the right opportunity, Dok couldn't keep his pants on to save his life. He had a half a dozen little pieces of fun scattered all over the plex, not to mention the new ones he was always finding. Filly put up with it because she knew she was number one and she knew what that meant to Dok. Rico put up with it because it usually wasn't a problem, wasn't usually any of his freaking biz. It only mattered now because people were slotting up and that could get them all killed.

Being under pressure was no excuse. It was irrelevant. Shank and Dok were pros. They were paid to handle the pressure and paid to do it right.

The only thing more dangerous than busting out Surikov's wife would be coming away with the wrong woman. Busting out a willing corporate defector was one thing. The kidnapping of a loyal employee ... that could start a fragging war.

Rico gazed steadily at Surikov, waiting, trying to scope the slag out.

Everything was about Surikov. His reaction to Marena Farris grabbing a gun and trying to waste him mattered more than any explanations Farris might have to give. Rico wondered if the slag had some special agenda that he hadn't mentioned yet. Rico hadn't forgotten what he'd seen that night at Maas Intertech when he and the team busted Surikov out. The man had been on top of a woman and going at her like he owned her. Maybe that woman had been nothing more than a corporate joygirl. Maybe not. Maybe Surikov had Dok's kind of problem with women. Maybe not. Maybe the only reason Surikov had wanted his wife busted out was so he could settle a score with her. Who knows? Maybe the only reason Marena Farris was

still alive was because Surikov hadn't grabbed a gun first.

Paranoia was catching.

Dok returned. "It's a match," he said. "Ninety-eight percent certainty. She's Marena Farris." He paused a moment, then said, "Boss, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Right. "You're on watch in two hours. Take a bedroom."

Dok and Filly headed upstairs.

Rico looked over at Surikov. The slag leaned his head back against the sofa and closed his eyes. "I can't believe it," he said finally. "I can't believe that's truly Marena. She would never... She's not a violent woman."

Piper had provided comparative data for both a retina print and DNA scan from straight outta the Fuchi security files. "Ninety-eight percent certainty," Rico said. "It don't get much more certain than that."

"They must have done something to her."

"Yeah? Maybe she hates your guts."

Surikov's eyes flared wide. For a moment, he seemed about to roar with anger, but then the emotion faded. He stared at the ceiling, and shook his head very slightly. "No," he said. "You don't know Marena. The real Marera. I can imagine what you must think, based on her looks. But she's a very loving woman. She's devoted to me. I can see it in her eyes. That's how I know this woman who just tried to shoot me isn't her. She doesn't have Marena's eyes. Good God, *what have they done to her!*"

The emotion in Surikov's voice built slowly and steadily to that final exclamation. Rico wasn't sure what to make of it. No question that a corp like Fuchi could do practically anything to a person if they wanted to spend the money. Could they install some kind of implant to override a person's brain and turn them into a one-shot killer? Rico had heard of it being done. Hell, the right mage with the right batch of spells could make a person do almost anything and leave him thinking it was his own idea. That much he had direct from Bandit Speaking of which ...

Where the frag was Bandit?

22

Shank guided Marena Farris to the door at the end of the second-floor hallway, then into the room there. She seemed weak, dazed. Bandit followed them in. Shank guided the woman to the bed, made her sit, then looked at the shaman.

"I'll watch her," Bandit said.

"Rico told me to do it."

Bandit lifted the Mask of Sassacus up before his own face and whispered words of power. The past few days had given him some time to further examine the mask and to experiment with it. He had harmonized its power with his own.

Aloud, he told Shank, "You must be hungry. Why not get something to eat?"

Shank grunted, nodded. "Yeah, you got a point. Thanks, chummer."

"Do not think of it."

"Think of what?"

"Just kidding."

Shank paused a moment, looked at Bandit, then grinned ferociously and left. Bandit considered the mask, then noticed Marena Farris slowly turning to face him. She would not see the mask. It was cloaked. Only Bandit could see it.

Marena Farris appeared emotionally upset. She moved her hands about her face, covering her mouth, her eyes, wiping at her brow, her cheeks. She spent several moments pressing her hair back from her face. Her eyes looked red, her face flushed.

"Care for a cigarette?" Bandit asked.

Marena Farris shook her head.

Bandit shrugged and took a cig from his open pack, then ignited it with a lighter from his duster pocket. He didn't actually draw the smoke into his lungs, only into his mouth, then blew it out. He was a practiced smoker. He practiced the habit because people seemed to become more at ease when they saw him doing something so mundane. That was his only reason for smoking. To appear somewhat mundane.

He smoked Millennium Reds. One of the most common brands available. They could be gotten anywhere.

Between one drag and the next, he gazed at Marena Farris as she appeared on the astral plane. She looked back at him, though only on the physical plane, it seemed.

"You have an interesting aura."

Marena Farris smiled a polite kind of smile. Not very enthusiastic. Not very interested. Perhaps a bit pained. Was it an attempt at deception or a reflection of her true feelings? On the astral plane, she was a storm of color, a boiling cauldron of light, of life energy. In Bandit's experience, such a tumultuous aura reflected tumultuous emotions or thoughts, sometimes both. The intensity and diverse coloring of the aura said more about the individual, their strength, their will, the force of their life.

"What's going to happen to me?" Marena Farris said.

Bandit wondered how she meant that.. Did she mean now? tomorrow? next year? Did she wonder what would happen to her when her body grew too worn and decayed to support her biological existence? "I wonder," Bandit replied, pausing to take another drag of the cig. "You're much older than you seem."

She gasped softly, then.

As in surprise.

"What ... what do you mean?" she asked quietly.

"What do you think?" Bandit replied.

"Well, yes," she said, slowly. "Yes, you're right. It's true. I am. Older than I look. Why ... do you ask? Why am I telling you this?"

"You'd like to tell me more."

"Yes, I would." She stopped and smiled again and nodded. Then frowned. "I don't understand."

"There's nothing to understand."

"Yes,, yes, there is. I'm sure of it."

"You just like talking to me."

"Yes, I do. But there's more. You're ..."

"No."

"You are." Her expression grew pained. She gasped for breath as if running a race. "You're ... doing things to me. Stop it. Stop it, *please! It hurts...*" Incredible.

Bandit lowered the mask. Marena Farris dropped her head to her breast. Her hair tumbled down around her face, concealing her features completely. But not her aura. Bandit looked at that again just to see how it had changed, but it was difficult to read. Certain aspects of it were puzzling, out of sync, conflicting with the whole. Conflicting with aspects of her aura that seemed to imply that she had a great latent potential for magic. Great enough that she might have made a powerful mage, had she begun the study early enough.

Then again, her potential was not entirely latent. She had some very minor raw ability. Unrefined, untrained. A sensitivity to spells of influence, a sort of natural resistance, and great strength of will.

Bandit wondered if she might not be one of those people, successful people, powerful people, who are often credited with great personal charisma, charm, influence, and a thousand other traits that mundanes found so difficult to describe.

Magic by other names.

It would be interesting to spend more time with Marena Farris. Bandit could see the value in it clearly. If nothing else, her own natural resistance would help him reveal the true depth of power possessed by the Mask of Sassacus.

The bedroom door swung inward.

Rico entered. "Looking for you," he said. "Have a seat, I wanna talk to our guest."

Bandit found himself a chair.

Heading into this, Rico tried to keep an open mind.

Marena Farris lifted her head and met his eyes. She looked distraught enough to cry, scared, too. It made her seem more human.

Her Fuchi file said she was forty-three, but she didn't look anywhere near that age. Maybe twenty-five. She had the kind of looks that leapt out and demanded a man's attention, no question about it. Her face was pure exec, cool and sophisticated, flawless. Her figure was beyond belief. She had all the makings of a primo slut or prostitute, the kind of woman who got whatever she wanted, regardless of what it took. She'd started at Fuchi as a corporate joygirl, a sort of combination hooker and geisha, but had broken out of that mold in just a few short years. The corp had educated her, boosted her up the ladder.

Rico noticed how the light from the room's only lamp gleamed on the moist skin beneath Marena Farris' eyes, and he decided how to proceed. An honorable man would plumb his own depths searching for mercy. Understanding. Compassion. But Rico couldn't afford it.

"What's your story?"

She hesitated, blinked like she didn't understand, then looked at him steadily and said, "Please don't kill

me."

Rico clenched his teeth. "Gimme a reason."

"I'm worth more alive."

What the hell was she talking about? Rico struggled to keep his face deadpan, concealing his surprise. Did she think she'd been kidnapped? That someone intended to kill her? Rico thought he ought to explain, only he didn't wanna explain, not till he got the truth out of her. "You always say hello to a slag by trying to waste him?"

"What else could I do?" Farris seemed to get choked up. Her voice wavered. Tears spilled from her eyes. She moaned, looking around like she wanted to find some way out. "You had me, you brought me straight to him. He obviously hired you for that." She paused a moment, hand at her brow. Her fingers trembled visibly. "I can't believe this is happening. Isn't there anything I can say? I'll give you any amount of money, twice whatever he paid you, if you'll get me out of here."

Rico hated playing games like this, especially with a woman, especially with one who looked like she expected to be killed at any moment. It made him feel dirty-like slime. It didn't really matter that she was a suit, a corporate. She was still a woman. If so much wasn't at stake ... Rico clenched his teeth. "You got money?"

The question nailed her attention. Her eyes went wide. She nodded. Adamantly. "Yes, I have a lot of money. I don't... I don't care how much you want. Just let me go. Please let me go."

"Later," Rico said. "We'll talk about money later. I wanna know some things first."

She nodded, looking like she'd willingly tell him anything. Rico wondered whether to believe it.

"How'd you figure it out?" Rico said. "What we got in mind."

Farris lowered her face to her hand, stared at the bed. She seemed about to cry again. "I've known for some time that Ansell loathes me. He can be very vengeful. That's why he volunteered-

"Volunteered? For what?"

Farris looked at him again. "You don't really need to know that. It's proprietary,"

Rico stepped toward the bed. "I'll tell you about proprietary. I almost got my cojones blown off coming after you. So you're gonna tell me what you know. Everything."

"Please ... I took an oath."

A real corporate thing to say.

Rico sat down on the edge of the bed facing her. A new rise of fear showed plainly in her eyes, yet something in the way she held her head, the angle of her chin, seemed almost like a challenge. Defiant. That changed when the razorspurs slid out of the rear of Rico's arm and snicked softly into position. Farris' eyes caught the movement. She looked, then looked again. When Rico lifted his forearm, moving those blades toward her throat, she stiffened, lifted her hands to her face, and leaned away.

Another moment and she was squirming.

She gasped. "*Please!*"

When she started shaking. Rico drew back. She was hard to read, and harder to figure. One big contradiction from start to finish. She could peddle that body of hers in any bar in the sprawl without even trying, yet she seemed sharp, maybe sharp enough to go anywhere, right to the top. She didn't seem like the type to be physically brave, and yet this same woman had just grabbed a gun and tried to blow away her own husband. What the hell kind of sense did that make? None. None whatsoever. Surikov didn't seem to understand it. Rico sure didn't.

"Consider yourself threatened," he said. "Now talk."

Farris was more than just a few moments calming down. If it was an act, it was a fragging good one. Every move flush, a seamless performance. Right down to the way she pursed her lips, as if forcing herself to at least *seem* in control of herself, when really she was shaking. Rico wasn't sure if he believed her act or not.

"You said your husband volunteered. Volunteered for what?"

"A special program," Farris said in a voice that seemed weak with emotion. "He didn't have to do it. He did it to get away from me. To spite me."

"Spite you why?"

"Because things didn't work out."

"What things?"

She hesitated and swallowed visibly. "Our relationship," she said. "Our marriage."

Rico figured that much had to be true. If it hadn't been true, it was now. Unless Surikov didn't mind almost getting wasted by his wife. "Tell me about this special program. You said your husband volunteered."

"It's a secret."

"You wanna get hurt?"

She lowered her head, shook it, and said, "It was a program to infiltrate Fuchi competitors. Security services have been doing that ... doing it forever. The problem is ... your average security operative lacks the qualifications to get at the data you really want. The agent typically ends up on the competition's security staff or else posted in some security function to an executive, with only very limited access to proprietary material. The Fuchi program changed all that. We developed an interdisciplinary scheme for training scientists and researchers to work as security operatives, and to work effectively. That's basically what it was about."

"Keep talking."

Something crossed her face, maybe dismay. "The program was very involved," she said softly, almost moaning. "It was five years in the making. I was part of it from the beginning. Ansell resented the hours I logged. He's very possessive. He wanted me to be with him whenever he was free from his work. My work didn't matter to him. I tried working from our condo and ultimately went on leave, but by then it was too late. He resented me, resented everything about me, and that resentment turned vile. It turned into hatred."

"So he volunteered for your program."

"It was ... it was a way to use my own work against me. He felt that I had betrayed him. This was his revenge. Knowing how it would make me feel."

Rico wondered how much of this was true. Farris' file said that she had worked on some special project for going on five years. More than that, he didn't know. A lot of what Marena Farris was telling him wouldn't likely appear in any files. "Surikov's a big deal biotechnician. You're telling me Fuchi put this slag, this asset, into some experimental program and sent him straight to the enemy. I don't buy it."

"Ansell's qualifications made him perfect for the role. That was the point of the program, to get astute people into the competition's camp, people who would know what they were seeing, who could report in specific detail on how competition research was developing." She hesitated a moment, wiped her eyes. "Yes. Ansell Surikov is a highly qualified scientist with an enviable reputation. Fuchi has many highly qualified scientists with good reputations. None of them are irreplaceable."

"Where'd they send him?"

"Kuze Nihon. A subsidiary, Maas Intertech. That's located in New Jersey."

"How long you been on leave?"

"About... about three years."

Her Fuchi file agreed. "Why do you rate your own personal security team?"

Farris hesitated, "I... I was never told why. In the beginning, I assumed it was because I had always been loyal to the corporation. I'm still an asset, even if I am on leave. I haven't resigned."

"What makes you an asset?"

"I'm a psychologist."

Her Fuchi file verified that. Fuchi had sent Farris to several universities in the U.C.A.S., and she'd earned a degree in psychology. It had seemed odd to Rico that a corp would spend money like that on a corporate hooker, but apparently it wasn't as strange as he thought. Piper said that a lot of the megacorps used their more sophisticated joygirls and joyboys a lot like shrinks. Some even worked as spies for corporate security.

That whole train of thought made Rico wonder if he was sitting next to something as potentially nasty as a trapdoor spider. Farris looked and acted upset, and yet the things she was saying told him that the brain behind her dark brown eyes was alive and working just fine. Did she really believe that her husband had hired help to murder her? That much didn't make much sense.

"Psychologists at Fuchi get personal security teams?"

"I suppose I'm a special case. Certain people hinted that threats had been made against Fuchi, against security personnel in particular. I accepted that. Later, as I put my life back together, I began to wonder if perhaps the threat had something to do with Ansell. Perhaps he had been found out. Perhaps Kuze Nihon was using threats against me to make Ansell work for them."

"Why would he care?"

"You would have to know Ansell to understand that."

"Try me."

She seemed puzzled for a moment. Whether puzzled by the demand or puzzled that it should be made, Rico couldn't tell. She said, "Ansell doesn't respond well to coercion. He's out of his element here, so you've probably found him easy to deal with. In the corporate environment, where he's at home, he's highly

independent of mind and intensely aware of his own personal purview. He believes he should be allowed to pursue his work utterly without supervision or constraint. He views even the slightest intervention by management as a complete usurpation of his rights as a scientist. That same egocentric perspective dominates his personal life as well. A threat against his wife would be no less a threat against him as a man. It wouldn't matter if he cared whether his wife lived or died. What would matter is his power to control what happened."

"If anybody's gonna ice you, it'll be him."

"That would be his view. Highly simplified."

"How does he go from spiting you to wanting to kill you?"

"Presumably, Maas Intertech realized he was an infiltrator and began using him as such, limiting his access, feeding him false data to pass along to Fuchi. They would naturally put restrictions on his research and he would resent this. Probably, he would blame me, for if I had not encouraged his spite, he would not have gotten into a situation like that. It's all my fault, you see."

"So he'd come after you for revenge."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"You make him sound like a psycho."

"Then I haven't been clear." Farris paused, wiped at her eyes some more. "Perhaps I should explain that the desire for personal power is a defining factor in many men, just as the desire to form cooperative relationships is a factor in many women's development and personalities. Ansell is as rational a man as you might ever meet. He functions very effectively in the corporate milieu. His personal power is extremely important to him, but he's not inflexible, not compulsive, in the clinical sense. At times, he deliberately exaggerates his need for control, as a ruse he uses merely to achieve a degree of control that he'll be comfortable with, knowing all the while that certain of his demands will be refused."

"Rational men don't dust their wives."

"If you really believe that, you've been misinformed."

"Yeah?"

"Rational people sometimes do irrational things. I'm explaining myself to you at length when I should probably be saying as little as possible."

"You been threatened."

"Yes, I know." She pressed a few curling strands of hair back from the side of her face. Her fingers gave a tremble—so slight Rico almost missed it. "Fear may be a rational response to danger, but it does not necessarily motivate rational behavior." She paused again and swallowed. "I want to cooperate fully because I'd rather you were my ally than someone I should fear. I try to avoid classic behaviors like that, and yet I find that I can't. Right now, it's practically a compulsion."

"Right now" bothered Rico a good deal less than what might be somewhere ahead of him.

Marena Farris was going to be trouble.

Hell, she was already trouble.

"Was she lying?" Rico asked softly when they came out of the room onto the second floor hallway.

Bandit nodded and said, "Yes. She lied."

"About everything?"

"No."

Rico wanted to know more, specifically when Marena Farris had lied and when she had told the truth. Bandit wondered how to answer. Spells of detection, especially those involved with detecting truth and lies, were not like spells for casting mana bolts and fireballs, which either worked or didn't work as the caster intended. Spells for assensing truth most often yielded mixed results, perhaps because most people spoke in a mixture of truth and falsehood.

There was also the question of whether such spells assensed the objective truth or merely the truth as the target of the spell knew it. Had Marena Farris lied in certain respects or simply recited lies she had mistakenly accepted as truth?

"What did she lie about?" Rico asked.

Bandit replied, "Take your best guess." He was no multiphased lie detector, and he disliked trying to function as one.

Rico grimaced, seeming displeased.

"Your wife says you volunteered for the program."

Surikov frowned, looked unhappy, even angry. "Volunteered? I did nothing of the kind. I was *ordered*

to enter the program! I had no choice whatsoever."

"They musta had some kind of hold on you."

"A hold? Of course they had a *hold!* If I'd refused them, I'd have ended up in the Antarctic somewhere, running computer-directed tests on plankton."

Surikov looked and sounded like he would have considered that a real tragedy, and Rico could believe it. He'd heard this kind of talk before. People like Surikov grew up on the inside of the corporate infrastructure. They didn't know any better. When the Master Suit gave orders, nobody disobeyed. You did what the bosses told you or you suffered the consequences. Even a slag with serious ego problems wouldn't want any black marks on his record because that would be bad for his career. And corporates didn't seem to see much difference between the words "life" and "career."

If one went down the toilet, the other followed.

"You said you were snatched outta Fuchi Multionics."

"Is there a difference? I was given no options. Whether I was kidnapped or thrust out upon my path, I had no choice. I was badly used. The morality of it is identical."

There was a difference, though. Fuchi might try to retrieve Surikov in either case, but this was not just "either" case. In this particular case, which was the only "case" that really mattered, L. Kahn had claimed that the client wanted to retrieve the subject of a kidnapping, and if that was a lie-as Surikov and his wife both claimed- then Rico had every right to call off the deal with L. Kahn.

Suddenly, his course seemed surprisingly clear.

If he got out of this alive, he'd have to make some kinda statement, a statement about fixers who lied. Something L. Kahn would not like. Something people would hear about.

"You got two options," Rico said. "You go where your husband's going, or you wait till I'm ready to let you go." Marena Farris watched him from the bed in the second-floor bedroom with eyes that got really big and round and an expression that seemed as expectant as it was fearful. "Does that mean ... you *will* let me go?"

"Not till I'm ready."

"But you will let me go, eventually?"

"When the time's right."

Farris slumped a little, lifting a hand to her face, closing her eyes. "It's so hard to believe you won't just kill me," she said in an undertone. "But that's what you're saying, isn't it? You're not going to kill me?"

Rico clenched his teeth. "I don't do murder."

Farris gasped. She did that a couple of times, head down, hand still over her face. Maybe she was crying. Soon, she lifted her head and wiped at her eyes. "Where is Ansell going?"

"It ain't settled yet."

"You're not taking him back to Fuchi, are you?"

Rico wondered if he should tell her. His first instinct was to say nothing. She didn't need to know. It did make him wonder, though. She'd just tried to kill the slag and now she wanted to know what was happening with his life?

Before he could decide what to say, Farris said, "You should bring him back to Fuchi."

"Why?"

"It's the best environment for a man like Ansell. It really is. I'm not saying that just because I happen to work there. Fuchi's research facilities are the best, and the research program is tailored for scientists of Ansell's ability. I don't really think he'll be happy anywhere else."

"That's his problem," Rico said. "His decision. Your decision I already laid out for you. Which is it?"

"If you aren't taking Ansell to Fuchi, I'd rather you just let me go. Someplace safe. Near a telecom." Right.

"She ain't going with you."

"She isn't? Why not?"

"Because that's her decision."

Surikov frowned, then looked at Rico expectantly. "You've got the guns," he said, quietly. "You could force her."

Rico clenched his teeth. "I don't think so."

"I could make it worth your while."

"Forget you even thought it."

"What about Marena Farris?"

Rico looked up as Piper pulled another soyburger out of the wave and turned to the micro-sized kitchen table. You'd think that in an ork safehouse, the kitchen would be the biggest part of the house. Not so. Rico finished chewing on a mouthful of burger, and said. "We're gonna hang on to Farris a while."

"How come, boss?" Shank asked.

Rico watched the ork devour a burger in one bite. "Because we don't have to let her go yet."

"And if Fuchi comes, we'll have a hostage."

Rico didn't like that word, didn't like hearing Piper say it. Taking a hostage had never been part of his plan. He wanted to let Farris go, right now. And he would, except...

"Corporates use everybody." Piper said, delivering more food to the table. "It's only right that we should use them. They should know the terror and violence that ordinary people live with every day. They should know what it's like to live in constant fear of death. What it's like to be considered valueless."

"Nobody's gonna lay a hand on her."

"Fuchi won't know that That's the point, *jefe*."

The real point was subtler. Rico felt sure of what had to come next, but he had doubts, serious doubts, about Surikov and Farris, and especially about Farris.

No one spoke chiptruth-no way, no how. Everybody lied to at least some degree. The question was did he have as much of the truth as needed to go ahead? Rico had the feeling he was missing some essential part of the puzzle, some basic truth that would make everything crystal clear if only he had the sense to see it. Maybe it was just paranoia. He had no choice but to proceed with making a deal with Prometheus for Surikov, it was that or sit on his butt, and yet he couldn't help wondering if something Surikov or Farris might be holding back would cast everything, the whole situation, in a brand new light.

Let Farris go? Sure, he'd let her go, just as soon as he knew that nothing she knew could hurt him or the team or the deal for Surikov. That would cost her time and inconvenience and maybe a whole lot more, but she owed Surikov that, that much at the very least. In another situation, she'd be heading into court on charges of attempted murder. Here, she was getting off easy, no matter what happened.

"This run's turning into a freaking nightmare," Thorvin growled. "I don't trust either one of the freaking fraggers, Surikov or Farris."

"Shut up and eat," Shank remarked.

"Eff you, ya freaking trog."

"Short an' squat."

"Anybody wants out," Rico said, "say it now. We're gonna be up to our necks in guano before this is done."

"Ain't we already?" Shank said.

"No one wants out," Piper said. "We're with you, *jefe*. You know that."

"Yeah," Shank said, with a nod. "Sure."

Rico looked at Thorvin. The rigger hesitated, about to take a bite of soyburger, then looked at Rico out the corner of his eyes. "Miss a chance to kick some corporate butt?" he muttered. "You must be freaking dreaming, ya freakin'..."

Rico nodded.

Point made.

23

The brownstone on Treadwell looked like an armed camp. Six cutters stood on and around the steps leading up to the front door. Three of them held submachine guns in the open. Three more stood inside the entranceway, two armed with assault rifles, the third with a light machine gun.

Things were getting real all over.

As always Mr. Victor waited at the center of the house, in the garden. He invited Rico to sit. The houseboy brought coffee.

"I have many more inquiries for the services of your team," Mr. Victor said. "I have intimated that you might be available in the near future, and at prices exceeding twice your usual rates. I have been answered only with enthusiasm. Let me know the moment you are prepared for more work. I will have a job for you that very day."

"*Gracias*," Rico said. "That's good to know."

"You do not seem pleased, my friend."

"I got problems."

"As do we all," Mr. Victor replied. "We live in troubled times. How may I help you?"

Rico said, "The job for L. Kahn is as good as a snatch. Surikov and his wife both tell me that he went

to Maas Intertech as an infiltrator. A spy. That ain't how L. Kahn told it. He said Maas Intertech stole Surikov away. So either he was lying or his client was lying. Either way, the deal's off."

Mr. Victor's expression turned grave. "There will be repercussions," he said. "I regret that under the circumstances I am not able to intervene on your behalf."

"You didn't contract for the job," Rico replied. "It ain't your problem. I just want you to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing."

"Of course," Mr. Victor said. "I understand completely. You know which is the honorable path, my friend. The man of honor takes responsibility for his own acts. He faces the consequences for what he must do. However, there must be some way in which I can aid you. Be candid."

"You could talk to Prometheus Engineering."

"In what regard?"

"That's where Surikov wants to go. He likes their style, some guano like that. Surikov's supposed to be a real hot property. Some hotjack scientist. I figure we could get a finder's fee."

"Call it a delivery charge."

"Si. Whatever."

Mr. Victor seemed to consider briefly, then said, "Perhaps I can do you this service. Let me see what I can arrange. Excuse me for a few moments."

"*Si, Gracias.*"

"*De nada.*"

Rico got up and walked around the perimeter of the garden. He made a point of gazing mostly at the ground or up at the tree limbs and birds overhead, anywhere but toward the table at the center of the garden. Mr. Victor wanted to do his biz in private. Rico had no problem with that. None whatsoever.

Maybe twenty minutes passed before a servant came to lead Rico back to the table. Mr. Victor invited him to sit with a brief gesture. "As it happens," Mr. Victor said, "I have a contact in a position to negotiate on behalf of Prometheus. They are interested in obtaining your man. He is known to them by reputation. They are also interested in his wife."

"She don't wanna go to Prometheus."

"I understand. I merely held out the possibility of the wife being part of the deal. It is no matter. Your fee will approximate what you would have gotten if you had finished the job for L. Kahn."

"You know that? what I agreed to?"

"My friend, it is my biz to know such things."

Rico nodded. If he had hesitated a moment to think, he could have saved himself a question. Mr. Victor had contacts, lots of them, practically everywhere it sometimes seemed.

Had anyone else spoken like this, alluding to privileged info of this type, Rico might have pulled a gun, forcing a confrontation from which there would be no turning back. Mr. Victor he could trust. Mr. Victor understood honor and knew when to speak and when to keep his mouth shut.

"This price is acceptable to you?" Mr. Victor asked.

Rico nodded. "Absolutely."

The portable telecom on the table bleeped. Mr. Victor picked up the handset, telling Rico, "*Un momenta, par favor.*"

Rico began to get up, but Mr. Victor motioned for him to remain seated. The phone call lasted maybe half a minute, then Mr. Victor broke the connection and said, "All is arranged. Pickup will be this evening. Your man must pass a DNA and retina scan prior to transfer. Payment will be made in certified credsticks. I trust that is also acceptable?"

Mr. Victor was only asking as a courtesy. It wasn't necessary. Rico nodded. "*Muchas gracias*"

"*De nada.* My friend, once this job is done, you will come and see me and I will have a real job for you. *Mucho dinero.* You are into the big time, now. Serious nuyen. Congratulations."

"There's one other thing I need."

"And what would that be?"

"A meet with L. Kahn. It has to be by telecom."

"That is easily arranged." Mr. Victor replied. "Allow me to ask what matter you will discuss."

Rico put it on the line.

By the time Ravage was finished, Willy Hogan had several cracked ribs, two broken arms, a broken leg and his face was practically unrecognizable, battered and drenched in blood. Hogan's wife and child shrieked from the bedroom doorway. The others crowding this tenement apartment in Sector 11, a mix of orks and norms, waited motionless, silent.

This was Hogan's payment for taking nuyen and providing no information for it.

L. Kahn watched without really watching. He had other matters on his mind. Hogan, a former Fed, a supposedly skilled technician, had been just one of the many ways in which L. Kahn had arranged to keep tabs on the team hired to extract Ansell Sunkov from Maas Intertech. The client had ordered multiple backups, and L. Kahn had delivered, yet every one of those backups had met failures of varying degrees.

The mission assigned to the backups was simple: track the runners who had Surikov, be prepared to move in ' if anything went wrong. How difficult could that be? L. Kahn had little patience for incompetents or self-styled experts like Willy Hogan. Even less when he was feeling , pressure from above. He had ambitions. He would not be scammed by the many jokers and con artists running around the Newark plex.

Ravage finished her task, leaving Hogan sprawled in his own blood, just barely alive. L. Kahn turned and found his way back to his black Toyota Elite limousine. Ravage climbed in after him. Once inside the car, she tapped the intercom and told the chauffeur, "Drive."

They were soon down the great ditch of the Garden State Parkway and into the tunnels of the Westfield transitway. L. Kahn looked at the boy lounging on the seat beside him. His name was Jared. He wore a bluish synthleather bodysuit He was cruel and cunning but malleable. And very attractive.

Unfortunately, the phone picked that moment to bleep. L. Kahn directed his eyes to the limo's center console. The telecom screen there opened a window to display the image from an incoming call. A second window displayed the code of the originating phone, and the location-Sector 9, proximate to the border with the Passaic metroplex and immediately adjacent to Sector 20. The so-called "Executive Action Brigade" had finally located the runners in Sector 20.

L. Kahn reached out and tapped the telecom key to accept the call. When he saw the dark-skinned Hispanic face that appeared on the screen, he forced himself to remain calm.

"Mr. Rico" this one liked to be called.

"You lied," Rico said.

L. Kahn felt a twinge of anger and puzzlement, but suppressed *it* Half-truths and lies were an integral part of the biz. Even a rank amateur should know that. What mattered most was the money, money and power. What inspired this razorguy Rico to cloak everything he said in pretentious moral language, L. Kahn did not understand. "You will make delivery tonight," L. Kahn said simply. Twenty-three hundred hours. Sector 17."

"Wrong."

"You refuse to make delivery?"

"Like I told you at the start, I don't do snatches. I'm no dog you can just order around, amigo. We know who your client is and the man don't wanna go. Your money's on its way back to you. The deal's off."

"Turn the subject over to me and I will forget you said that."

"Not today, amigo."

"Your lives will be forfeit."

"We was born that way."

The image on the screen froze and held as the disconnect icon appeared. L. Kahn maintained his composure for a few moments longer, then cursed. That face glaring out of the screen, it was too much to endure. He should have known that pretentious slot Rico would be trouble. A shadowrunner with ethics.

Who could believe it?

L. Kahn leaned back in his seat, growled with frustration, then smashed his boot heel through the telecom display screen.

The order came at 19:40 hours.

Ten minutes later, Skip Nolan stood in the dingy, litter-strewn alley behind the street of ghetto rowhouses in Sector 20, North Caldwell. Like the four men and two women of Team A, he wore the armored assault uniform of the Executive Action Brigade.

The Team B leader signaled ready. Team B would take the front and upstairs portions of the narrow rowhouse where the runners had holed up. Team A would take the rear and basement areas. Somewhere up above, in the night, Bobbie Jo had the whole block under surveillance. No one had entered or left the house for hours. Ground-based surveillance teams had seen lights going off and on and curtains moving and figures silhouetted against window shades. The house was hot, making infrared analysis difficult, but no one had any fears that the runners might have slipped away again. A vibration detector dropped onto the roof of the house had picked up people moving around inside, and a laser snooper had picked up conversation off one of the windows. And on top of all that, the runners' van was parked right behind the house.

The runners were there, no question about it, and now, according to orders, they were going to be

taken down. Skip didn't know why the Brigade should suddenly go from a surveillance role to an interdiction role, but he wasn't planning to worry about it. That wasn't his job. Taking down runners in the Newark metroplex wasn't so different from scoring smugglers along the C.A.S.-Pueblo border or supporting a coup in Guatemala. The world was full of conflicting interests. When forces clashed, somebody lived and somebody died, and maybe once in a while the right people got what they deserved.

He keyed the mike of the headset worn under his helmet. "Team A, Team B ... let's rock."

Two men swung a portable ram, smashing the rear door of the rowhouse right out of the frame. As the door went down, a third trooper flung a stun and smoke grenade that went off with a bang. Squad One rushed into the kitchen, weapons tracking from side to side, then called "clear" and moved on. Another grenade banged from the front of the house. Skip followed Squad One through the swirling smoke as far as the stairs to the basement and there pointed Squad Two up the hall toward the front of the house.

Another grenade detonated upstairs. Squad One called out that the basement was clear. Skip started toward the front of the house, but already he felt the uncertainty gnawing at the pit of his stomach. One room after another came up clear. Still no weapons fire, no report of confrontations, no sign of the runners. In another moment or two, the Team B leader would call the second floor clear and then Skip would know that the worst had happened yet again. The place was empty. The only bodies present belonged to the E.A.B.

How the hell had those fraggers gotten away?

"Bitches stay in the car."

None of the women complained, and that was well. The call regarding the change in the runners' status had come at an untimely moment in Maurice's studies. The last thing he wanted to do was waste time traipsing around die metroplex after a group of recalcitrant runners, but unfortunately he had no choice.

Gathering his coat around him and hefting his walking stick, Maurice stepped from his Mercedes limo. The night was cool and quiet, but rife with a tension that hinted at things to come. Claude Jaeger stepped up beside him. Maurice looked at the faint shimmering in the air before him and shifted to his astral senses.

Vera Causa stood facing him. She smiled and turned to indicate the house directly behind her, saying mind-to-mind, *This dwelling gives a fine view, master.*

Maurice looked at Jaeger. "Clear this house."

"Is that an order?" Jaeger replied.

"Consider it a recommendation."

Jaeger nodded and walked over to the rowhouse's front door. The woman who answered the door fell without a sound, then Jaeger proceeded to neutralize the rest of the occupants. Maurice moved through the house to the kitchen. Through the transparex-panes of the rear door, he could see the dark, litter-strewn alley behind the house and the mundane forces now gathering.

Vera Causa indicated the rowhouse directly opposite. That was the runners' safehouse. The runners' van waited there. Finding the house and the van had not been difficult. A spirit such as Vera Causa moved with the speed of the astral. She could pursue a supersonic jet halfway around the globe. The forces of the Executive Action Brigade had literally led his ally here.

Taking refuge in the wastes of Sector 13 had provided the runners with more safety than they knew. Vera Causa had refused to enter the area, despite Maurice's command to follow them from their meeting with L. Kahn at Newark International. Maurice himself found that blighted region discomfiting to approach on any but a purely mundane level. It had therefore been necessary to forego any direct action. Continuing to monitor the Brigade had led them here to Sector 20 and the district of North Caldwell.

Maurice watched with interest as the dark armored figures wearing the flash of the Brigade gathered at the rear of the house and prepared to force entry.

The runners had a shaman, called "Bandit." Despite Maurice's best efforts, he had been unable to learn much about this shaman. Many people in the plex seemed to know his name, but few admitted to anything beyond a basic physical description and facile rumors. An astral glance at Bandit's aura and the foci he carried, such as Maurice had caught at the airport, might lead one to conclude that Bandit had little true ability in the Art, and even less in terms of true power.

That was obviously an inaccurate perception, Maurice now saw. The rowhouse occupied by the runners was protected by a powerful ward, a lattice of blue-green energy that throbbed in brilliant counterpoint to the rhythms of the natural energies pulsing and flowing through the night in this part of the plex. Any magician could cast a ward, but only one of considerable ability could cast a ward as strong as the one now burning before him.

This indicated to Maurice that the shaman must be masking his aura, and to do that he must be a

powerful magician, an initiate, in fact.

This changed things considerably. It made Bandit a potentially dangerous opponent, and it urged Maurice to caution. The ward could certainly be defeated, but that would likely cost Maurice energy, and he had not come prepared to begin any sort of conflict at anything less than his full measure of vitality. The appearance of this unexpectedly powerful ward warned him to wait and watch.

The Brigade's troopers stormed the house, smashing down the rowhouse's rear door and entering like soldiers. The ward of course had no effect on their entrance, providing only a barrier against spells and astral surveillance. No form of sorcerous traps appeared to be keyed to it.

They seem confused, master, Vera Causa remarked.

They?

The soldiers.

An insightful observation, Maurice thought, for a spirit so recently conjured. Vera Causa's rapid progress along the learning curve gave him cause to wonder yet again. The raid of the safehouse soon ended. The runners were not found. Maurice projected onto the astral and moved into the alley to watch and listen to troopers there. They appeared disturbed.

The runners, it seemed, had not been observed since they had entered their safehouse. They had gone inside and stayed there. They had not departed via their van or any other vehicle. They had not climbed out through the roof and made their way across the rooftops to another location. How, then, had they escaped? Maurice circled the safehouse, stepping through the walls of the adjoining rowhouses and out to the street in front of the safehouse, then around and back to the alley. The building walls adjoining the safehouse were intact, so the runners had not simply broken into an adjoining structure and slipped away. Only one direction remained in which they could have gone, and that was down.

Maurice descended into the earth, and here he found the answer to the Brigade troopers' questions.

The runners included an ork, and that implied some connection to the ork underground-and that could mean many things. The Newark sprawl had a population of orks the equal of any city in the urban Northeast, perhaps the whole of North America, and they were always busy. Maurice had information indicating that many had begun going underground shortly after the Awakening, the better to escape the oppression of fanatical humans. Their subterranean constructions had since become quite extensive. Some sections of the city were honeycombed with tunnels and passages that appeared on no official schematics. And the orks had dug deep in many places. Deeper than any rational human would care to descend.

The deeper one went, the greater the sense of claustrophobia the tunnels bred. It posed a threat to sanity that Maurice did not care to challenge. And tonight there was no need.

A tunnel passed directly beneath the safehouse, a mere few meters below ground level. It appeared to be an old tunnel, braced by wooden beams. In places the walls were crumbling into mounds of sawdust and earth. The runners had doubtless used this tunnel to escape the perimeter set up by the Brigade.

Maurice considered. He doubted that the runners would remain in these tunnels long. Their leader would not allow it.' To do so would be to invite forces like the Executive Action Brigade down into the tunnels, and that would put others, innocents, such as orks, at risk. The runners would therefore surface as swiftly as possible and seek other accommodations, a new safehouse, before continuing on their course.

The Executive Action Brigade was obviously at a loss. Their technological methods had failed. It would, therefore, be Maurice's task to find the runners' new safehouse. Fortunately, he had the means to do so.

He returned to his waiting limo.

The heavy metal grille of the storm drain was set into the ferrocrete of the gutter, but it also had an opening set into the curb like a shallow arch.

That arch gave a good view of the fronts of the rowhouses opposite, but only to someone jacked into a Mitsuhama control deck and using the sensors of a modified Sikorsky-Bell microskimmer for eyes. That someone was Thorvin-*who else?* The moment he saw the pair of dark blue vans turning the corner down by Hamilton, he fired a signal to Filly.

"Showtime!"

Her signal to get the hell out.

The vans came rushing up the block and squealed to a sudden halt in front of the safehouse. To say Thorvin had been expecting this would be a freaking understatement.

He'd been expecting exactly this kind of a commando-style raid ever since he'd discovered the microelectronic bug some piece of scag had glued to the underside of the van. A nasty little piece of silicon that bug was. The sneaky kind. A real snitch. Virtually undetectable until it was activated, at which point it fired a microburst location signal.

The minute that snitch came on-line, the van's detection system went wild, and the rest was history.

Getting out had been a problem. They couldn't just leave. They'd needed someplace to go to and not just anywhere would do. They had a flabby scientist and a weak-limbed corporate biff to chaperone around. And the moment Rico told L. Kahn to eat squat, the whole world would come down on top of them. Including their backup on the job, or whoever had been tailing them. Move in to grab Surikov and Farris and ace the team. That's why corps hired backups. And that's why Rico had decided on the trick. Keep everyone concentrating on the house in Sector 20's North Caldwell for as long as possible, and meanwhile get Surikov and Farris to safer precincts, which they'd done last night.

The van behind the house was an integral part of the trick. It was a decoy, of course, a virtual twin of Thorvin's super-charged vehicle, though only from the outside. Thorvin had thought Rico must be frizzed when he ordered up a twin of the Rover, but what the frag? That's what bosses were supposed to do. Plan ahead. Prepare for the unexpected. Even if it meant looking brain-numb. This particular part of the plan hadn't cost much. A day of hunting around through the sprawl's scrapyards, some welding and paint, and he had put together a look-alike, right down to the registration tags. The decoy's engine barely had enough power to drag the body more than a block at a time, but then motivating power didn't matter.

The rest of the trick was easy. Leave someone in the safehouse to move around, turn lights off and on, talk to themselves. Act like a crowd of people. Shank and Filly volunteered. They'd be moving now to the trapdoor in the basement, which led into the tunnel under the house. If Shank and Filly had any sense, they'd be moving extra-fast, because the commandos out front were already out of their vans and applying a portable ram to the safehouse's front door.

Thorvin watched the commandos go through the safehouse door. A close-up view got him a look at the flash on their uniforms. No black annis patches here. Nothing even hinting of Daisaka Security. The logo of the freaking Executive Action Brigade appeared on every left shoulder, every one that Thorvin could see. That was interesting. Thorvin had heard of the E.A.B. They'd recently been involved in clearing gangers outta certain parts of Sector 17 where certain corps had condoplexes. The E.A.B. made decent commandos, but they weren't exactly specialists at being subtle.

Why would anyone hire the effing E.A.B. for backup on a job like this? Thorvin wondered while descending to the concrete conduit that shuttled rainwater down the length of the block. It joined up with the sewer line running along Hamilton Drive. Before long, Shank and Filly came up the shaft from the tunnel below.

Thorvin keyed his mike. "How'd it go?"

"Smooth as effing ice," Shank replied.

"So why would anyone hire the freaking E.A.B. to tail us on a job like this?"

"Why the hell not?" Filly replied. "They come cheap."

24

The first shots came at ten p.m.

Victor Guevara was sitting in the garden at the center of his house. He happened to be glancing at his watch just as the first shots sounded.

It began with a long clattering burst of an automatic weapon, followed immediately by a fusillade of single shots and bursts. Several panes in the french doors looking into the garden from the front of the house abruptly burst into fragments. At the same moment the idle chirpings and whistles from the birds in the garden rose suddenly into a cacophony of caws and shrieks.

For an instant, Victor felt caught off-guard, but he was not surprised. He tensed and looked up, then willed himself to retain his composure.

The nights had grown very dark of late, and a man in his position had certain vulnerabilities. A civilized man recognized that, accepted it, and took what precautions he could. In anticipation of dire events, he had sent Christiana, his wife of twenty-three years, along with Dionne and Ivana, his daughters, and his son-in-law and two grandchildren to spend some time with trusted relations in Boston, where they would be safe. Though his personal inclinations might forbid him from fleeing trouble, honor demanded he take every conceivable step to ensure the safety of his family. And this he had done.

Now came several shouts, and louder peals, the screams of the dying. Victor would pay excessive premiums for insurance after this, not only for himself but for his employees, but he did not consider this, not for more than a fleeting instant. What he thought about were the spouses and families of those dying to protect him. It would eventually fall to him to say certain words and make certain gestures to those who survived the dead, in a futile attempt to somehow ease their losses. He would do this because it was his responsibility as a man. Because, again, honor demanded it. Only dogs and other animals could turn away

from their dead as if they were nothing more than mounds of rotting garbage. Victor might be many things, some better than others, but he was no dog. Of this he had no doubt.

Even in his youth, during his days in Sector 19, the violent districts of Roseland and Pleasantdale, he had been like this. Ambition came first, but nothing came before honor, self-respect, and his beliefs about his rights and obligations as a man.

He had joined gangs and had led gangs. In time, he'd achieved a position with a local syndicate known as Rueda, the Wheel, and from there had gone on to forge his own network of contacts and agents. Everywhere he went, he always spoke to people politely, with respect. Always, he dealt with others as a man of honor. He did not lie and he did not cheat. He endeavored to give a fair value for any moneys spent. Fulfilling his ambitions had not been difficult. People were only too willing to be persuaded of his ability as a negotiator and intermediary. They knew they could rely on his discretion. They knew his word stood for something. Amid the routine betrayals and vicious treacheries of the Sixth World, his word had become as valuable as platinum.

No longer did he carry any weapons. The days of blood and thunder had passed for him. It seemed to Victor that if he could not survive based on the alliances he had made, the work of more than half a lifetime, then perhaps he deserved to die, or perhaps it was fate's inexorable ruling.

The *Japoneses* had a saying: *A man's fate is a man's fate*. If so, he would meet his fate willingly.

So it was that when Victor heard a crash from above, and a squad dressed as commandos descended through the roof of his garden on rappelling lines, he remained seated calmly at his table, sipping his coffee and awaiting what would be.

The battle for his house was soon at an end.

A number of dark-clad, helmeted figures surrounded him with weapons at the ready. The initials E.A.B. showed on the left breasts of their upper-body armor. Victor knew what this stood for and could guess who had sent these troopers to his house.

He could also guess why they had been sent.

One distinctive figure emerged from the front of the house. She wore a silvery bodysuit and black-studded bands. Her eyes were like violet holes, empty, as emotionless as her face. Victor knew this woman by name and by reputation. Some years ago, when she was new and unknown, he had given her a number of jobs, her first professional contracts. She had since risen through the ranks of the Newark underworld. She now commanded a certain respect from even the most powerful of the crimelords ruling the metroplex.

"*Como estd*, Ravage," Victor said.

Ravage paused beside his round table, watching him, perhaps surveying him for weapons. She held a Scorpion machine pistol pointed at his face. Likely, she did not understand how he could sit here, calmly sipping his coffee, and therefore she suspected some as yet unnoticed threat.

Victor would show her no fear. Pride alone demanded that. Ravage had become just another animal. She had put morals and ethics aside to do whatever a client might desire. This added untold quantities to her merchantability, and spoke clearly of her character, or lack of it. Victor saw little difference between the Ravage standing before him now and a common whore. She had packaged herself as a product for others to rent.

No honor. None whatsoever.

"Someone wants to talk to you," Ravage said.

Victor nodded once, and said, "*Si*. I know"

From the large unpaned window of his office 230 stories above lower Manhattan, Gordon Ito watched the lights of the city gleaming against the night. He lit a Platinum Select cigarette. He recalled that his current mistress had said something about having dinner tonight. Too late for that now. He checked his watch to confirm it. No great loss.

He returned to the high-backed chair behind his desk, looked across the room at his bodyguard, and pointed toward the door to the outer offices. The guard bowed formally, then turned and left.

An optic key hit the touch-sensitive top of his onyx desk brought a telecom screen rising up out of the desktop. Gordon tapped a few more optical keys. Call-protection software designed to scan the phone lines for taps and other forms of eavesdropping came on-line automatically each time Gordon made a call, unless for some reason he chose to cancel such security measures.

The Fuchi logo appeared briefly on the telecom screen. This was replaced by a straight-on view of an oriental woman wearing a Fuchi corporate blazer.

"Mr. Ito," the woman said.

"Ms. Yin," Gordon replied.

The digital clock on Gordon's display ticked off five seconds. This pause was standard protocol. Yin said, "One moment, please."

The Fuchi logo returned, but subtly modified, veiled by a black triangle. This represented Special Administration, and, hence, Gordon's own department as well.

As far as most Fuchi employees knew, the S.A. did not exist. It appeared on no corporate schematics delineating lines of authority, and it received its funds from diverse sources, funneled through obscure bank accounts. Gordon suspected that not even the board back in Tokyo knew of its existence, with the exception of Richard Villiers, Chief Executive Officer, and Villiers' number two man, Miles Lanier. Villiers had set up the S.A. and charged it with counterintelligence and other covert functions.

"Mr. Ito."

"Mr. Xiao."

"*Konichiwa.*"

"*Konichiwa.*"

The veiled Fuchi logo remained on the screen, but the voice belonged to Xiao, Gordon's boss and chief of Special Administration. A small icon appeared on Gordon's screen-voiceprint confirmed. Xiao never allowed his image to cross telecom lines, not even protected internal lines. A little touch of paranoia. Gordon understood that Xiao looked Korean, trim and spare, with close-cropped black hair. "Your calling time is convenient," Xiao said. "I have just finishing eating."

That was no coincidence. The hour was approaching midnight. Xiao usually woke in the late afternoon and worked through the night. Gordon's informant had predicted that Xiao would be awake now and just concluding his evening meal. There was no more propitious time to call than as Xiao concluded a meal. He apparently had a penchant for fine food. Gordon had a psychoanalyst working on that one, as well as other traits that had come to Gordon's attention.

"What brings you to my screen tonight, Gordon? Is it business? The Farris business?"

Gordon held back a curse. The bastard already knew. Xiao had informants of his own, and at least one of them was in Gordon's own outer office. Gordon would have the informant removed, except that it was sometimes useful to see Xiao misinformed, indirectly, discreetly. "I take it you've heard about the abduction at Crystal Blossom."

"Most certainly I have heard," Xiao replied. "I run the most efficient clandestine service in the corporate over-world. I have the most efficient chief of operations in the human sphere. Would you not agree, Gordon?"

Xiao's voice was, as always, emotionless, monotone. Gordon suppressed his immediate reaction to the implications of Xiao's words, and admitted, "I could have called you sooner. But I wanted more data before I laid things out for you."

"Your obsession with completeness is gratifying."

"It has pluses."

"Has Fuchi Internal Security become involved?"

"Negative." IntSec was totally in the dark, as it should be. Technically, IntSec and the S.A. were on the same team, but Xiao didn't see it that way. Neither did Gordon. The two organizations were as different as spies and security guards.

"Have you identified the criminals who abducted Marena Farris?"

"The data's on my comp. Partial ID's. My tech teams pulled a lot of trace evidence from the scene. We're cross-referencing with police databases. I suspect a local group."

"Is it the same group that ran on Maas Intertech?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

"You may instead tell me what you intend to do about Farris."

"Why does she interest you so much?"

"A loyal corporate employee abducted from a Fuchi facility? Must I answer that, Gordon?"

Gordon resisted a pained smile. Xiao made a good sparring partner. Sometimes, too good. Xiao would be the last man on Earth to miss the implications of Marena Farris' abduction. On the most superficial level, it gave some indication that Gordon's arrangements to roll up a special op, arrangements made through the *kuromaku* Sarabande, had gone wrong. Xiao would not be pleased with that. Xiao had personally ordered that the special op be rolled up. Xiao had also personally ordered that Marena Farris be "set aside," held and protected, when the special op first began.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Gordon said. "I ordered multiple backup."

"There is an image issue here."

"You're worried about image?"

That didn't ring right. Xiao's concern with image usually began and ended with Special Administration. Gordon concluded that Xiao was lying. The question was, why?

Xiao said, "I have recently had communications regarding the Fuchi image. Communications from lofty quarters. It is not a matter of total insignificance. Therefore, I have decided that you should do nothing further. Leave Farris to me. I will attend to the matter of her abduction personally."

"My pleasure," Gordon replied.

The display screen went blank. Xiao was never one for extended good-byes. Gordon lit another Platinum Select and sat back in his chair, wondering what the hell the fragger was up to.

It had to be something special.

Aubrey ran his eyes over the driver's curvilinear console, met the driver's expressionless glance, then turned to the door at the rear of the driver's compartment. The door opened for Aubrey at a touch of the thumb-lock. He stepped through.

The main passenger cabin had the look of a luxurious lounge: drapes, carpeting, glinting marbled furniture, subdued gold lighting. To the right stood Zoge, a former *sumotori*, to the left, Rollo, an ork. Born were massively constructed. As Aubrey paused to look at them, they each gave a quick nod.

Aubrey moved to the door at the rear of the cabin. The thumb-lock let him through. The rear cabin was private and small, a very compact and ornate bedroom.

On the bed lay a dark-skinned biff recently come from Las Paz, Bolivia. Her name was Bela. Her Spanish was practically incomprehensible and she knew nothing of life in the sprawl, but what she did know she knew very well. She had heavy black hair and wore only a contented smile and a small gold cross on a delicate chain slung around her neck. She turned onto her back and parted her knees so that Aubrey could see what she had between her thighs.

Aubrey saw nothing he hadn't seen before in any number of different configurations.-He sneered. Bela replied with the haughtiest of smiles. Then the door to the microscopic lavatory stall on the right opened and Sarabande stepped out, tossing back her lustrous sable hair. "Ready?" she said.

"*Si*," Aubrey replied.

"Very good."

Aubrey watched as Bela went to work, brushing Sara-bande's hair, weaving it into a braid, fetching clothes, and kneeling to fit shoes onto Sarabande's feet. The slitch actually paused to kiss Sarabande's right ankle and to murmur words of endearment. Sarabande didn't seem to notice. Sarabande had eclectic tastes, but she was easily bored, especially when biz awaited.

Aubrey smiled savagely. Bela would soon be gone, perhaps in a matter of days.

Sarabande finished dressing. Aubrey preceded her into the main cabin, then headed up front to the driver's compartment.

The bus sat idling in the north parking field of the Governor Florio Rest Area, located along the Jersey Turnpike just south of Carteret and the Newark sprawl. A black Toyota limousine pulled in and parked nearby. Aubrey watched on the driver's console displays as an unlikely pair emerged from the limo and came toward the bus. They walked side by side: Ravage in her signature silver bodysuit and L. Kahn in his usual medium brown Armante suit with cloak. One was a pro, a serious threat. The other was a sham. Expendable.

They paused alongside the bus. L. Kahn glanced at Ravage, who, after a quick glance around, lifted a hand and blocked.

Aubrey let them wait a few moments, then moved down the steps as the driver opened the door. Ravage watched closely, well within striking range-barely an arm's length away-as Aubrey waved the probe of a Bailey Aardwolf magnetic anomaly and chemical detector past L. Kahn's front. The multiphase device discovered nothing indicative of weapons, propellants, or explosives. Aubrey nodded at the bus. "*Bueno. Entrt*," L. Kahn stepped past Aubrey watched Ravage. The razorchick watched her client mount the steps of the bus.

Her thoughts were obvious. Her client was leaving her zone of control. She did not like that. "*Hasta la vista*," Aubrey said quietly. Ravage looked at him, then turned and walked away. She would have to follow in L. Kahn's limousine. No one entered Sarabande's presence with guards or with weapons of any kind.

Once Ravage was out of striking range, Aubrey turned and also climbed the steps. The driver immediately closed the doors and got the bus moving. Aubrey waited until the bus rolled out onto the highway, then thumbed the lock to the inside door and followed L. Kahn into the main passenger cabin.

Tonight, Sarabande wore gold visorshades with mirrored lenses, a gold jacket adorned with swirling

silver, a red blouse and matching slacks and boots. The boots shone as brightly as chrome. Dressed in her business armor, the woman revealed almost nothing of her innately sensual nature. She sat behind a small round table in the left-rear corner of the cabin. Occupying the center of the table was a compact compeck. A gleaming red cable ran from the deck to Sarabande's right temple.

For going on a full minute, she did not move, did not even seem to breathe. Aubrey could not tell if she was in the face of her computer or merely making L. Kahn wait. Without prelude, she said, "You arranged the attack on Victor Guevara?"

L. Kahn hesitated briefly, then said, "Yes. That's correct."

A moment passed. "You questioned him."

"Yes."

"What did he tell you?"

L. Kahn hesitated again. "This is my personal—"

"I asked you a *question*."

Aubrey tensed involuntarily. The subtle emphasis that suddenly entered Sarabande's voice cut the air like a scalpel, fine and precise and utterly ruthless. The effect of that edge on L. Kahn was plain to see. He stopped in mid-sentence and stiffened. Moments passed, then he said uncertainly, "Guevara claims to have no knowledge of the runners' present location or their intentions. Yet, the runners' leader has been in constant contact with him. I'm not finished with him yet."

"Then he is still alive."

"Yes. I have him in a safe place."

"That is fortunate."

Sarabande lifted one hand casually to her temple, as if adjusting her datajack. This was her signal. Aubrey stepped forward, whipped a braided garrote around the neck of L. Kahn and tugged it tight. L. Kahn rasped and staggered. He began to struggle, but Rollo and Zoge immediately stepped in, placing themselves between L. Kahn and Sarabande. One slammed a massive fist into L. Kahn's face, the other drove a fist into his midsection. L. Kahn's head snapped aside, blood and saliva spraying from nose and mouth. He grunted loudly and sank to his knees, gagging. Aubrey removed the garrote, put one foot to L. Kahn's back and shoved.

L. Kahn sprawled onto the floor at Sarabande's feet. That was suitable. What this man apparently did not know was that Victor Guevara had been one of Sarabande's local agents for many years. A very reliable agent. Guevara had brought Sarabande many useful contacts and a great deal of nuyen. Sarabande did not like such persons being troubled, interfered with in any manner.

Aubrey stepped over and lowered his foot onto the back of L. Kahn's neck, forcing the slag's face flat with the floor.

Sarabande recrossed her legs, and said quietly, "You have been played for the fool that you are. While the runners were bargaining with you for more time, they were plotting the abduction of the subject's wife. They now have both these persons. They obviously have no intention of turning the subject over to my client. I am very displeased."

L. Kahn grunted, moaned. "They broke ... contract."

"Indeed."

Sarabande signaled again. Aubrey drew back a step. Rollo and Zoge moved in, dragged L. Kahn off the floor and onto his feet. Aubrey delivered three precisely aimed and executed hand strikes directed at specific points of L. Kahn's upper body, then turned and whirled, slamming the heel of his boot across L. Kahn's face.

The man sagged as if made of mud. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth. Rollo and Zoge turned him on his knees to face Sarabande. Aubrey grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked L. Kahn's head up straight.

"When you are given instructions, you follow them to the final decimal," Sarabande said. "You do not decide on your own to mount private adventures. You are one little fly in my web. You do what you are told. Nothing less, nothing more. You will release Victor Guevara at once. You will then sanitize this entire operation. Is that clear?" L. Kahn seemed to have barely the strength left to nod, much less speak.

Sarabande signaled.

Rollo and Zoge dragged L. Kahn around to face Aubrey. The meeting was over. It was time for one final warning. Aubrey drew a knife from his pocket. The black monocle-edged blade snapped out of the handle and into position with a soft click. Aubrey grabbed hold of L. Kahn's hair to steady his head, then put the tip of the blade inside L. Kahn's left nostril.

"Remember," Aubrey said. "Do what you're told."

L. Kahn grunted, and Aubrey tugged the knife free.
It was a very, very clean cut.

25

"I'm hungry."

"Come're."

Lying on his back on the bare mattress, Monk turned his head to the right and wondered what Minx meant. It was way too dark to see, but he could feel her lying right up against his side, her head resting lightly on his arm midway between his shoulder and elbow. He could feel the warm weight of her luscious, lithe body weighing against his side all the way down to his ankle. He could feel the soft, gentle pressure of her body grow subtler then fuller, each time she took a breath.

Come're?

Where ... ?

Then, he felt her moving, maybe rising onto one elbow lowering herself onto his chest. The feel of her body descending onto his inspired him to a not-so-subtle excitement. They had just made love like that, her on top, he on the bottom. He guessed she wanted to do it again. With her, he'd do it forever.

"Monk?" she said softly, her face just a breath away her hair showering down all around them. "Do you like me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Would you like to be with me always?"

"Sure."

"I'm glad." Her lips brushed his cheek. "You're so booty. And it doesn't always work right unless you want it."

"Huh?"

"Breathe with me, silly. That'll make you."

"Make me wha ... ?"

Her mouth closed over his. She exhaled, long and deeply. So long and so deeply that when it came time for him to breathe, he simply inhaled her air, her breath. They did that a couple of times. It was wild and kind of sexy and the excitement it inspired in him made Monk want to go on breathing like that forever. It made him want other things, too. He began running his hands up and down her sides and over her slender back, down over her behind, then up and over the back of her head and through her lavish hair.

They got it together, their separate parts. Minx began shifting back and forth, making it work. She kept her mouth on his throughout. The harder and faster they moved, the harder they breathed, passing the same breath back and forth, back and forth.

By the time it ended, Monk felt dizzy-dizzy with excitement, and dizzy with something that seemed like love.

The room actually seemed to be spinning, turning around and around and tilting wildly back and forth. The darkness took on a reddish glow, as if the sun were returning from night to twilight, and then to the last fiery radiance of sunset. Minx laughed and her laughter echoed. She smiled and her eyes seemed to gleam a fiery red. Her whole body had a crimson hue. Everything did.

Grinning, Minx leaned down into his face, till their noses touched, and she crooned, "I made you."

"Made you, made you," her voice echoed.

"Huh ... ?" Monk said.

"Huh... ? huh... ?" his voice echoed.

"Come on! come on! come on!" Minx said. *"Let's go! let's go! let's go!"*

"Go where? go where? go where?"

Minx laughed and laughed and laughed. She tugged him up by his arms. The floor tilted downward, then upward, then back and forth and up and down. Minx grabbed him around the waist and tugged him forward, pitching forward down the slope of the floor, then staggering up, up the slope of the floor. A cacophony of raucous voices and uproarious laughter echoed and resounded. Leering, red-hued faces streamed toward him from out of nowhere, only to vanish right in front of his nose.. Minx forced him to run headlong down a flight of stairs, then dragged him stumbling up and down a long, red-hued passage.

"Hurry! hurry! hurry!" Minx said. *"Monk! Monk! Monk! It's time! it's time! it's time!"*

A metal door slammed open above them.

Minx dragged him up, up and out through the door, then down more stairs and onto the broad, red-hued pavement of a four-lane transitway.

Suddenly, everything seemed normal, just red, except for the fact that the transitway was empty of

traffic.

Monk looked to his left and saw a MediVan with flashing strobes and glaring headlights bearing down on him from maybe two meters away. He opened his mouth to scream, but didn't quite make it. Someone jerked him back off his feet-right off the ground-and set him down again a good two or three meters away from where he had been, but now facing in the opposite direction.

Something shrieked shrilly.

"Monk, *quick!*"

The MediVan door was open. Minx all but shoved him through, up the step and onto the seat. The driver looked human but skeletally thin, like death. The two orks in the rear had huge, savage tusks. When they smiled, their eyes gleamed a fiery red.

Minx shoved onto the seat beside him.

Tires screamed, the MediVan roared ahead.

"Hear about the wreck on the skyway?" shouted one of the orks hi the rear. "Guy jumped the divider, hit seven cars, decapitated fifteen people before his tires ever touched the ground! Slammed into an oxygen tanker and incinerated himself and a buncha other cars! They still don't know what he was driving!"

Minx bent almost double with laughter.

The MediVan shot down a narrow tunnel and into the burning red glow of the night. A man crossing the street directly in front of them dove toward the sidewalk. His briefcase bounced on the MediVan's front hood, then struck the front windshield and split wide open. Hardcopy and comp disks whipped across the windshield and vanished. The MediVan's siren began whooping and wailing.

"Boner!" the driver shouted.

He grinned, eyes glaring red.

Monk looked at Minx as she grabbed his head and tugged him into a kiss, her breath gushing into his mouth hot and wet, her hand thrusting down and squeezing his groin.

"So booty!" she cried.

The night filled with flashing stroboscopic lights of red and near-red. The MediVan screamed to a halt. Minx thrust a reddish MediVan jacket around the back of Monk's shoulders, pulled one on herself, and tugged him out of the van.

Cars and bodies littered the roadway. Gunfire stammered and roared. "This one!" Minx exclaimed, tugging Monk around in a circle. She thrust him right at the sprawled body of a woman, a very large woman in clinging reddish clothes. "Now! Do it now!"

"What ... ?"

She thrust him down, his head to the woman's, his mouth to the woman's mouth, and then with two fingers clamped his nostrils shut. Monk grunted in surprise, abruptly exhaling-just once.

Maybe that was the wrong thing to do.

"No, Monk! No!" Minx exclaimed. "Not like that!"

Abruptly, the woman jerked and stiffened beneath him and her eyes flared open wide, glaring a fiery scarlet-red.

"Oh, *drek!*" Minx cried.

The woman began clawing Monk's face. She moaned louder and louder, like a creature risen from the grave and bent on exacting a terrible vengeance.

"*FIEND!*" Mink shrieked.

Monk stared, wide-eyed, till suddenly Minx was tugging him back, right onto his feet.

"TOO LATE! RUN, MONK, RUN!"

They ran. They ran across the width of the street-dodging around smashed cars, jumping over bodies-and in through a doorway and up a flight of stairs. Monk glanced back only once. The woman he had breathed into was up on her feet and staggering around. She grabbed some slag in reddish camos and tore his eyes right out of his head.

Monk opened his mouth and screamed.

The slag screamed, too.

A door slammed open. Monk pitched forward through the doorway. The door slammed again to his rear as he tumbled to the floor, onto his back. In some little, one-room apartment Panting, gasping, thrusting back her hair and groaning, "Oh godddddd ... ," Minx knelt down beside him and laid her head on his chest. "That was the wrong thing to do, you little booty," Minx said, catching her breath. "She must've been dead already."

Monk gaped, panting. "Dead?"

Abruptly, Minx's hands were moving gently all over his face, and she gazed down at him with a

red-hued look of genuine affection. "Oh, Monkie ... *are you tired?*" she crooned. "You must be tired. Like you're drained or something."

Now that she mentioned it...

"Come're," she murmured. She pressed her mouth down over his, and exhaled. Monk felt his whole body tingle with excitement. When she did it again, breathed into his mouth again, he inhaled deeply. It was sexy and wild and it made him feel like, like ... Like sex. Better than sex.

Later, when they were lying nude in each other's arms, Minx whispered, "Are you still hungry?"

Monk thought about that. "I'm not sure."

Minx smiled and snuggled close. "You're so booty."

"You're all red," Monk said. "Everything's red."

Minx giggled. "Of course."

26

The door from the alley led into a narrow hallway that ended at a squarish room crowded with artifacts: chairs, a couch, kitchen appliances, trideo, simsense gear, bookdisks, chips, several cyberdecks, and what looked like the scattered components for several more cyberdecks. Bandit had no particular interest in any of this. He investigated further. A small room off to the left turned out to be a lavatory. A third room looked like a bedroom.

The character of the bedroom stood out. Life glimmered here, though faintly. The spiritual essence of the world seemed to matter here. This room must be investigated further.

Bandit returned to his body.

"Okay?" Rico asked from the front of the van.

"Yes," Bandit said. "Interesting."

"You didn't see anything dangerous?"

"Not likely."

Back from his brief trip onto the astral, Bandit sat cross-legged in the rear of Thorvin's van, amid a clutter of tools and spare parts. He waited while Rico gave instructions to the rest of the group. This deep into Sector 6, Little Asia, they were probably safe, thanks to Piper's connections, but they would take no unnecessary chances. Dok and Filly would stay on guard here in the van. Everyone else would take a squat, go into the small apartment Bandit had scouted and shack out.

Bandit followed Rico and Piper, Shank, Thorvin, Surikov, and Marena Farris out of the van, across the alley, and into the cluttered apartment.

"You sure this is okay?" Rico said.

"I'm sure," Piper replied. "The slag who lived here caught big-time feedback. The rent's paid till the end of the month."

"Who's the slag?"

"Someone I know from the Irons."

Farris and Surikov took seats at opposite ends of the couch. Shank paused, watching them. Bandit stepped into the bedroom.

The air smelled of incense. The walls had been painted to look like a forest. A few plants, dried and nearly withered, sat in colored pots. Figurines and shiny trinkets decorated the chest of drawers, the bureau, and the small table in one corner, along with a few animal pelts and bones, vials of crystals, and a small drum. A pair of sleeping bags lay on the floor under a veil of mosquito netting. Beneath the pillows at the head-end of the sleeping bags lay a small cache of drugs, feel-good stuff, illegal, and a book, *The Shamanic Tradition*, by Arthur Garrett, Department of Occult Studies, U.C.L.A.

None of this had any real value. Bandit flipped through the book by Garrett, just curious, then dropped it onto the sleeping bags. The character of the room suggested a medicine lodge, where a shaman might do long magic, but that impression was apparently a lie.

The book by Garrett as much as proved it.

Fluffy stuff, very philosophical.

The real surprise came from the closet. Bandit assensed something there, something hinting of power. He found an open black plastic case that was just under a meter long. Inside was a flute, a big one, apparently carved out of wood and ornamented with shamanic symbols. Bandit ran his fingers lightly over the wood. On the astral plane the flute was a living entity-visible and real-alive. Softly radiant with energy. Like a focus, a weak one, only recently made.

Odd ...

The flute seemed to call to him, as if from across a great distance, faintly, so faintly, like some part of

himself that he had forgotten long ago.

He wondered ...

He considered the sword hanging from his belt. He had carried it a long time. When he was younger and less skilled in the ways of Raccoon, he had sometimes needed the sword to defend himself, but he had not used it in years. He would probably never use it again. He had come to understand that such violence as a sword might do was not compatible with the ways of Raccoon. Maybe it was time he gave up this part of himself completely. Maybe he should leave the sword in exchange for this flute, which somehow seemed representative of an older part of himself, his life, his being, and a part more important now.

No question it would be a fair exchange.

"You're making a mistake," Farris said.

"Naturally, you would say that," Surikov replied.

"This won't work out as you think."

"Why should that bother you?"

"Ansell, you know I have only your best interests in mind. I still care about what happens to you."

"I should believe that? After all that's happened?"

"Yes, yes, you should. I was wrong, I know that now. I'm sorry. I was afraid, deathly afraid. I know that's no excuse, but can you really hold it against me? What would you have thought in my position? I'd been taken from my room in the middle of the night by people I didn't even know. People with guns. I knew you were angry with me. I knew you blamed me. What else could I have thought?"

"You really thought I wanted you killed?"

"I know that's not very rational. I wasn't thinking very rationally at the time. Maybe I wasn't thinking at all. I don't know. I'm just afraid that you're making the same mistake, that you aren't thinking. You feel you've been betrayed, not just by me. You're full of anger. Maybe you feel that going to Prometheus Engineering will be a kind of revenge ..."

Surikov shook his head. "That's not it at all."

"Darling, how can you be so sure? You've been with Fuchi all your life. I know you haven't always gotten everything you wanted, but you were happy. For a time, you were very happy. If you could just put aside your anger, you'd see that you weren't happy at Maas Intertech for the same reasons that you won't be happy at Prometheus Engineering."

"So I should return with you to Fuchi? You must be mad."

Shank grunted and took a seat on the floor, then leaned back against the wall beside the hallway leading in from the alley door. Marena Farris didn't miss much. Ever since trying to waste Surikov, the exotic-looking biff had spent every available minute trying to persuade the slag to go back to Fuchi. She had a one-track mind, and she was smart. No matter what Surikov said, she found some way to twist it around and turn it into a reason why Surikov should return to the Black Towers. This far along, it was starting to grate. Shank had heard enough of Fuchi already.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He'd been slightly more than a day without any sleep. No big deal. He'd gone a lot longer than that in Bogota and Panama City, some years ago. The smart soldier knew to grab a few zees any time he had the chance.

Not enough furniture to go around, but Shank didn't mind the floor. A carpeted floor was a lot better than a bug-infested hole in the ground ...

Now if Marena Farris would just shut up ...

The worst of it was that their situation would probably improve if Farris got things her way. Thorvin had spotted the Executive Action Brigade coming after their asses in North Caldwell, Sector 20, and Rico suspected that the E.A.B. had been hired as their backup and that Fuchi had done the hiring, maybe through L. Kahn. If Fuchi got what they wanted, they might be content to let bygones go by, call off the backup, and forget it.

If not... Well...

There'd be plenty of time to catch up on sleep when it ended, whichever way things ended.

"I want you to stay with Farris."

Piper ran her hands up over Rico's chest to his shoulders, then leaned her head against his chin, his neck. "What if something goes wrong?" she said, softly. "You might need help."

"You're a decker. Not a cutter."

"I can shoot."

"If things go that wrong, one more gun won't make any difference. And I need you to watch Farris anyway."

"She's not going anywhere."

"That's the point. She's our responsibility."

Of course he would feel that way. Piper decided not to argue. She knew less about guns and fighting and had less experience with either than anyone on the team. That made her the obvious choice to keep watch on Marena Farris.

Rico and the rest of the team were ready within an hour, suited up, weapons checked, and heading out to the van. Rico put a pair of cuffs on Marena Farris' wrists and another pair on her ankles. "That's so you don't get into any trouble," he explained.

"Please don't go through with this," Farris said. "This meet. It won't work."

Rico hesitated a moment, then said, "It's already done."

Piper followed him to the alley door, there for one last embrace. "Be careful, *jefe*," she murmured.

"Always," Rico replied.

Once he had gone, Piper had nothing to do but sit in one of the armchairs and wait and worry. She held an Ares Special Service, but doubted she would need it. In all likelihood, no one would be coming to rescue Marena Farris, and Farris didn't seem like the type to try and break free on her own. This only emphasized Piper's feelings of uselessness. Tonight's meet had no need for a decker. She could jack in and monitor police activity, but the police, as usual, would probably prove to be irrelevant. She could try and infiltrate the Prometheus mainframes, in case Prometheus tried a double-cross, but the chances of her learning about that from the matrix seemed close to nil. Corps kept records on almost every aspect of existence, but documents on any illegal or quasi-legal operations were likely to be hidden away in Code Red datastores, or in some node isolated from the corporation's mainframes.

About the only thing she could do was pray, ask the kami to be kind. Before she could decide where to start, Marena Farris said, "I know you must mistrust me, but I want you to know that I'm grateful for the way you've treated me."

Piper felt a twinge or irritation. It was hard to look at Farris and not feel something like that. The woman appeared every bit the swank corporate whore, sophisticated and yet slutty. Impossibly over-developed. "I don't need your gratitude."

"I've often heard stories that make runners seem like wanton criminals," Farris said. "I know that some are brutal killers. That's obviously not the case with you and your people."

"Why are you talking like we've done you some big favor?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"What does that matter to me?"

"It could matter a great deal, depending on how things go."

"What things?"

"The meeting tonight with Prometheus."

"What do you know about it?"

"Probably more than you suspect." Farris paused to shake back her hair, then met Piper's gaze with an intimate look, an expression that pleaded to bridge the distance between them. Piper did not believe that look, not for an instant. Nor did she believe the sudden change in Farris' voice, which grew shockingly soft. "It's easy enough to see what you think of me. I know you probably don't trust me. That's why I haven't said much concerning what I know. I'm not just some little psychologist or some cosmed-sculptured biff. I've had access to some very proprietary data. I'm worth a lot more alive than dead."

Piper sneered. "No one's planning to kill you."

"Your man told me that already."

"Then it's true."

"He's a good man."

"The best."

"Good people are hard to find. Their beliefs put them at a disadvantage. They have to be very good at what they do, and they have to be well-informed, or bad things happen."

"Why are you telling me this? *Corporate*."

Farris hesitated, smiling, but managed to make the smile look reluctant, almost painful. "You're right," she said. "I am a corporate woman. Through and through. But if this meeting with Prometheus doesn't go right, I want you to remember that I warned you. I warned your man."

"So?"

"If I were you, I'd be afraid."

Piper briefly considered the gun held casually in her hands, then looked at Farris, and said, "Why should I be afraid?"

"How much do you really know about Prometheus Engineering?"

"You tell me. What should I know?"

"You may not know enough. That's my point."

Piper lifted the gun and pointed it at Farris. The Ares was loaded with soft ammo, but Farris could not know that. Like most guns, the Ares could fire either soft or hard ammunition. "I want you to tell me everything you think I should know. Everything that's pertinent."

An anxious look came over Farris' face. Her lips faintly quivered. She swallowed, and said tentatively, "Are you going to shoot me if I don't?"

Farris described herself as a "corporate woman." She was employed by one of the most unprincipled despoilers of the Earth that humanity had yet created. Answering her question took hardly any thought at all. "Give me an excuse."

"Your man won't like that."

"My man doesn't like many of the things I do. That's my problem. Your problem is what happens between now and when he comes back."

"Yes," Farris replied, "I can see that."

"Good. Now talk."

Farris talked.

In the van, Shank looked at the flute, frowned and said, "Hoi, Bandit. Where's your sword?"

Bandit said, simply, "It's not my sword anymore."

"Huh?" Shank said. "What'd you mean?"

Bandit replied, "It's not my sword anymore."

Shank wondered about that.

27

The Willow Brook Mall lay just across the Passaic River, putting it just beyond the border where Sector 20 of the Newark plex met the western extent of the Patterson-Passaic sprawl.

The mall had three strategic aspects: it attracted slags from the plex as well as burbies from the corporate out-lands, it straddled the confluence of several transitways and limited-access highways, and its parking fields went on forever.

At two a.m., Field 17D in the northwest quad was deserted but for a few scattered sedans and one black Toyota Elite limousine. Rico scanned the limo from a distance, checking the registration tags. Elites were as common as water, even in the Newark plex, but this wasn't L. Kahn's limo. Same model, different year.

"Think we'll make it?" Shank asked.

The time for worrying was over. "Ask me later."

"Nice answer, boss."

Shank put the Renault-Fiat Eurovan in gear and drove ahead. The rest of the team was in Thorvin's van, parked a safe distance away. They would stay out of sight, parked among other vehicles, until certain preliminaries had been satisfied.

Rico keyed his headset, and said, "We're moving."

Thorvin acknowledged.

Shank steered the Eurovan into field 17D and brought them to a halt about two spaces away from the waiting Elite. A few moments passed, then the rear door of the limo opened and a suit got out. He didn't look like nothing special, average height and build, medium age, dark gray suit and gloves to go with it. Standard corporate style. The style made the slag a real Johnson, anonymous, the perfect front man for a corp. You might see him a thousand times a day on the street, but you'd never remember him because nothing about him was at all memorable.

A second suit appeared, standing up on the far side of the limo. This was no Johnson. Rather, it was the suit's security man, a prime cutter.

Rico got out and met the suit midway between the van and the limo, pausing about two steps away, near enough that they'd both be in trouble if anybody got stupid. They hooked each other over. The suit motioned very briefly with one hand, glancing toward Rico's hip. He spoke with a voice as bland as his looks. "Mall security might spot that shooter of yours."

"We ain't gonna be here that long."

The suit nodded vaguely. "You have the merchandise, I presume?"

"You got the juice?"

The suit slowly drew open one side of his suit jacket, revealing the heavy automatic bolstered under his

shoulder as well as the plastipak of certified credsticks in his inside breast pocket. "The price as agreed in certified sticks."

"I wanna check 'em."

"First I see what I'm buying."

"You see, but you don't touch until I check the sticks."

The suit nodded, letting his jacket swing closed, and said simply, "Agreed."

Minor points, but even minors points counted here. In this game, nobody trusted nobody and even a little slip could push the panic button and bring out the shooters. Rico didn't mind letting the slag see Surikov. He could "see" him from five or ten meters away. He'd be unlikely to try anything, if he had anything in mind, till the range narrowed a bit. Step by step, slow and careful-that was the game plan, the accepted procedure.

Rico keyed his headset. "Ready."

Thorvin acknowledged.

Momentarily, the van came rolling up. Thorvin stopped it, according to plan, on the far side of the Renault-Fiat Eurovan from where Rico stood with the suit. When Filly and Dok emerged with Surikov, they stepped out in front of the Eurovan just far enough to show Surikov's face.

"You're very careful," the suit remarked.

"It pays," Rico replied.

"Once you've checked the credsticks, I want a DNA and retina scan."

"My man checks your equipment."

"That's fine."

Checking the suit's credsticks didn't take long. Rico had a portable verifier on his belt, not a stock model. Piper and Thorvin had put the unit together. Piper said the unit's integral chipware would detect phony bank encoding to a very high degree of certainty. That was good enough for Rico. He slotted the sticks one by one into the unit, waited for a pair of soft beeps, then passed them back to the suit. The sticks passed inspection.

Another slag emerged from the Toyota Elite. The suit introduced him as a technical aide. The aide showed Rico the pack of scanners he intended to use on Surikov. Rico motioned Dok over. Dok checked the scanners with gear of his own.

"Standard equipment," he concluded.

"Your man goes with my man," Rico said to the suit, "checks the merchandise, reports to you, then we make the swap."

"Agreed."

The final check took about a minute. The aide returned and gave the suit a nod. "Bring me the merchandise and then you get the sticks," the suit said.

"Right."

Here was the moment that counted. Rico took a quick look around. The suit's cutter hadn't changed position. The parking field around them looked clear. Thorvin wasn't giving any alerts based on readings from his own equipment or anything Bandit had to say. The assumption, then, was that everything looked chill. Rico motioned for Dok and Filly to bring Surikov forward. Their steps, scuffing against the pavement, seemed really loud. They moved slowly, at a measured pace. Seconds stretched out long.

"That's close enough," the suit said, lifting a hand toward Surikov, palm out. Then the slag's forearm jerked and something like a shotgun roared, and Rico realized the sleazebag had a cybergun implanted in his arm.

That explained the gloves. The glove on the right hand covered the firing port. The glove vanished with the roar of the cybergun and a flaring red tongue of fire.

As the roar began to fade, Rico had the Predator from his hip holster gripped in his hand and coming up, coming on-line, and putting a red targeting indicator on the suit's face.

In the background, on the far side of the limo, the suit's cutter was moving.

This time, Rico realized, the game was for keeps.

Bandit discerned nothing of any interest on or around the parking field or for a kilometer or more in any direction. The spells he used uncovered no imminent threats, no enemies. The only thing that really seemed to merit his attention was the suit's limousine.

In astral space, the distance between Thorvin's van and the limo was negligible. Bandit crossed it in practically no time at all. Getting further than that was another matter. The limo at first seemed like an ordinary car, but that wasn't quite true. Something about it was wrong, out of character for a car. Several

minutes of probing brought Bandit an answer. The limo was protected by a powerful ward. He hadn't realized this before because the ward was masked, hidden, deliberately concealed. This was very unusual. Concealing a ward was difficult. It suggested to him that someone or something of great value must be inside the limo. Unraveling the ward would be a worthy challenge.

Before he could finish, however, he assensed the violence erupting around him on the physical plane, and gained a sudden insight as to the reason for the limo's astral ward.

He returned to his physical body, looked toward Thorvin, and said, "I think there's a mage in that car."

"What CAR?" Thorvin shouted over the roar of gunfire.

"The limousine."

The blast of the cybergun caught Dok completely off-guard. He saw the suit lift a hand palm-out, then that hand disappeared behind a flaring of fiery red. The blast assaulted his ears. He caught himself in mid-stride, saw Rico's gun coming up and felt Surikov falling, pulling him off-balance.

Dok tightened his hold on Surikov's arm, but it was pointless. The man dropped like meat, collapsing onto his back. Dok staggered, men caught his balance, looking down in time to see the results of the suit's single shot unfolding. The blast from the cybergun had shredded Surikov's neck. He was dead or close to it. Dok began bending toward the man and opened his mouth to shout, but too late. It happened too fast. Surikov's eyes quivered like gelatin, then began boiling. A dark, viscous fluid began trickling from his ears. Steam swirled. The man's face began collapsing in on itself. Dok knew exactly what was happening. He'd seen effects like this before. Not every cortex bomb was designed for explosive force. Some were rigged with white phosphorous or burn-gel. They might be keyed to life signs, or to a remote, and they left nothing behind but a puddle of simmering goop.

Filly shouted into his face.

Autofire erupted.

The Predator hammered the night like a cannon. The suit staggered backward, head snapping back, blood splashing his chest, Rico turned and hurled himself into a dive.

Heavy weapons thundered. Rico recognized the rapid-fire stammering of the minigun atop Thorvin's van and the higher-pitched bursts of Shank's M22A2 assault rifle. There was also a quick, clattering burst that might have been from an SMG. Rico thought of the suit's cutter. Probably him.

He tucked and rolled and came up running. All he had to do now was make it to Thorvin's van without getting his cojones shot off. Slot in and run.

One minute everything was calm and peaceable-like. In the next, Surikov was down and Rico was blasting away with that heavy auto of his, and targeting indicators were popping up all over the place and heavy autofire was coming in from every direction.

So much for any advance warning!

Never trust a freaking shaman for anything!

Thorvin revved his supercharger and spun the weapons pods up top. Hostiles were coming up right out of the ground, like from manhole covers and storm drains. He set his minigun to stammering and fired a broad pattern of minigrenades, smoke and concussion both. What really worried him was the pair of bogies just now appearing on his radar overlay.

"PAIR OF BIRDS INCOMING!" he roared.

Make my freaking night.

Bandit stepped out through the open side door of the van and took a quick look around.

Just beyond the Eurovan that Rico and Shank had brought along was the suit's shiny black limousine. Bandit couldn't see the suit anymore. The slag had fallen, and Bandit had an idea he might be dead. Raccoon did not care much for killing or for any kind of fighting, but this was probably an exceptional situation. Things did not look good.

A few steps in front of him, between him and the Eurovan, Shank was shooting away on full auto.

Then the mana shifted. It had nothing to do with Shank. Bandit sensed what was coming before he had any real right to know. He lowered his head a little and leaned toward his left to peer around the front end of the Eurovan. From there, he saw something move on the far side of the suit's limo. The mage was emerging, standing up, using the limousine for cover. A dark hood cast his features in shadow, but not his aura. Bandit's eyes widened as he saw the pulsating power in the mage's astral form. They widened still further as he assensed the power of the spell the mage was drawing together.

This was very bad.

Swirling energy coalesced and condensed, growing more intense, more menacing. The world seemed to slip toward blackness as the mana mounted rapidly toward a climax. Bandit wondered what would happen when that climax finally came, but decided against waiting to find out. He had a very, very strong feeling that he would not like the effects of the mage's spell one bit.

Rather than wait, he murmured two words and pointed. From his finger shot a slender stream of energy that blended with the forces gathering around the mage. Momentarily, the mage hesitated and wiped at his eyes. Then he coughed, and then he was growling and claspng his hands to his face as he hacked and coughed and rasped for breath. The stench of the vapors that now swirled around him would spread quickly. The nauseating odors took effect at once.

The mage abruptly bent over and vomited.

Bandit nodded. Another lesson learned. Powerful, complex spells had their uses. Raccoon preferred to keep things simple wherever possible. Here, simple made complex irrelevant. Or almost irrelevant. For another moment, the energies the mage had conjured continued to gather, uncontrolled, building toward a new climax, a chaotic release of immense power.

This could be bad.

Really bad.

A crackling detonation rushed across the night sky, growing in strength and volume until suddenly it erupted and a searing bolt of pure white energy struck down out of the night. Dok felt more than saw it. The hairs running up his spine to his neck stood on end. A tremendous blast shook the ground. A roaring explosion followed. A blinding white light flared. For an instant, it was like watching a nuke explosion on trid. Out the corners of his eyes, Dok glimpsed what he thought was the suit's Toyota limo leaping off the ground, disintegrating into whirling, razor-edged bits of shrapnel.

Somewhere between that first immense blast and the roaring explosion that followed, Dok felt Filly bump into his side, and suddenly she was falling right in front of his feet.

Caught in mid-stride, halfway around the front end of the Eurovan, Dok pitched forward and plunged to the pavement. He heard Shank bawling, "COVERRRRR!" He heard that roaring explosion and caught a glimpse of the disintegrating limo. He thought for sure that Filly must've stumbled. Or maybe she'd heard that first ground-shaking blast and just instinctively went prone.

Shrapnel or bullets or maybe both slammed against Dok's ballistic-insulated chest and shoulder and arm as he scrambled around on his hands and knees to get back to Filly. She was bleeding. There was blood in the hair at the back of her head, and she wasn't moving. Suddenly the worst seemed like a possibility, but Dok knew, God now he knew, that it would be just like Filly to take a hit, even a bad one, without ever making a sound. She was one tough woman.

He seized her from under the shoulders, began dragging her toward the van. *No time-no time for first aid now!* He had to get her into the van-into the van and then do whatever he had to do! Patch her up good. Keep her alive till they got to a clinic somewhere, *if it was really that bad!*

It was hard to breathe, so hard ...

Suddenly, Rico was there, grabbing Filly around the hips and helping to heft her in through the van's side door.

No time to lose.

None at all.

28

They were most of the night shaking their pursuit and checking and rechecking that they were clear.

The few things Bandit said about the mage who had been at the meet made the slag sound like some incredible master of the arcane arts. Like the guy could've laid waste to the whole parking field, everything in it, and half the Willow Brook Mall if he'd only had the time to get the magic together. Maybe the way things ended pointed out the advantage of learning your stuff on the street, instead of in some high-tower occult academy. On the street, you learned that you were either quick or dead. That was one thing about Bandit. As much as he sometimes seemed to be living in some other world, he knew how to be quick, and he knew when quick meant everything.

Good instincts, Rico thought.

What else could you call it?

Thorvin sent the van flying down the transitways. They crisscrossed the plex and doubled back too many times to keep track. Rico found it hard, impossible, to keep track because he couldn't believe how the

meet had ended. It made no fragging sense.

There was also the action in the rear of the van.

Dok worked on Filly for more than an hour, long after it became obvious to Rico that what little Dok could do with the gear on hand just wouldn't cut it. Maybe if he'd had a full surgical kit with respirators and all the drek like in the average emergency ward, maybe then something too good to believe might have happened. The way things were, with all their asses on the line, they had to get clear, and everything else took second place.

Filly never moved. She didn't breathe. She didn't show the least sign of life. Whatever had hit the back of her head had penetrated bone. It had probably been over in an instant, before she could feel the pain, before she even knew what hit her.

If it was gonna happen, that was the way it oughta happen. That was how Rico wanted to go. Here one moment, gone the next. A death with some dignity.

That didn't help Dok.

"She lived how she wanted, amigo," Rico finally said, "She was true to herself and true to you. She was real. She had to be there. She wouldn't've let you go alone. No *effing* way, compadre."

Shank grunted, nodded agreement, and told Dok, "We're with you, bro."

Dok turned his head toward the ceiling and closed his eyes and said nothing. Clamped his eyes tightly shut and clenched his teeth together till the muscles in his jaw were twitching. Trying hard to keep things inside. Rico knew what that was like. He also knew it was no use. Some feelings were just too powerful.

It was almost dawn when they got to Little Asia. Thorvin turned the van down the narrow alley to their latest bolthole and parked. No sign of pursuit or surveillance. Rico got out, looked around. The van's side door slid open and Bandit stepped out, also looking around. Inside the rear of the van, Dok sat staring at Filly's body. "Come on, bro," Shank said.

"I wanna be alone," Dok said harshly.

"Come on, chummer."

"Leave me *alone!*"

"Dok," Rico said, letting an edge slip into his voice, "you're still bleeding. Shank's bleeding. We're all bleeding. You come inside, take care of biz. You want time then, you got it."

The speech seemed to work, but the minute Dok stepped out of the van he started cursing. Getting mad, crazy with fury. His words rose into snarls like an animal might make. He turned and began slamming his fists into the side of the van. Then he rammed his head into the metal. Once wasn't enough. He couldn't stop. Probably, he wanted Filly so bad he'd do anything, take any risk, go up against anybody, kill anybody, to get her back. He couldn't just quietly accept the truth. He had to do something.

A woman was always a woman, even just lying in bed asleep. It wasn't like that for most men, and, Rico knew,

it wasn't like that for Dok. He was a soldier as much as one was a doc. He was a former mercenary. Just saving lives was never enough. He had to prove himself as a man. He had to do things. Crazy, dangerous things like shadowrunning, even if it got him killed. It was more than just machismo. It was pride and self-esteem and an essential part of his identity. He had to do something about Filly, even if anything he could do would be futile.

Even if it was just pounding himself bloody against the side of a van.

Rico watched for maybe three seconds, then grabbed Dok by the arm, jerked him around and thrust him back bodily against the van. Dok struggled, pounding at Rico's shoulders and shouting, but Rico kept shoving, pinning him against the metal. Shank helped. Grief ultimately beat out fury, and that grief was too much to contain.

A man strong enough to love, really love, opened himself to the possibility of pain. A man who could do that didn't give a damn who knew how much it hurt or how the pain showed.

The flood subsided abruptly. Dok sagged, his eyes going wide, his face turning pale. Rico caught him up hard, gripping him around the body.

"I'm hit," Dok murmured. "Christ ..."

Rico said nothing.

Shank helped carry Dok inside.

The moment Piper heard the rumble of the van, she snatched up her automatic and hurried up the hall to the alleyway door. A brief glance through the peephole confirmed her suspicions. She pulled the door open, then stood and watched as Dok climbed out of the van, as he cursed and shouted, and, finally, as Rico and Shank carried him toward the door. Glancing back and forth, she felt only confusion until she saw the

reddish stains on Rico's cheek and hands, and then the lower legs of someone lying just inside the open sidedoor of the van. On those legs was a pair of dark hi-top boots. Filly's boots. Piper looked at the blood staining Dok's jacket and the rips in Shank's armored vest and the scratches on his arms and knew right then that the meet had gone very badly.

It took her a moment to put it all together: Dok's rage, Filly's boots. No sign of Ansell Surikov.

The slotting corporates had fragged them again. Now someone was dead, *another good person was dead*, and more were wounded. Piper couldn't just stand there and watch the wounded bleed. The anger and the frustration that came welling up from inside demanded that she respond. It was her duty.

She turned and hurried back down the hall. From her knapsack, she took a clip containing hard ammo, twelve armor-piercing rounds. At the touch of a switch the clip full of soft ammo dropped from her Ares Special Service. She thrust the new clip in, pulled on the slide, and released it. One soft round popped out and fell to the floor. A hard round took its place.

She stepped into the bedroom.

Farris lay there on the floor, on her side, arms cuffed behind her back. The little trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth was nothing compared to what she deserved, and what she was going to get. Those who served the megacorps were no better than the nefarious scum who ruled over the corporate hierarchy. They were the enemies of every moral person, of all metahumanity. They deserved no mercy. For their crimes against the Earth and every future generation, they deserved to die. They deserved to rot in hell.

"*Kuso-jitsugyoka*," Piper snarled.

Farris looked at her, gaping, and then shrieked.

Piper pointed the auto at Farris' face and squeezed down on the trigger, but then something brushed her side and bumped her back. A huge hand swept along the outside of her arm, encompassed her forearm and tugged it upward, lifting her right off her feet.

"You fragging bent?" Shank growled.

He tugged the gun from her hand.

Dangling above the floor, Piper cursed at him wrath-fully in Japanese.

Then Rico was there in the doorway, looking from her to Farris and back again. Piper stopped, stopped struggling, stopped cursing. Contained herself. Completely. Shank lowered her to the floor. She rubbed her aching arm and glanced at Rico, but could not meet his eyes.

"What's this?" Rico said.

Piper shook her head, said nothing.

"*What the frag's going on?*"

"It was necessary."

Rico glared and curtly motioned her out of the room.

As Piper stepped into the main room, Dok looked up from the couch, met her eyes and said, "Filly punched out."

Piper couldn't help but be moved by the emotion in his face and voice. Despite her most immediate difficulty.

Despite Rico's anger. She had known Filly for several years, almost as long as she had known Dok. She regarded them as friends. She knew how close the couple that been. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "Very sorry. I'll pray for her. Pray that the kami are kind to her spirit."

Dok nodded, looked away.

In that moment, Thorvin came into the room, hopping forward on one leg. Blood was dripping from the engineer's boot on his left foot. He paused and leaned against the wall. "Freaking slug came *right through the door!*" he growled. "Musta found a gap in the freaking armor."

Suddenly everything seemed to be going wrong.

They must have offended the kami.

She most of all.

Dok was hit, but no worse than anybody else-of them that survived the meet. They'd all been blooded, all except Bandit, who had the devil's own luck.

Getting Dok to tend the wounded took some work. He kept staring into space like he was in a trance or something. He kept forgetting the names of things he needed out of his kit. He made such a mess of one bandage he tried putting around Shank's arm that he had to pull it off and start over. He wasn't all there. Rico could understand that, but he also understood that none of them could afford an infected wound or the loss of any more blood than they had already shed.

Once the team was patched, Rico drew Dok into the bedroom to check on Marena Farris. She was on

one of the sleeping rolls, sitting up and free of the cuffs. She looked anxious, upset. Rico didn't blame her. He'd be upset too if somebody pointed a gun in his face.

Dok checked her out. One side of her mouth was a little puffy. Nothing to worry about. Nothing for Dok or Farris to worry about.

Rico remembered the trickle of red he'd seen coursing down from the corner of her mouth. She hadn't got that lying on the floor. She'd been in the other room when the team left for the meet and her hands had been cuffed in front, not behind her back. The obvious conclusion was that, for whatever reason, Piper had gotten a little rough. If Rico hadn't seen her pointing an Ares at Farris' face literally as he came through the door, he probably wouldn't have believed it.

But for the swelling by the mouth, Farris' stylishly contoured face was otherwise unmarked. The worst Piper could've done was slap her, maybe slap her a couple of good ones. That wasn't the point, though. The point had to do with what was right and what was wrong, what he could let pass and what he couldn't tolerate. He had serious problems with any woman getting beaten or abused, especially one like Farris, who obviously presented no real physical threat to anyone. The fact that another woman had done the beating made no difference. The fact that Farris had been cuffed and totally helpless only made the matter worse.

It made him want to throw up.

Once Dok stepped out of the room, Rico said, "What happened here won't happen again. You can take that for a promise."

Farris nodded, looking troubled. "What happens now? To me, I mean."

"That ain't decided."

Farris hesitated, then said, "Have you spoken to your woman?"

"What woman?"

"The Asian woman. I don't know your names."

"Who said she's my woman?"

Farris seemed disturbed by the edge that slipped into Rico's voice. "I'm sorry," she said in a hushed voice. "I just assumed ..."

"Don't assume nothing."

"Yes, of course. Excuse me. But you should still speak to her. There are things you should know. We talked."

"We'll get to that later."

"There's something you have to tell me?"

Rico nodded. "The meet didn't go too good."

"How is Ansell?"

"He didn't make it."

"You mean he's dead?"

Rico nodded again.

Farris looked more than just saddened by the news. How much more Rico couldn't tell. Farris lowered her head. She wiped at her eyes. "Could I be alone, please?" she said. "This is ... I'm afraid I'm getting rather upset..."

"If you want anything, just ask."

She shook her head, her hair falling forward, shielding her face.

Rico left her and went into the front room where he found Piper waiting. The look on her face was getting familiar: embarrassment, shame. Rico nodded toward the alley door. She preceded him up the hall and out into the alley. Rico spent a moment glancing around, checking that the alley was clear, then turned to Piper and said, "You wanna tell me what you thought you were doing in there?"

"It would be very difficult," Piper replied, looking everywhere but at him.

"Do it anyway."

She took a while getting to it. "I wasn't really thinking," she said in a whisper. "I saw that the meet had gone bad, *jefe*. I saw you were wounded. I saw Filly lying there in the van. I realized she was dead. I felt I had to do something. I felt it was my duty."

"Murdering Marena Farris."

"She is a corporate. Corporates are our enemies."

"Yeah? Let's talk about duty. You had a duty to me to watch out for Farris. You had a duty to the team."

Piper's face turned a dark shade of red.

She covered it with her hands.

"Please ... ," she moaned.

Rico turned and walked away a few steps, then lit a cheroot. It was that or bust a gut, or get violent. The frustration was almost too much. The way he felt now, Piper seemed like a complete stranger, a total mystery, a disaster waiting to happen, a slight against his honor that he didn't even want to consider. She was as gentle as a dove in bed. How the hell could she attempt cold-blooded murder? Did her hatred of corps run that deep?

Maybe the old saying was true.

Never trust an elf...

In a voice that wavered with emotion, Piper said, "I am shamed. It is my way, *jefe*. I have always been shamed. From the moment of my conception. I am *kawaruhito*. You cannot imagine ... In Japan, all metahumans are vile. Reviled. They are hated. I was sent to Jigoku-To-Shi. That is Hell City. That is its name, *jefe*. It is a horrible place. I escaped. I found a way to Seattle, UCAS. I had heard of the promised land. The land of promise. Tir Tairngire. But they would not let me in. My own people. Elves like me. Like my father, they rejected me. So I am doubly shamed."

Rico had never heard this story before, not these particular details. Piper didn't talk much about herself. And Rico didn't expect a self-effacing Japanese and word-wary decker to give away any more than she might need, certainly no more than she wanted. He'd always been willing to accept whatever she chose to give and just forget the rest. He struggled to do that now. He struggled to see what this excerpt from her life story had to do with almost murdering somebody. Was shame the key point? Had she suffered so much of it that a little more didn't matter? He knew well enough that she wouldn't stand here and ask forgiveness because she'd had a rough We. *Please feel sorry for me and forget what I did ...* Piper would never say that, not intentionally, anyway. Piper wanted nobody's pity.

"Shame is my *Ms*, *jefe*. It is all I am capable of. I have failed you twice on this run, and that is my shame. And I will fail you again, no matter what I do. Or how hard I try." She hesitated, then blurted, "You should leave me. For your own good. You should have nothing to do with me."

Rico clenched his teeth. He didn't believe in "fate." Luck, maybe, but that was different.

Piper had been acting under impulse, he decided. The shock of seeing Filly dead, the heat of the moment. Every body got that way sometimes, and these hadn't been a great couple of days. The run had become an abortion. "They were all feeling the pressure, and pressure had a way of bending people outta shape.

It all came down to one point, though. The same point that had been there from the start. "I don't work with killers," Rico said lowly. "Murderers. I won't live with one neither. Work like that, network, it's for scum. The garbage you see in the gutters. That's your choice. You decide what's gonna be."

Piper started breathing hard before he got halfway done. He barely got out his last word before she said in an anguished voice, "I choose you, *jefe*. I choose you ..." Her breath caught and she grunted, almost crying. "I just... I'm just afraid ... the corps, corporates ... *they're going to kill us this time!*"

It was a distinct possibility. But it changed nothing.

Rico drew Piper into his arms and held her. They weren't dead yet, and Rico wasn't about to give up. Too many lives, too much at stake. His job was to find a way outta this mess they'd somehow come to own. Quitting wouldn't work. Neither would lying down and dying. "Just don't gimme any more problems, chica," he said. "I got enough already, *Comprende?*"

Piper nodded, face buried in his shoulder. "*Hai. Wakarimasu, jefe,*" she said. "I understand."

29

The room was small and squarish, the decorations rather crude and the furnishings threadbare. The walls had been painted to look like a forest. A few dying plants slumped here and there in colored pots. The air smelted of incense. The pair of sleeping bags on the floor provided the only place to sit.

Farrah Moffit ran her eyes around the room one more time, just to prove to herself again that she had no way to escape.

Even if she could get out of this room, she would need to find a working telecom, then manage to stay alive and free long enough to be picked up. The odds on that seemed long. She had seen and heard enough to guess that she was somewhere in the New York-New Jersey megaplex, but where exactly she did not know. Queens, the Bronx, Westchester—they all looked the same to her. One great mass of grimy ferrocrete. Outside Manhattan, she was lost.

Certain smells in the alley had made her think of Manhattan's Chinatown, but that probably meant nothing. A great many Asians lived in the urban Northeast. Practically every metropex in the region had some sort of Asian enclave, some quite large.

The runners who held her captive had done a very good job of keeping her in the dark.

If only she could believe the leader's promises that she would not be harmed. Her time with Fuchi had cured her of any such naivete. She would be kept alive for as long as that served the runner's purposes, then, in all likelihood, she would be killed. She had never previously dealt with shadowrunners herself, but she had heard enough and read enough and seen enough on trideo to be acquainted with the breed. Most were glorified gangers, criminals by another name, and quite vicious. They would not allow her to live for the simple reason that she could point them out in a police line-up, should police become involved, and she could testify to their crimes, should matters ever reach a court. They would not leave her behind. They would not simply let her go. Eventually someone, probably that Asian girl, the decker, would come into this room, put a gun to her head and pull the trigger.

If only she knew more of what was happening. What she would give for just a few minutes in front of a trid.

She felt so isolated, so alone.

This, of course, was part of the runners' strategy. They wanted to keep her in a state of mental uncertainty and emotional turmoil, this to persuade her of the value of cooperating fully, of being compliant. Submissive. Weak. An elementary stratagem, a common technique for interrogations. The leader kept assuring her she would be safe, while other members of the group threatened her with violence, and, in one case at least, made good on the threat. A neat little twist deliberately designed to add to her fears and her confusion.

To her chagrin, it was all working very nicely, though only to a limited extent.

Certain inescapable facts kept coming to mind. As a hostage held for ransom, she would be as good as dead. Fuchi did not pay ransom. That was the corp's stated official policy, and it held true for all but the highest corporate officials. The entire draconian apparatus in charge of Fuchi security worried little about humanitarian values or the sanctity of human life. For someone in her position, a fairly low-ranking member of the corp's Special Administration, Fuchi would be more likely to send in a corporate assault team, kill everyone, sacrificing certain corporate assets rather than submit to extortion.

That put her life in her own hands exclusively, and that frightened her. Pleading would do no good. Deceptions would get her only so far, and might get her killed before she was due.

No, Farris realized, she wouldn't get out of this alive unless she offered the runners something, something substantial, something that she alone of all their contacts had to offer them.

Deciding what that was did not take long.

* * *

The food Dok and Piper brought was not bad. It was mostly fish and rice, warm and easy to eat and quickly finished. Bandit liked his food that way.

Once done, he picked up the flute, surveyed it astrally, ran his fingertips over the polished wood. It appeared to have been made by a highly skilled craftsman. It had no flaws that he could detect. As soon as he had the time, he would return to his special place, his place of long magic, and bind the instrument's energies to his own. He would enhance its power, too.

Now, he lifted the flute to his mouth and played a few tentative notes. He did not know how to play a flute, but he would learn. He stopped when he noticed the others in the room-Rico, Shank, Dok, and Piper-all looking at him.

"When did you get so musical?" Shank grumbled.

Bandit thought about that, and said, "Ask me later."

"Sure. Maybe next year."

Bandit nodded. A year from now would be fine.

"If we're still alive."

"If we aren't, how would you ask?"

Shank stared at him a few moments, frowning. Apparently, he had no answer. That was good. It assured Bandit that Shank had not suddenly become so "magical" that he could speak from beyond the grave.

Orks should stick to weapons and combat and leave questions concerning magic to others.

"What?" Piper said, looking confused.

Rico stood, and said, looking at Bandit, "I'm gonna question our guest. I want you to watch her for lies."

Of course.

Reluctantly, Bandit followed Rico into the bedroom, where he had found the flute. The woman was in there now, the one with the unusual aura. Latent magical ability. Marena Farris.

Rico closed the door.

Marena Farris looked like she'd been crying: red eyes, shiny brow and cheeks. A few wet-looking curls of hair stuck to her cheeks. She looked at him with an expression that seemed to mix grief and fear into something intensely vulnerable.

It would've been easy, too easy, to walk over, crouch down, talk to her soft and low and try to reassure her. Any woman in Farris' position probably deserved no less.. Just for being a woman caught in a bad situation. Yet Rico forced himself to plant his feet in front of the door, then crossed his arms and looked at Farris long and hard, like he'd be taking no cirek from anybody. He had more to consider than just this woman's feelings. "Okay," he said, "you got my attention. What'd you know about all this?"

"Did you talk-"

"We talked," Rico said, interrupting. He had heard what Piper had to say about her talk with Farris. "Now I wanna hear it direct."

Farris wiped at her eyes, then looked at him and said, "Where shall I start?"

"How do you know about Prometheus?"

"It was part of my job as a member of Special Administration-"

"Of what?"

Piper had mentioned this, but Rico wanted to hear more. Farris elaborated. She made the Fuchi "Special Administration" sound like a corp within a corp, a special network designed to monitor practically every phase of the corporation's business. Part of Farris' job, apparently, was to covertly stick her nose into different Fuchi departments' business.

"Get back to Prometheus."

Farris nodded. "Fuchi has done extensive psycho-profiling of all its primary competitors. There's an entire department devoted to competition research. I participated peripherally in several studies, including a recent study of Prometheus."

"Convenient."

"It was essential. I served as liaison between the infiltrator program and competition research. We weren't about to choose the target for our infiltrator by random selection. We viewed our first insertion as a sort of beta test-model. We wanted to ensure that whoever we sent would enter an environment where he or she would have a high chance of success."

"You said the meet with Prometheus wouldn't work out Why?"

A wary, almost fearful look entered Farris' eyes. Rico wouldn't be surprised if she was aware that Surikov wasn't the only one who had died at the meet with Prometheus. She had to know that others had been wounded. Rico, for one, had a bandage on his left arm that couldn't be missed.

Farris hesitated, then said, "When was the last time you heard of Prometheus accepting someone from a competing corporation?"

"I'll ask the questions."

Farris flushed. "Excuse me," she said. She spent a few moments regaining her composure, that or figuring out what to say next. Rico wondered how much of the wary, fearful act was real. Bandit offered no clue. Not yet anyway. "Well ... my point," Farris said, "is that Prometheus has a very strong intra-corporate program. They develop their personnel resources from within. They've taken a few special individuals who desired to change corporate affiliations, but those were exceptional people, primarily mages with very arcane specialties."

Rico could accept that, as far as it went. Magicians were special. They weren't half as common as most people seemed to think. Ones with Bandit's ability were damn rare.

"Typically," Farris continued, "the corporate mindset views a change of affiliation as a sort of betrayal. Would you trust someone who betrayed their corp? Trust them with proprietary data? Your edge against the competition? Corps guard their secrets very closely. They scrutinize personnel recruited from other corps scrupulously. Prometheus more than most."

Rico nodded. Never trust a traitor. He'd heard that before. "Why'd they kill your husband?"

"Because," Farris said, seeming stung, "they'd rather deprive a competitor of the value of an Ansell Surikov than risk recruiting a potential traitor. Another corp's loss is their gain. That's how Prometheus sees it."

"And that's how you knew the meet wouldn't go right."

"That was my assumption."

"So why didn't you say something?"

"Would you have believed me?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. Everything I do influences what you think of me and that matters quite a lot." Abruptly, Farris seemed on the verge of tears. Her eyes got moist and her lower lip quivered. "If I had said they might try to kill you, and they didn't, if your meet had gone as planned, you'd see me as a schemer. You'd think I had some hidden agenda, that I had tried to deceive you." Her breath caught. "It may not seem very brave, but I want to get out of this alive. I'm horrified over what's happened, over Ansell's death, but nothing scares me more than the power you have over me. I'll do anything I have to do ... to get through this."

Some slags would take a statement like that and run and never stop, especially with it coming from someone who looked like Farris. Some slags would use any situation to take advantage of a woman. Not Rico's style. Not even on his worst day. "One of my people might still be alive if I'd known what you know about Prometheus."

Farris' expression grew anguished. "I'm *sorry*," she said. "It's hard to know what to do. If I, had it to do over, I would take my chances and tell you. I was afraid. I'm still afraid."

"You got reason."

Farris seemed to shudder. "Yes, I know," she said quietly, almost in a whisper. "I know I have reason to fear you. That's why we must talk. I have something that you might want."

"Like what?"

"Ansell Surikov."

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"Surikov is dead."

"No. He's not."

Farris looked scared, but she spoke in the dead-calm tone that people used when they know exactly what they're saying, and know that they're right.

Rico looked at the stress analyzer on his wrist. If Farris was lying, she was damn good at it.

A long silence followed. Farris' eyes never wavered, despite her fearful expression. Mentally, Rico ran down the short list of possible explanations. Farris could be lying. She could be nuts. Desperate enough to say anything or too far gone to notice. Even if Surikov had been revived, magically resuscitated, or his apparent death only some magician's illusion, Farris would have no way of knowing that.

Rico could think of only one other explanation and it wasn't a good one. Possibly, just possibly, he and his team had been not only double-crossed, but reamed right from the start. Tricked somehow. He didn't see how. "Surikov's not dead?"

"No." Farris shook her head.

"Then who was the slag we busted out of Maas Intertech?"

"Michael Travis. One of Ansell's research assistants." It didn't seem likely. "No way," Rico growled. "No fragging way. We had retina scans. We had fragging DNA scans,"

"Yes, but how did you confirm those scans?" Farris asked softly. "Based on data obtained from Fuchi?"

"I'll ask the questions."

Farris just watched him a moment. The fear in her expression seemed to mix with sadness, maybe regret "Not even Fuchi datafiles are immutable," she said. "The infiltrator program anticipated the possibility that certain relevant datafiles such as personnel files might be surreptitiously accessed. These files were altered. Datasets were exchanged. Michael Travis' retinal and DNA patterns were inserted into Ansell's files. The real Ansell Surikov, his codes and patterns, are now part of the datafiles that originally belonged to Michael Travis."

Rico said nothing. He guessed that what Farris was saying was possible, but she made it sound too easy. There was more to changing identities than just a swap of data in computer files. "Surikov's face is all over the datanets. He's been at conferences. He's been on trideo. People know what he looks like."

"Yes, that's true," Farris agreed, as softly as before. "And that is one reason why Michael Travis was chosen. He and Ansell have similar physical parameters. Similar physiques. Only a modest amount of cosmed surgery was necessary to complete the likeness."

Rico shook his head, tempted to sneer. "You can't cut a slag into a disguise like that. You can't make him a duplicate of somebody else. It's been tried. Surgery leaves scars. You can't cover up the traces. Not all of them."

"You're correct," Farris said. "Ordinarily, any surgery would be detected by a close medical examination. Precluding an attempt at deception. In this Case, however, it was possible to disguise the cosmetic alterations as necessary surgical reconstructions." Farris hesitated a moment, then said, quieter

than before, "Ansell has always been something of a bacchanalian. And rather ^discriminate. It was a simple matter to modify his files to show an episode with Gray's Syndrome."

Rico grimaced. "That's real convenient."

"Efficacious. And therefore essential."

Gray's Syndrome was one of several virulent, sexually transmitted diseases that had arisen over the last five or ten years. People said it had come with the Awakening. Elves seemed to be particularly prone, but no one was immune. Gray's was nasty, though usually not fatal, given the right medical care. It corrupted a person's appearance. Made him or her look old and sick and deformed. And it happened fast, in just days. By the time a person realized he had it, his hair could be falling out and his teeth turning black and jutting out of his mouth like the fangs of an ork. The pain was said to be horrendous. Some people were transformed practically overnight. Some people, those who couldn't afford surgical corrections, killed themselves rather than go through life looking like some simsense-inspired horror. Some people just went insane. Rico supposed it would take a lot of surgery to restore a man from an episode with Gray's. That much cutting might well be used to cover the surgery needed to turn some slag into a near-duplicate of Ansell Surikov.

Clever.

"Okay," Rico said. "Say you made this slag Travis look like Surikov. He passes the scans. That doesn't make him Surikov."

"That is where headware comes in."

"Yeah?"

Farris nodded. "The base implantation involved some highly advanced bionetics to boost the cerebral functions. This provided a framework for implanting a new form of semi-organic skillsoft, the bionetic equivalent of personafix BTL, encoded with Ansell Surikov's persona matrix."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that Michael Travis not only looked and acted like Ansell Surikov, he believed that he *was* Ansell Surikov."

"And nobody at Maas Intertech noticed that this slag Travis had all this drek inside his head."

"Ansell Surikov has numerous cerebral implants. Most scientists do. Michael Travis' implants were simply designed to conceal their personafix functions." A look like surprise passed over Farris' features. "Even I couldn't tell them apart. And I've had more experience with Ansell than merely as a psychologist."

"Which one are you married to?"

"Ansell. The original Ansell."

"So if Surikov was really Travis, why'd you try to kill 'im?"

Farris' expression turned sad, hurt. "I've already explained that. Everything I told you about Ansell applied to Michael Travis. Almost everything. Michael volunteered for the infiltrator program. He did it to spite me. We'd been having an affair. It didn't work out I only referred to him as Ansell Surikov because, in effect, he *was* Ansell, functioning as Ansell. I believed that he had hired you to kill me. Ansell is quite capable of that, given adequate motivation, and Michael Travis' implanted persona overrides made him just as capable. I thought that my only chance for surviving would be to kill him first."

Rico almost didn't give a damn. He could see he wasn't going to catch Farris in any kind of lie. She had all the angles of her story worked out, whether this was chiptruth or pure fantasy. What worried him was the chance that her story was actually true, what that implied about all he had done, and what he ought to do next. "So if it's this slag Travis who got iced, where's the real Surikov?"

"That's what you and I must talk about."

"We're talking about it right now."

Farris dropped her eyes and shook her head. "We're talking about the past. I want to talk about the future."

"What future?"

"Ansell's future," Farris said. "And your future. And mine."

"I ain't got no future."

"Perhaps you do." she said quietly. "It's conceivable that I could give it back to you."

Rico watched Marena Farris intently. She looked about as uncertain and uneasy as ever, but now he didn't trust it, not nearly as much as before. A minute ago she'd been just a frightened woman telling a story he could either believe or dismiss. Now she talked like a person with a plan and Rico didn't like it. Farris was too smart-and too damn good-looking. She looked too much like the conniving blonde biff in every action-adventure flick he'd ever-seen. Biffs like that always had something up their sleeve to match what they had inside their shirts or pants. The words that came out of their mouths always made things perfectly

logical, even if those words were sure to get you killed.

Farris' lower lip quivered. "I can help you," she said. "I'm not just a psychologist."

Hadn't she already said something like that to Piper? *I'm more than I seem ...* Rico accepted that without question. "I know what you are," he said. "Get to the point."

"Of course," Farris said quietly. "The point is this.

Ansell isn't happy where he is. Fuchi Multitronics has put very tight limits on his work. He would like to go somewhere else, to another corp. If you were to help him get there, this other corp would reward you generously." Rico sneered. "You're dreaming, chica."

"No," Farris said, shaking her head. "No, I'd already begun negotiating on Ansell's behalf before you carried me away. Only a few days have elapsed. I could finish the deal by telecom. You could come away from this with a lot more money than you've got now, and I could probably arrange to get at least one group of people off your back. I could make that a condition of the deal."

"You're talking about Maas Intertech."

"I believe you've had some experience with Daisaka Security? The Asian woman mentioned that. Daisaka is linked to Maas Intertech through the parent entity, Kuze Ninon. I could arrange for them to be turned off."

"I slotted off Fuchi once this month by busting you out. I figure that's enough of a problem to live with."

"Yes," Farris said, nodding. "You've struck a blow against Fuchi corporate pride. They want you, but they can only hunt for you in so many ways, and the SIN-less are hard to find. But it isn't just Fuchi. Daisaka wants you, too. Isn't that so? And the more people looking for you, the greater the chance that someone will find you. I'm offering you the opportunity to drastically reduce the numbers of your opponents and to make some money that you might very well need in the days and weeks ahead."

"I should trust you to cut a deal?"

"Yes, you should," Farris said. "I have the most compelling reasons possible for dealing in good faith. I want to live."

"You know people at Maas Intertech?"

Farris didn't answer. She just stared at him. A couple of moments of that and suddenly Rico felt like he was facing the blank stare of a fixer, revealing nothing. It was almost scary. Who the hell was this biff really? Why did it seem like she knew more about things than any one person had a right to know? Surikov, Travis, the infiltrator program, details about Fuchi competitors... It made Rico wonder if she knew even more than she was saying.

Her gaze was like a promise, telling him that she had contacts, contacts that could make a deal, a deal that anyone in their right mind would grab at, if only to better the chances of getting out of this mess alive.

Rico didn't want to believe it.

A voice whispered softly at Bandit's left ear, saying, "*Master, look.*"

Bandit shifted to his astral perceptions.

The bedroom now glowed softly with the radiance of life, the astral forms of Rico and Marena Farris, Bandit's own, and one other, a spirit. The spirit took the form of a large raccoon, but one that walked erect. It hovered behind Bandit's left shoulder as if to hide from the other astral forms in the room.

This particular sort of spirit was known as a watcher. It was a simple spirit capable of simple tasks. Bandit had assigned it to watch the astral terrain in the vicinity of the apartment.

"*You've noticed something?*" Bandit asked.

The watcher nodded vigorously, and extended a paw toward the wall at the rear of the room. Bandit looked at the wall, but saw nothing of interest. "*Come swiftly, master,*" the watcher said. "*Come and look! You said if I noticed anything strange ... Well, this is very strange indeed!*"

Bandit shifted to the astral plane, leaving flesh and bone behind. He wondered what the watcher had noticed. Still sitting cross-legged, he rose from the floor, turned and followed the watcher through the rear wall of the room and into the alley behind the building.

The night pulsed softly with primal energies. The auras of hundreds of people glowed dimly through the rear windows of buildings lining the alley. Other subtler gleamings of life showed here and there along the length of the alley-the auras of a rat, several weeds, birds pecking at a sprawling pile of garbage. Bandit took all of this in at a glance, and, seeing nothing of value, turned his attention elsewhere. Something else, something far more significant, demanded his attention. It tugged at his magician's sense with sudden violence-and held it.

Through the alley leading to the next block came tendrils of mana: drifting, flowing. Curling slowly

forward like sinuous snakes, radiant with power. Rising, falling. Flowing up and down. Curving in and out. As the tendrils neared the back alley, they began turning outward, fanning out left and right, as if to proceed in both directions up and down the back alley, but then they curved back again as if returning to a single course.

Here was magic in the making, a long magic. Nothing else could bind the mana into such form or send it much beyond the limit of sight. Could this appearance be mere coincidence? Bandit doubted it. Long magic built up slowly, over the course of hours. It was a far more exacting magic than the manabolds and fireballs that fledgling magicians tossed off on the spur of the moment or amid the chaos of a gun battle. The leading tendrils of the spell seemed to be coming toward the building where Rico and the others had taken refuge. Even now those tendrils were crossing the back alley, slowly, sinuously snaking their way toward the wall through which Bandit had emerged.

A group of armed razorguys passing through the alleyways might have been a coincidence. There were hundreds, possibly thousands of razorguys in the plex and they all had to live somewhere. Magic and magicians were far less common. Uncommon enough to be rare.

What was the point of this sending? Bandit spent a short while considering this, assensing the spell being cast. It appeared to be a spell of detection, one designed to find a particular individual. What individual, he could not tell. Did this have something to do with Rico and the team, Ansell Surikov, or Marena Farris? Bandit wondered.

On occasions in the past, Bandit had in fact observed the sendings of other magicians, sendings that had nothing to do with him or anyone he knew or anything he was doing, but he could count those occasions on the fingers of one hand.

Always, it was best to be careful.

He returned to his physical body. Rico was crouched right in front of him, gazing at him steadily, questioningly. Bandit considered that questioning gaze, then said, "Trouble's coming."

"What trouble?" Rico asked, grimacing.

Bandit replied, "How bad do you want to know?"

Through the rear windows of the van, Shank watched the Asian slag turn in off the street and come hustling up the alley, walking fast, almost breaking into a ran. He didn't look like trouble, but his haste made Shank wonder. He was dressed like a cook: greasy white apron, shirt, pants, sneaks. If he had any weapons, they were under his hide and crammed in pretty tight. He was skinny to the point of skeletal. He might've just climbed out of a grave.

"What's this freaking piece of drek?" Thorvin said.

Shank grunted, wondering, tightening his hold on his compact Colt M22A2.

The slag kept on coming, hustled up alongside the van, then turned to the door of the apartment the team was using as a bolthole. He pounded on the door with a fist. Shank stepped out through the rear door of the van, stepped around the rear corner of the van, took one step further and put the muzzle of the Colt at the back of the slag's head.

"Be real careful," he growled, his voice low and menacing.

The slag froze, except to slowly turn his head. That head barely came up as far as the middle of Shank's chest. From what Shank could see, the slag looked surprised enough to be terrified, eyes open wide.

Abruptly, the door to the apartment swung inward and Piper stepped into view. Shank put a hand around the back of the slag's neck, about to push him inside, just into the hallway, to scope him out, but then the slag was looking at Piper and nodding and bowing the way Asians do, and Piper was bowing, too.

"*Okyaku sdma ga kite imdsu!*" the slag said. He spoke quickly and quietly, seeming excited. Shank wondered what the fragger was saying.

Piper's eyes went wide. "*Doo yuu imi desu ka!*" she said, breathlessly.

"*Shookdijoo o mdte indkereba narimasen hi!*"

"*Ara ma! Osore irimasu! Ddnata desu ka!*"

"*Nan-no shirushi ga yoroshii desu ka!*"

They went on like that for a few moments more.

Shank looked up and down the alley. Nobody passing the street-end of the alley seemed in any particular hurry, no more than usual for this part of town. On the street itself, a sanitation truck rumbled by, workers in black masks, gloves and jumpsuits mounted on the truck's steps. For a night in Little Asia, for any part of the Newark sprawl, things seemed pretty quiet.

"*Hai! Wakammasu! Domo arigato gozaimasu!*" Piper said.

"*Do itashimashite!*" the slag said.

Shank lowered his weapon.

Piper bowed and the slag bowed, too. They both bowed again. The slag hurried back toward the street. Shank looked at Piper. She looked at him and said quickly, in English, "Shank, we must go. Get ready to run."

"Null sheen," Shank replied. "Run where?"

Piper stared at him wide-eyed, then suddenly shook her head and hurried back down the hall to the apartment. Shank shrugged.

Behind him, the van rumbled to life.

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"A deal has been made, *jefe*," Piper said rapidly. "Daisaka has approached the oyabun himself. Kobun of Honjowara yakuza and agents of Daisaka Security are sweeping the district together. It is said they make discreet inquiries, but that is just cover. They will find us unless we leave here."

Rico grimaced. "How much time we got?"

"We must go now. Right now."

Piper didn't need to give any extra emphasis to her words. Rico could see the emphasis in her eyes. She was scared, and probably with good reason. "Somebody sold us out?"

"Not how you are thinking."

"One of your contacts."

Piper shook her head. "Perhaps Honjowara-rama has used us to obtain something he wants from Daisaka. That is most likely. But we have been warned, *jefe*. Warned to get away. We have been used as pawns. That is not the same as betrayal."

Maybe, maybe not. It sounded like the kind of deal that a slag like the oyabun could make with impunity. Rico was in no position to argue about it. What the fragging *sama* wanted from Daisaka was none of his business. An honorable man might have told Daisaka Security to go slot, but Rico decided to be glad for small favors. Without the oyabun's token consent, they'd never have been able to lay low in this part of the plex, and without the warning that had come to them now ... they might've wound up dead.

"Let's flash."

They gathered their gear. Bandit threw a few handfuls of some sparkling stuff all around the front room of the apartment and sang something too soft to make out. Rico didn't know what it was for and didn't waste time asking. They headed out to the alley. Dok and Piper got Marena Farris into the van. Rico tugged the side door closed and got into the passenger seat and then they were rolling, turning toward the nearest transitway. "What's our terminus?" Thorvin said. A fragging good question, Rico thought. This run was pushing their limits. They'd used all the presets, contacts, and hideyholes they'd had lined up in advance. They'd stepped beyond the last step of the plan. They could head for the fortified bolthole in Sector 13, but Rico wanted to save that till they had autofire burning their butts and nowhere else to turn.

They stopped in Sector 11, just across the border from Little Asia. Thorvin parked the van in the big parking garage two stories below the Hillside New Jersey Transit station. Rico put a credstick into a public telecom, stabbed the Vid Off key, and tapped in a special number. Momentarily, Mr. Victor's voice came through the handset to Rico's ear. "How are you, my friend?"

"The meet went wrong," Rico said. "The man's trash. The client wasted the merchandise. We had to fight our way out."

Brief silence. "I am sorry to hear that. I am shocked, though I have had certain difficulties myself. We live in dangerous times. Tell me, how did your problems arise?"

"How do they usually arise?"

Another silence. "What will you do?"

Revenge was out of the question, for the moment. Staying alive was the immediate problem, that and what to do with Marena Farris and her proposal. Rico considered mentioning that proposal to Mr. Victor, but decided against it. Mr. Victor's arrangements hadn't been working out so good lately. Rico still trusted him, but right now it seemed enough to trust him with something simple. "We need a new hole."

"Perhaps I can help you with that, my friend."

Mr. Victor knew a slag who knew an address. Mr. Victor would arrange a meet. Rico clenched his teeth, but said that was chill. Mr. Victor then said, "You should know that your former employer has put out the word. Nuyen is offered for information on your whereabouts."

Rico hesitated. "You serious?"

"Quite serious."

Incredible.

Mr. Victor had to be referring to L. Kahn, and that was incredible because fixers didn't usually put out rewards, not directly. That was like L. Kahn admitting to the world that somebody had stuck it to him, and fixers didn't like to admit that. Fixers tended to be acutely conscious of their image, no less than corps. What it suggested to Rico was that L. Kahn must be feeling pressure. Maybe from Fuchi. The suits at Fuchi wouldn't be too happy about their merchandise getting dusted. And they wouldn't be too happy about the disappearance of an employee named Marena Farris either.

Rico returned to the van, gave Thorvin directions. He could feel Farris staring at him from the rear of the van. That stare was a question waiting for an answer.

The guano was getting deep. Daisaka Security, the Executive Action Brigade, yaks, informants. Maas Intertech, Prometheus, Fuchi. On top of all that was Bandit's latest warning. The shaman hadn't been too clear, but it sounded like somebody had been coming at them magically in the minutes just before they fled the bolthole in Little Asia. How the frag did that fit in? From the original chipfile for the run on Maas Intertech, Rico knew that Daisaka had magicians on-line, but was that his explanation? And did it matter?

And now Marena Farris had a proposition, one that could get at least part of the opposition off their backs.

Rico wondered if he really had any choice.

The problem with corps was that they had the resources to buy just about any kind of contact or informant that might suit their purposes: cops, hustlers, gangs, whole city blocks, entire governments. You couldn't evade power like that forever. Something had to give. Either the corp eventually decided you weren't worth the effort or the nuyen anymore, or it got you, grabbed you by the cojones and made you dance however it wanted, then dropped you down the nearest garbage chute.

Rico and the rest of the team could try and lay low, but that would take money, hard nuyen. They all had some, but how much would they need? Enough to sit for months, a year, two years? They'd have to change IDs, maybe alter their looks. Dok could handle some of the surgical mods, but that was just the beginning. Piper would need new programs and hardware just to stay up to date. Rico himself would need some cybernetic mods to keep his bodyware from falling behind the leading edge of tech. They'd all need things: Dok, Shank, Thorvin. It was a question of how they would get what they needed. The reality was hard.

You didn't get bucks for front-line cyberware playing doorman for some bar or collecting on gambling debts. It took big bucks-and big bucks meant taking big risks. Smuggling contraband. Stealing major paydata. Breaking some slag out of a corporate contract that was the moral equal of slavery.

It came down to two choices. Dying was the easy way out. Simply send Marena Farris back to Fuchi, then sit around and wait for the corps to come and scrag them. The hard way meant going along with what Marena Farris was proposing, check it out, investigate. Then, if everything looked chill, do it. That might get them just as dead, but Rico could see no other way that they could ever get enough nuyen together at one place and one time to make a difference.

And time was running down.

His wives waited silently, as wives should, seated around him in the rear of the Mercedes limo as he whispered sorcerous words and wove the spell into existence. A handful of sparkling motes appeared in the air before him and gradually swelled into a pulsating, coruscating cloud. Daniella lowered a window. Maurice pointed. The cloud drifted out and across the alley to the door of the runners' apartment. It spread across the door and sifted through the door's substance, passing into the spaces beyond.

In a matter of seconds, it would expand to fill the three small rooms of the apartment, stunning unconscious everyone it touched.

A second spell turned the alley door into dust.

Maurice nodded. Clad all in black, Claude Jaeger turned and darted through the empty doorway and disappeared into the apartment. He would swiftly dispatch the runners and anyone else he found there. And then their contract would be complete. The knowledge and talent of a skilled magician would be forever lost, and that would indeed be a loss, but it could not be helped. The runners had gone rogue, and L. Kahn had ordered they be exterminated. But the more important point was that, with tonight's work done, Maurice would finally be free to return to his studies. He had wasted too many days working magic on the world instead of pursuing knowledge, truth. He was impatient to be done.

Momentarily Jaeger returned to the doorway. He cast a mouthful of sputum to the concrete floor of the alley. "Mages," he said, with a sneer. "You fragged up."

Impossible.

And yet...

Shifting to his astral senses, Maurice looked at his ally, Vera Causa. At his command, she had scouted the apartment astrally and confirmed that the runners were present. But for that, she had said nothing since their arrival here in Little Asia. She said nothing now. She did not even look at him. Was it possible she had erred?

"Guard," he told her.

"Yes, master," she replied. "*Of course.*"

There was an acid quality to that reply which Maurice did not like. He considered whether this bound spirit might be escaping his control. A difficult matter to decide.

He snapped his fingers and pointed. Daniella thrust open the door on his right and preceded him outside. He did not object when she and the other slitches followed him into the apartment. Daniella had a certain limited ability in the arts, and the others also had certain skills that might prove useful,

To the mundane eye, the apartment looked deserted. It was cluttered with furniture, kitchen appliances, trideos, bookdisks, and what looked like the scattered components from several cyberdecks. Pillows and blankets, discarded fast-food containers, and other anonymous litter also lay strewn about. The former occupants seemed to have departed swiftly. And yet appearances deceived. On the astral level, the runners appeared to be lingering still. Amid the pulsing fluctuations of the life energy coursing irregularly about the room glowed not one but seven auras, or what appeared to be seven human and metahuman auras.

It was as if the runners had gone but had somehow managed to leave their auras behind. Maurice had never seen anything quite like it. Plainly now, he assented that these "auras" were merely a spell, a clever manipulation of mana, drawn from the surrounding etheric energies. What amazed him was the fact that he had been unable to detect this deception while working the ritual spell that had brought him here to these rooms. He had been duped. Led to believe that John Dokker and the rest of the runners were still present.

How, he wondered, could such a perfect mirage have been assembled? Until now, he had imagined his ritual spell of detection to be inexorable, long and slow, but certain to succeed. Obviously, such was not the case. He felt persuaded by the desire to learn more of this deluding spell. He must investigate the intricacies of a work that conjured such perfect fantasies.

Concentrating his astral perceptions, he moved nearer the false auras. In that very instant, the spell unraveled, as if it had expected the touch of his mind, as if it wished to keep its secrets. Mana flashed, bursting outward in all directions, blazing, rejoining the pulsing streams of the world.

Maurice felt a swift pang of grief, then soft despair. As he returned to his mundane perceptions, he heard a crash like that of a trash can being knocked over, resounding outside in the alley, then the sudden savage snarl of a cat.

Jaeger turned and darted toward the alleyway.

The moment struck Maurice. The snarl of the cat stirred his memory. He tilted his head back, nodding, closing his eyes, and softly laughed. It had become a night for tricks, new and old. The snarling cat in the alley. What manner of shaman could use such a juvenile trick and yet could manipulate magic of a complexity as to conjure illusory auras?

"Husband," Daniella said. "Scan this."

Maurice opened his eyes, then followed his first wife into what appeared to be a bedroom. Lying on a bureau was an item that at first glance resembled a common monofilament sword, an artifact manufactured and distributed throughout the plex in the thousands by Ares Macrotechnology and other corps. On the astral plane, however, the sword's significance was obvious. Its aura had the character of a living thing that lived no more. The sword had once been imbued with power, as a focus for spells. The memory of those spells lingered still. Maurice doubted he would be able to determine much about the spells, but that was a secondary consideration.

The vibrations of the person who had carried the sword also lingered. That was what made the sword significant.

Plainly, it had been left behind by the runners' shaman, perhaps in exchange for something he had taken. That was the shaman's way, the most persistent of the rumors Maurice had heard. When Bandit took a thing, he left another in exchange. Maurice could hardly believe his luck, or the shaman's stupidity.

The sword would serve as a material link, and thus, through ritual magic, would lead Maurice directly to the shaman, thence the runners, regardless of where they had gone.

And this time Maurice would how to no clever illusions.

The Chapel of the Eternal Light was just over the border from Little Asia in Sector 7. For five hundred nuyen, they laid out Filly's body in a room with perfumed air, quiet music, and molded plastic flowers, no questions asked. That included a five-minute trideo funeral service, cremation, and an urn for the ashes.

Rico paid the tab, despite Dok's protests. It was his responsibility. He was the leader. It was his failure to properly prepare for the meet with Prometheus that had cost Filly her life. Compared to the moral weight of that fact, five hundred nuyen was nothing.

They all knew the risks. Death was part of the game. For the sake of the survivors, Rico was trying hard not to think about the price of his failures or the chance that he might slot up again. If you wanted any chance at surviving, you did what you had to do and saved all the grief, self-doubts, and questions till the run was over and people were safe in bed.

When the pre-recorded serviced ended, Piper said, "I want people to remember, when gray death sets me free, I was a person who had many friends, and many friends had me." She paused a moment, then added, "Filly had many friends. And we her friends have her still. In our hearts. We will always have her there."

Another surprise. Rico puzzled. The words seemed somehow too openly compassionate for a reticent Japanese, and too Christian for a fanatical Buddhist-Ecologist. Maybe it was gender. Maybe it took a woman to speak with that much compassion, to get past her own habits and beliefs long enough to say what ought to be said. Rico wondered where the first few rhyming lines had come from. They sounded like something from a poem, but Piper had never shown any interest in poetry.

Wasn't anything what it seemed anymore?

Dok cursed and cried, then clenched his teeth and turned and walked away. Rico didn't think any less of Dok for any of that. He was only showing his strength.

An hour later, they met Mr. Victor's contact amid the stacks and factories of Sector 10. The slag pointed them to an unoccupied warehouse not far from Port Sector.

The place was five stories tall, about as wide as a tractor-trailer, jammed between a truck terminal and some kind of foundry. The air smelled like burnt metal.

Beyond the big bay door was a loading bay, an open area, narrow but long, with a loading platform at the rear. Beyond the platform was a short hall sided by several small rooms: an office, a bathroom, and what looked like a lounge. Plastic-molded furniture and cushioned benches. Semi-nude holopics of celebs like Maria Mercurial and Taffy Lee and the *Sayonara Baby* joygirls decorated the walls. A scattering of trash, narc caps, BTL carriers, and rat shit littered the floor.

"Now I know we're in deep," Shank grumbled.

A curt reply leapt to Rico's lips, but he held it back. Shank was right. Maybe they'd never enjoyed luxury accommodations while on a run, but they'd usually managed to find something you could call decent. Places where you had no second thoughts about using the furniture or maybe taking off your clothes for a shower. Taking refuge in a rat-infested squat in one of the filthiest parts of the plex didn't say much for how things were going. A glance at the bathroom confirmed it.

They supped on Nathan's Finest with rice and noodles. Rico watch Marena Farris dab at her mouth with a paper napkin. He'd have to make a decision about the woman: use her or lose her. Accept her proposal or let her go.

"Let's hear your proposition again," he said.

Farris hesitated, looking at Rico as if uncertain. Piper threw him a sharp glance.

Dok scowled. "What proposal?"

"Huh?" Shank added.

Farris told her story. The slag they'd busted out of Maas Intertech hadn't been Surikov, just a double named Michael Travis. The real Surikov was still with Fuchi Multitronics and not particularly happy about it. Farris had begun negotiating a transfer to another corp on the real Surikov's behalf just prior to being lifted. If Rico and the team would help her complete the transfer, she'd see to it that they were taken care of, paid cash nuyen, and forgotten by Daisaka Security.

"I wouldn't trust the fragging slitch."

The words could've been Piper's, but they came from Dok, hard and raw. Rico sat back and lit a cheroot. Shank said, "Nobody's asking you to trust her."

"No, of course not." Dok grinned acidly. "Just risk our lives!"

"We could use the money."

"Even if she's telling the truth, she can't guarantee Daisaka stays off our butts."

"There ain't no guarantees about nothing, chummer."

"And," Thorvin said, "we could still use the money."

"Money won't buy back your life, friend."

"Can't see living long without it, either."

Dok looked at Rico, and said, "You can't be thinking of going ahead with this?"

"No?" Rico said.

"It's *insane!*"

"No more than any other run."

In a way, Rico supposed, maybe they owed it to the slag who'd died in the parking field of the Willow Brook Mall, and to Filly. Both those people had lost their lives because of corporate treachery. Doing right by Farris and the real Surikov-assuming he *was* the real Surikov- would be a form of vengeance. Maybe the only kind of vengeance they could hope to exact. Somewhere down the road they might be able to cost Fuchi and the other corps a few percentage points on the exchange and lose them some money, crash their computers or spread nasty rumors about their financial health. For the moment, though, scoping out Farris' offer was the only chance for vengeance they had. A forced transfer of corporate assets. It wouldn't hurt a corp the size of Fuchi much, but it would still hurt.

"You in or out?" Rico said.

Dok stared, briefly. "You're saying the decision's already made?"

"The decision is we scan the scene, check what we can, make plans, do it right. If everything's chill, then we

"We could be walking into a trap!"

Rico took a long drag on his cheroot before speaking "Look around you," he said. "The trap's already set."

"Yeah," Shank said. "An' it's closing fast."

The grime-smearred window beside the loading bay door gave a fair view of the street out front. Rico stood watch, if for no other reason than he couldn't sleep. Too much on his mind. He wasn't there in the gloom of the loading bay more than half an hour before Piper appeared on the platform at the rear of the bay.

"*Jefe...?*"

"Here, *chica.*"

For someone with ordinary eyes,-the bay was nearly black. Piper groped her way down off the loading dock and across the bay. Rico caught her searching hand and drew her over to the side of the window. She hugged herself to his flank.

"We should just walk away, *jefe,*" she said softly.

Rico murmured, "You know I can't do that."

"Why?"

He recounted the reasons for her, but the truth of it went beyond questions of money and survival. It went beyond any debts real or imagined to those who had died, It came down to something very simple: Marena Farris. Maybe the woman had plans to get away from Fuchi, but the fact was that she hadn't been ready to leave when they lifted her, so, in effect, she'd been snatched. Kidnapped. And now they'd had her too long to just send her back. Fuchi security would likely assume that she'd been tampered with, that they were getting some kind of trojan horse-maybe a spy or saboteur-in place of a loyal employee. She'd be questioned, analyzed, watched every minute of the day and night. She might never be trusted again. Piper would probably say it didn't matter, the woman was a fragging corporate, an enemy. Rico didn't see it that way. Farris might be a corporate and maybe she had secret agendas, but she was still a woman, and still a human being. That warranted some consideration. To Rico, it meant she had the right to walk her own path, and to get set back on that path if somebody tugged her in a direction she didn't choose herself.

Making that happen would take some doing, and Rico wished he could really trust what Farris told him. He hoped she was playing straight, or straight enough that any discrepancies didn't matter.

"Maybe we should go away somewhere after we finish with this," he said.

Piper clenched him tightly around the waist, moaning, "I don't care what we do as long as we get out of this alive."

"We'll make it."

For all their sakes, Rico hoped he was right.

33

At just after three a.m., Marena Farris' aura changed subtly, indicating she had finally fallen asleep, curled up on one of the cushioned benches in the lounge.

By four a.m., she seemed to be sleeping deeply. Everyone else in the lounge was sleeping, too.

Bandit waited a bit longer, then began.

His fingers found the medallion under his shirt. He used this because the medallion held power. The spell he began gathering, for all its subtlety, demanded great power.

He lifted his free hand slightly, just slightly, just enough to point his fingertips toward Marena Farris, then, he began mouthing the words, powerful words, never to be spoken aloud. This was one of his most intricate spells, designed and developed over the course of years. Each word must be spoken in a very specific manner, and must be spoken silently so that their secrets should remain forever secret.

Slowly, the mana gathered, first around his slightly uplifted hand, then flowing together into a narrow stream that flowed slowly, slowly, slowly across the etheric plane. Slowly arcing over Marena Farris' slumbering aura. Slowly surrounding her aura. Interpenetrating. Then curling, turning, joining. Gradually weaving a web. Gradually forming a connection.

Sleep, the magic softly directed. *Sleep till you are told to awaken ...*

From out of the depths of mind came a sound, a soft gentle sound, a sound of concord and harmony and willing acquiescence. Slowly it arose and slowly it coalesced, assuming form and substance, evolving into a word, a word like, *Yesssss ...*

At the proper moment, with his free hand, Bandit lifted the Mask of Sassacus. *We are one ... one mind, one spirit...*

Yesss . . .

Your trust in me is complete ...

Yesss . . .

You have confided everything to me ... you have entrusted me with all your secrets great and small... sharing your secrets with me brings you great pleasure, great warmth ... you desire to tell me everything ... you wish to share everything with me ...

Yesss ... it is so ...

There is something you wish to tell me now ...

Yesss ...

Who is the man you call Ansell Surikov?

He is Ansell... my husband ...

There is something you wish him to do ...

Yesss ... it is true ...

Tell me ...

I... wish him to go to a new place ... a new ... organization ...

Tell me why ...

It will profit us both ...

Are you keeping secrets from the runners?

Yes ... they do not know my name -

What is your name?

Fa ... Farrah Moffit...

Why is this name important?

If they knew it, they would not trust me ...

Hours later, when the woman Marena Farris, Farrah Moffit, awoke, she slowly sat up, pressed back her hair, then turned her head and looked right at him, looked at him and stared.

She knew.

Bandit pondered how that could be.

"Would you trust a traitor?"

In the subdued light of the dilapidated warehouse office, Rico turned in the swivel chair to face the door. To his left, Piper sat in an armchair with her axe across her lap and a datacable jacked into her head. In the shadows of the doorway before him stood Bandit, fingering his new flute...

Rico pointed with his chin. "Say again?"

"Would you trust a traitor?"

"Dose the door."

Bandit stepped forward, swung the door shut

"Who we talking about?" Rico asked.

"The woman. Marena Farris."

"She's a traitor?"

"That's what she thinks."

"A traitor to who?"

"Perhaps Fuchi Multitronics."

"She told you that?"

A few moments passed. Bandit looked down at the flute in his hands. His expression, as usual, was unreadable. What he was thinking was anybody's guess. "I ascertained certain things. She is afraid for her life. She wishes Ansell Surikov to join a new organization. She fears you will not trust her. She views herself as a traitor. Some of what you know of her is false. She has not always worked for Fuchi Multitronics. Her name is not Marena Farris."

What the frag? Rico forced himself to keep cool, lean back in his chair. "What's her real name?"

"Pariah Moffit."

Rico searched his memory. The name meant nothing to him. "Who is she?"

"A former employee of Prometheus Engineering. Sent to Fuchi as a mole. Ten years ago a Fuchi joygirl named Marena Farris was quietly killed. Farrah Moffit took her place. She insinuated herself into the Special Administration and used this position to learn Fuchi secrets and transmit them to Prometheus. She believes she is now under suspicion. She did not willingly go on leave. She is afraid to return to Prometheus because she has transmitted no data since put on leave. She fears they may kill her. She believes that moving to Maas Intertech is her only way out."

Rico rubbed at his brow. Maybe a hundred or so questions should have come to mind by now. Maybe he was too tired to think that hard. Maybe the run was wearing him down. Only one thought came to mind. "Why Intertech? Why would they trust her any more than anybody else?"

"Her contact is in a position of power. They met some years ago. If she could bring him someone of value, someone like Surikov, to Intertech, her contact will see she gets what she wants."

"What does she want?"

"She wants to counsel children."

"What?"

"She is a psychologist. She is disaffected with corporate intrigues. She wants to counsel children, perhaps have a child of her own. She wants out of the game."

"You believe that? All of it?"

"I believe she believes it."

Nothing was ever certain. "Who's her contact at Maas Intertech?"

Bandit gazed steadily at Rico a few moments, then said, "I didn't ask."

Rico clenched his teeth, drew a deep breath, then let it go.

What mattered most? That was the question that kept coming back to Rico's mind.

The problem with this run was that too many factors kept getting involved. You could get frizzed just thinking about it, just trying to keep all the details straight in your mind, just trying to work out everyone's angles.

All the scag about who Farrah Moffit really was and where she came from probably made no difference. Maybe she was just caught in the middle, stuck somewhere she didn't want to be, the victim of megacorps, no less than Rico and his team. Maybe she just wanted a way out. Rico realized at length that there was no way he could know for sure and that thinking about it so much was a waste of precious time.

You had to focus on the key points. What really mattered. What seemed to matter most Was the Ansell Surikov who Farrah Moffit kept talking about really the real Ansell Surikov? Rico tried to figure a way to answer that question for sure, then stopped himself. What was the point? His objective now was to get Farrah Moffit back on track. What difference did it make what she called this slag she wanted to get away from Fuchi, as long as the slag wanted to go.

Only three questions really seemed crucial: was Farrah Moffit's contact at Maas Intertech for real? could she cut the deal she promised? and did Ansell Surikov, or whoever, really want to leave Fuchi?

First...

Piper opened her eyes. The display screen of the telecom on the wall beside her flickered and came to life. "Security at the Crystal Blossom Condominiums has been tightened, *jefe*, but the telecom lines are unaffected. I have a clean line direct to the apartment where we lifted Marena Farris."

"You mean Moffit."

"Yes, excuse me." Piper rolled her eyes, looking a little exasperated. "Where we lifted *Farrah Moffit*."

Rico stepped down the hall to the lounge. Dok sat there-cleaning his Ingram SMG-opposite Farrah

Moffit Both he and Moffit looked up as Rico entered. Moffit looked about as anxious and forlorn as anyone Rico had ever seen. He guessed that was only natural. "Who's your contact at Maas Intertech?" said Rico, without preamble.

A timid look came into Moffit's eyes. "Must I... Must I give him a name?" she said hesitantly.

Dok cursed softly. Moffit glanced at him anxiously. Rico said, "We ain't going nowhere till you scan. Till we scan what you got. Till everything checks out. *Comprende?*"

Moffit seemed to resign herself to it. She nodded, just faintly, then said softly, "His name is Osborne. That could be a corporate pseudonym. I don't know. He's the Vice President for Internal Policy and Review. He controls a kind of internal intelligence section, along with various resource units such as personnel."

"How do we make contact?"

"We've established a protocol."

"Let's hear it."

The proc wasn't very complex. When Moffit wanted to contact Osborne, she called his office via a public telecom, ID'ing herself as a personal friend. If Osborne wasn't available, Moffit left a particular message and called back later. If Osborne wanted to contact her, he followed much the same routine. The only sophisticated part was that they used portable voice-translation gear to prevent their voice prints from ever being matched to their corporate personnel files.

Rico motioned Moffit to her feet "Let's make a call."

Moffit seemed willing. Rico ushered her up the hall to the warehouse office and sat her down facing the telecom screen. He gave Piper the nod, she closed her eyes. The telecom screen flashed blue with the unit calling window of the local telecommunications grid. The words VIS PICKUP OFF appeared in the upper-right corner. The code for the telecom being called appeared in large numerals at center screen.

Moffit caught her breath, and looked up and around at Rico, her eyes wide with surprise. "That's my condo's call code."

"First we talk to Surikov."

Moffit's eyes flared enormous. "No!" she exclaimed. "They'll pick up the call! They'll realize we're-!"

"Can it."

A slag who could have been Surikov's twin appeared on the screen. Rico looked closely but couldn't see any difference between this Surikov and the one who'd died at the Willow Brook Mall, Michael Travis. Surikov opened his mouth as if to speak, then glanced downward. PRIVACY ON winked on and off at the bottom of the screen. Surikov compressed his lips, then reached to the side and drew a telecom handset up to his ear.

"Yes?" he said. "Who's this?"

"Dr. Surikov," Rico said.

Surikov nodded, now looking a bit impatient. "Yes, yes," he said. "Your vid's off. Who am I speaking to?"

Another message from Piper winked on the telecom screen: LINE SAFE.

One final check had been made. Surikov's telecom was clean, right down to the handset at his ear. "You don't know me," Rico said. "I'm calling about something you wanna know about. Be careful what you say and how you react This line's clean, but your apartment may be monitored."

Surikov frowned puzzledly, maybe irritated. "I'm afraid I don't-"

Rico gave Moffit's shoulder a nudge. She jerked her head up and around to look at him, then looked back to Surikov when Rico motioned at the screen. She seemed nervous as hell, desperate. Definitely off-guard. As Rico intended.

The question was: how would she handle herself?

Moffit abruptly shifted in her seat, sitting up straight. Her fingers shook. She gasped. "Darling ... darling, don't say anything, *don't say my name?*"

That last came out in a rush. Surikov opened his mouth as if to interrupt, but then stopped.

"You'll give us away," Moffit continued, only pausing to gasp again. "Someone may be listening. Listening to what you say. Please don't say anything for a moment. I know this is hard. Just say ... say yes if you recognize my voice."

Surikov was gazing intently out of the telecom screen. Rico couldn't be sure if the slag was angry, incredulous, or both. "Do I-" he said, abruptly cutting himself off. "Well, of course. Of course I do."

"Darling, please be careful," Moffit said. "Be very, very careful. I'll explain everything that's happened as soon as we're together. Right now I need you to help me. Think carefully. Do you know what I mean when I refer to our special project?"

Surikov frowned, now seeming puzzled. "Well," he said, "yes. Certainly." He waved one hand vaguely. "What else could you mean?"

Moffit nodded. Her eyes seemed riveted to the telecom screen. Her gaze seemed even more intense than Surikov's. "This is why I'm calling," she said. "This is what I'm working on. Our special project. I'm with people who are going to help. After we're done with this call, you must act as if nothing unusual's happened. Do you understand, darling?"

"Yes, obviously." Irritation rose suddenly into Surikov's face, but in an instant faded to nothing. He nodded. "Yes, yes, I understand. I'm just, well ... I didn't expect this."

"I understand, darling. Please listen. The people I'm with are very, very careful. They want confirmation from you that you're willing to go along with our project. You must say something to convince them, but you must assume someone's listening to you at your end."

Moments passed. Surikov pressed his hand back over his brow and his thinning hair. His eyes widened briefly, like a man struggling with the incomprehensible. Twice he opened his mouth as if to speak, then said nothing.

"Well," he said finally, "I don't know quite how to say this. I just want to be reunited with my wife. Everything else is rather secondary. It's been, very difficult... difficult to concentrate on my work. I'm so used to her being here. I know she loves me very much, and she wants what's best for me. What more can I say? I trust her implicitly. She wants what I want. I want what she wants. Do you see?"

Farrah Moffit turned her head and met Rico's eyes. She looked scared, expectant, and hopeful all at the same time. Rico looked at the man on the screen, then back at Moffit, watched her a moment, then nodded. "Say bye. We'll be in touch."

Moffit said that, and then a few other things that only helped persuade Rico that the relationship between her and Surikov was real, or real enough that it didn't matter.

The slag wanted what Moffit wanted.

Likely, that was what he'd be getting.

34

Twenty minutes in the lavatory did slightly more for her psyche than for her looks. More than half that time Farrah spent seated on the toilet, face in her hands, eyes closed, struggling to regain her composure, and to reinforce it. The ploy by the runners' leader had caught her off-guard. She had walked into that little room at the top of the hall expecting to face Osborne, only to be confronted by Ansell. It had forced her to shift mind-sets very abruptly, in little more than a moment. With a man like Osborne, she could afford to be every bit the corporate woman, cool to the point of ruthless. In fact, she had to be like that. With Ansell, she couldn't afford to be anything less than the stereotypical woman, as defined by Ansell's own views. Approaching the man in the wrong manner would have invited disaster. Failing to impress upon him the dangers of the situation would have invited so much greater a disaster. It had forced her to think very quickly, to make leaps of intuition she felt only half-able to make. It left her in a state-heart pounding, body shaking-practically on the verge of fainting. She needed time alone to recover, and to prepare for what was coming.

She felt as if things were beginning to rush past her too swiftly, slipping out of control. She told herself that wasn't so. Her plan was coming together. She would make it work.

She had to.

Before the grime-streaked mirror over the lavatory sink, she did what little she could to improve her appearance. There wasn't much. She had no supplies. She was lucky the runners had seen fit to provide her with a change of underwear. She washed her face, then combed her hair and tied it behind her head. Fortunately, the subdued tones permanently bonded to her face, lips, brows, and lashes simulated the most basic effects of makeup. The resulting look was neat enough, though anyone who knew her would see the difference at once. She looked somewhat less polished than her usual self. Unfinished. A woman would certainly spot that. But would a man like Osborne notice?

"I'll make you a promise," said a quiet voice.

Farrah turned to face the man standing in the doorway. The latest one to act as her guard. His graying, razorcut hair and three-day growth of beard made him appear the oldest of the runners. He was also the one who had seemed most acutely distressed after the runners' meeting with Prometheus. The woman who had died at that meeting had apparently been his woman.

"If you cross us," he said, lowly, "you'll never see home again."

Farrah believed it. For all this man's apparent skill at first aid, he carried himself like someone used to confrontations, physical violence. Farrah did not doubt that he could kill her if so moved, without difficulty,

without remorse. It was a frightening realization. Her days lately had been fraught with such realizations.

"You scan?" the man insisted.

"I won't cross you," Farrah replied, somewhere finding the capacity to speak in a voice that did not waiver. "I want to get out of this alive. I want to get back to my husband."

To Farrah, those seemed like persuasive proofs, but she saw at once that she had slipped and slipped badly. The man's expression turned venomous, his mouth twisting into a vicious sneer. "That's it," he snarled, motioning with his gun. "Move it."

She did, stepping again into the hall, expecting something, she wasn't sure what—a blow at the back of the head, a shove at the very least. Nothing like that happened and she immediately saw why. The runners' leader waited, watching from the top of the hall. The leader's expression was hard, but she saw none of the fury that had lit his features on previous occasions. Farrah suspected that she might have at least a slim chance of survival as long as she did nothing to provoke that fury.

At a motion of his head, she moved past the leader and into the little room outfitted like an office. A shabby office. The Asian woman was jacked into her deck. Here was another variable that kept Farrah's nerves on edge and twitching. The Asian despised all corporates, everything to do with corporations and corporate living. She seemed to want all corporates dead. Farrah hadn't the slightest doubt that this one might kill her too, given the right opportunity, given the right "excuse."

The leader closed the door, then turned to Farrah, saying, "We play this like you're making all the arrangements. You'll be against a black background. The man won't see nothing but you."

Farrah nodded. "I understand."

"Remember what I told you."

"I will." The man had given her precise instructions on the details of the agreement she was to complete. Farrah closed her eyes and told herself again that she would somehow make this work. She had no choice. Everything depended on it.

"You set?"

"Yes. I'm ready."

The telecom calling screen appeared on the wall display. That was swiftly replaced by the willow and lotus logo of Maas Intertech. Then came the face of a very young and very attractive Asian woman. "Mr. Osborne's office. May I help you?"

Farrah smiled. "May I speak to him, please?"

The woman also smiled, apparently in recognition. "Oh, yes. One moment, please."

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome."

The corporate logo returned, then Osborne appeared. He was not a good-looking man. His face resembled putty that had been sculpted into rough, square lines, then baked to a stony texture. He wore his hair samurai-style, shaven above the brow, drawn back behind his head. Prominent eyebrows threw his eyes into shadow. Of his clothes, only a plain, collarless white linen shirt, buttoned at the neck, showed on the screen. A small, dark, circular pin that kept winking with the light clung to the shirt's right breast.

"Nice of you to call," Osborne said. "I understand that you've been lifted."

Osborne did not seem pleased at all, but Farrah had no difficulty guessing why. If he had heard some rumor of her abduction, he would be presuming, at the very least, that their previous negotiations were now void. That would mean the loss of certain opportunities. She would have to correct that presumption, bring him up to date. "The situation has changed."

"Yes. I'm aware of that, I'm also aware that a certain person died at the Willow Brook Mall. I'm not sure if I should be thanking you or cursing you for that. Do we have anything else to discuss?"

"Quite a lot, in fact."

"I'm listening."

"My basic offer to you is unchanged. However, I now have the capability to recruit the person myself and deliver him to you at a suitable time and place."

"And just how has this happened?"

"It happened. The result is this. I'm willing to concede certain of the extras we discussed, the ones you found most problematic, in exchange for certain consideration."

Osborne said nothing for several moments. Doubtless, he was pondering what she might want in place of any extras she had previously demanded. All such "bonuses" were not created equal. Simple monetary value was not always a deciding factor. "I'm still listening."

"The main points relate to my recruitment team. They want a cash award for their efforts."

"That sounds workable. What other points?"

"As a result of other recruitments they've handled, they are currently receiving a great deal of unwelcome attention. They would like that to stop."

For a moment, Osborne seemed on the verge of asking what all this had to do with him. Osborne was not so slow of wit as to actually put that question into words. "You're not saying what I think you're saying?"

Farrah nodded. Once.

Osborne paused to light a cigarette, then said, "Daisaka Security is looking for your recruitment team?"

"That's correct."

"You know what I'm thinking? That you engineered the disappearance of a certain person from my corp's facility. Why would you do that?"

"I would not."

"No? I think it's an interesting concept. For several reasons. It takes a big gun out of our R & D effort and makes your boy all the more valuable. It also saves me the trouble of explaining how an impostor got into our program. The more I think about it, the more I like the idea."

"Then you should be grateful."

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm taking this as a warning." He paused and gazed at her pointedly. "But that doesn't change certain facts. You want our agreement documented and certified, correct? Like any full and proper recruitment. Unfortunately, I have no authority over Kuze Nihon's security arm or any other organization beyond the purview of Maas Intertech."

Farrah smiled, pointedly. "You're too modest."

"Simply a realist."

"But you do have influence."

Osborne took a swift drag from his cig. "I might agree to quietly exert myself in certain quarters, but I will not agree to provide any substantive evidence of this aspect of our agreement. You'll have to take my word for it."

"These people we're dealing with are not fools, Osborne."

"That fact has been made poignantly obvious."

"Let's speak of facts. The fact is that this team and I together are providing you with an unparalleled opportunity."

"That's for me to judge."

Farrah had no doubt that Osborne knew what she meant and that he also agreed. The runners' lifting of Michael Travis had shown Maas Intertech's security unit to be at least rather lax and possibly incompetent. Heads would be rolling by now, the entire security framework under intense review. If Osborne could suddenly present Ansell Surikov to the board of directors, he would, by comparison, seem a hero. The fact that an impostor had been working under their very noses need never be mentioned. The death of Michael Travis could be explained away in any number of ways, if that death had even become generally known. "You must have your eye on the CEO's office."

"I have my eye on a lot of things," Osborne said very quietly. "I'm open to discussing your new terms because I want your boy. I'm sure you've reached that conclusion. If I have to use my influence, as you call it, I will. I'll do what I have to do. It's even conceivable that I might have a job or two of my own for this team of yours, and therefore a reason to make efforts on their behalf. But don't try to push under my skin. I get unreasonable when people do that."

Farrah suppressed a shiver. One thing she definitely did not want was to encourage a man like Osborne to get unreasonable. That could prove fatal. "You have my sincere apology."

Osborne did not seem overly moved. "I suggest we talk money. How absurd a fee does your team expect?"

For an organization with the resources of Maas Intertech, it wasn't a great deal of money and Osborne didn't even blink at mention of the sum.

They completed their negotiations in short order.

35

That slag Osborne had said it. Rico wondered about it. Could Farrah Moffit have been the one who'd set up the original run against Maas Intertech? She handled herself real slick on the telecom, cool and corporate. Yet, to Rico it didn't seem likely. She was a fragging psychologist She'd gotten her start at Fuchi as a fragging joygirl. She turned doe-eyed and timid the minute anybody raised their voice. It didn't matter, but it did make him wonder.

Rico rubbed at his eyes and suppressed a yawn. It seemed like days, weeks, since he'd last slept a

damn.

"What now?" Moffit asked quietly.

Rico grimaced. "Now you go back to the lounge."

He and the team had some plans to make.

"Master," the voice whispered. *"Wake up."*

Bandit woke, shifted senses, and opened his eyes to the astral counterpart of the lounge. The auras of Dok and Farrah Moffit glowed from opposite sides of the narrow room. Between them hovered the Raccoon-like form of a watcher.

"Something strange, master," the watcher said. *"You said..."*

"Yes."

Bandit motivated his astral self, sat up, crossed his legs and ascended, moving forward. The watcher led up the hall, through the door to the warehouse loading bay, across the bay, then through the large bay door and outside.

As Bandit passed through the astral form of the bay door, he entered the glare of directed mana, a spell, like turning to face the sun. Instinctively, he tugged himself back, back into the dim radiance of the loading bay. As he did that, he threw up a shield, a spell of his own, surrounding his astral body in a sphere of guardian power.

Then-nothing. No mana bolts streamed through the dormant aura of the bay door to strike his shield. No monstrous spirits appeared to confront him. Just what had he encountered? He descended into the ground, moved forward a ways, then came up through the buildings on the far side of the street. He saw an old, fat man seated on a toilet and smoking a fat cigar, but other than that... nothing.

The night sky shone with the reflected radiance of the Earth's energy. The air rumbled with the workings of nearby factories. Cars and trucks moved along the streets.

The magic that had glared in his face was gone. It had touched him and disappeared. What was it? What could it mean?

Trouble, for sure.

They took the meet in Jersey City, on Pacific, right near the railroad yards. Meets at very high-profile localities like malls hadn't gone too good in the recent past, so this one was taking place in the litter-strewn parking lot of the local Quik Shop store.

At three a.m., the lot was deserted.

Rico looked around from the passenger seat of the van. The surrounding neighborhood was grunge, three- and four-story grimy brick and cracked, crumbling sidewalks. It was like Newark's worst, only the cops still worked here and they never went easy. Jersey City had its own private corporation and that corp had its own cops. They were a mob like all the other mobs, only they had the law behind them. They specialized in street justice. Make the wrong move and you ended up sprawled in some dark corner with a hole through the back of your head.

Not a good place for pyrotechnics. The Jersey City cops rode in armored cars and command vehicles and had assault teams on twenty-four-hour alert. If things got real hot, they called out the fragging panzer. Or one of their gunships.

At a quarter past the hour, a crimson Toyota Ambassador pulled into the lot. It was marked for Paladin Cabs. That meant body armor, run-flat tires, and gun ports.

Tonight it also meant a bodyguard. The guard looked like a gutterpunk in razor-sharp threads. He came out of the rear of the cab in a dark gray suit, glanced toward the street, stood up, glanced toward the street, closed the door of the cab, and turned to face Thorvin's van. Then he shot another glance toward the street. Rico recognized the habit. It was something you developed after seeing too many people sliced and diced to bloody ribbons in the thrasher parts of the sprawl.

A pro would keep his eyes moving, but he'd be discreet about it. This said something about the slag inside the cab. Osborne might be a dangerous man, but he'd never walked the razor himself. If he had, he wouldn't have a clown like this for a guard.

At Rico's signal, Shank tugged open the side door of the van and then waited, crouching, watching the clown and cradling his M22A2. Rico gave the clown a few moments to adjust to that, then pushed open the passenger door and stepped outside.

Osborne came over to face him. With a quick look up and down, he said, "You did a fine job on my security." Rico nodded. "You got sticks?"

Osborne drew a synthleather wallet from his jacket pocket, folded it open, and handed it over. Rico

checked the credsticks with the reader on his belt. They checked out.

"We'll set the delivery once we "got the merchandise."

"When do you go?"

"Soon."

"Make it so. I've got a lot riding on this deal. Do it fast enough and we'll have things to discuss in the future."

"Sure, amigo. Slot and run."

Osborne nodded, got back in his cab, and left. Rico glanced up at the night sky, then returned to the van.

The nightly rain would be coming soon.

Too soon.

36

"Time is oh-two forty-five hours."

Rico acknowledged that over his headset. The message came from Piper and it meant she had done everything she had to do inside the Crystal Blossom condo's mainframe computer.

Rico keyed his headset. "Go."

The helo veered abruptly, vectoring left and up as the doors siding the main compartment slid open. Rico wound the thick, slick-coated drop-rope around his left forearm and popped the safety line affixed to his commando harness. Shank nodded from the door opposite.

Abruptly, they were coming up over the edge of the roof of the Crystal Blossom condoplex.

"*Now!*" Thorvin said.

Rico stepped out into empty air.

The timing was precise. The helo slowed just as he slid to the end of the drop-rope. He hit the roof's flat, gritty surface with both feet, tumbled once and came up onto his knees, scanning the rooftop with his Ares Special Service in hand. Shank landed an instant behind him. The helo arced away so as not to attract attention, dwindling into the night and the infinitude of buildings and glaring lights sprawling across Manhattan.

The roof was clear. Rico rose and jogged over to the building's southern face. Shank followed. They pulled black climbing ropes from their harnesses and thrust K-2 autopitons against the low ferrocrete wall rising like a rim from around the edge of the roof. The cryomag tips of the K-2s burned holes straight into the crete. Secondary probes then extended outward from the pitons' main shaft, embedding the devices in the crete.

That took about five seconds. They spent another three or four connecting the ropes to the pitons, then to the I.M.I. power winches on the front of their harnesses.

"Set," Shank growled.

"Go."

The winches were programmed. From the roof, fifty stories above the ground, they fell about eleven stories straight down, then the winches cut in. Harnesses jerked and pulled. They slowed, jogging feet-first off the face of the building. They came to a halt before the wall of mirrored macroplast panes guarding the living room of Condo 35-8. This was where they'd picked up Farrah Moffit and where they would now find Ansell Surikov.

They applied flashtape to the mirrored windows. One quick flash seared a large hole through the panes.

They swung inside.

The heart of the Crystal Blossom condoplex mainframe used standard CPU matrix iconology. a white room walled by control panels. At 02:44:58:21:19 or so, Piper attached a black-box program icon to the Master Logic Panel icon, then transmitted her ready signal to Rico.

"Time is oh-two forty-five hours."

A while passed, then a warning signal from the engineering subprocessor advised of a breached external wall panel in Residence 35-8. The black box on the main console piped that signal, changing it, shunting it to the building diagnostic subprocessor, initializing a Level 1 diagnostic search of engineering subsystems.

Momentarily, another warning came, and another diagnostic search began.

The loop was complete.

"Alert! Alert!"

Hearing that, Skip Nolan looked down the row of comm operators facing the spectrally lit consoles lining the Executive Action Brigade's command vehicle. One console was showing its red alert light on top. Op Three was working the console rapidly.

Fingering his headset, Skip stepped up behind the Op. Window One on the console's main display showed a broad expanse of city populated by soaring towers gleaming brightly in the night

"We've got a hit," said an excited voice. A burst of static interrupted the signal. The transmit display on the console ID'd the speaker as part of Ground Eleven, the surveillance team assigned to monitor a tower on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

"Ground Eleven, report," said Op Three.

The surveillance agent's voice returned in mid-sentence, "-just skimmed the roof. We make it a Hughes Stallion, possibly armed. We've got some activity-"

More static.

"-scanning two unknowns rappelling down the south face."

Window Three on the console's main display abruptly zoomed in on the Crystal Blossom condoplex. Two dark, human-sized figures seemed to be elinging to the building's mirrored surface, maybe thirty, thirty-five stories above street-level. Something flashed, and a black squarish patch appeared in the building's mirrored skin. The two figures disappeared into the black patch.

Skip suppressed a curse.

He'd been all but incredulous when Colonel Yates ordered a surveillance team to monitor the exterior of the condoplex. What the hell did this building have to do with their mission? The brigade didn't have resources to waste like this. Their targets were somewhere in Newark, not Manhattan. They'd scraped up enough street-level intelligence to be reasonably sure of that. All the colonel would say was that he had special intelligence, not through regular channels.

Now it looked as if someone were making a run on the condoplex. Skip jacked into the console, replayed the vid, and zoomed in tight on the two dark figures hanging at the side of the building. Computer analysis found a ninety-seven percent correspondence between the figures on the wall and datastore references on two of the runners who'd participated in the run against Maas Intertech.

That was a match.

The colonel's long shot appeared to be paying off.

Skip looked up the line of consoles to the crippled body in a wheelchair. Bobbie Jo, her mind and spirit, were linked to an underpowered backup drone drifting slowly over eastern Newark, futilely, it now seemed. She was too far from the action to make any difference, way too far away. The drone was too slow, and Bobbie Jo was getting too timid. She'd be lucky if Colonel Yates didn't cancel her contract. The colonel didn't believe in on-the-job therapy.

If only she could have found the will to pilot one of the brigade's assault choppers ... Things might've worked out better for her.

But-no time for that now.

He jacked into his command console. "Alert, alert. Cap One, you are go. Stand by for target designation on channel three."

A monotone voice replied, "Acknowledged. Lifting off."

From the background came the rapid thump-thump-thumping of rotorcraft.

When the lights came on, Surikov lay on the bed with his legs hanging over the side like he'd been sitting there a while, then just leaned back and fell asleep. He wore a black robe. He looked about fifty, sophisticated, with thinning hair and a close-trimmed beard turning gray. Extra weight around the middle. Not a big man. Not a small one either. A liquor bottle lay close to hand.

Rico tossed the bottle back toward the center of the bed and tried shaking Surikov awake. When that didn't work, he took the opportunity to press Dok's DNA scanner against Surikov's arm. The check took about thirty seconds and came back positive. ID confirmed. Again. He tugged Surikov up into a sitting position and cuffed him. Surikov grunted, moved his head, gradually starting to come around. He smelled like booze. "What ... ?" he mumbled. "Who's there? What's going on?"

"We're taking you to the Garden."

"A garden of delight," Surikov said, smiling stupidly. "That's my wife."

"We're taking you home."

Surikov stared for several long moments, then rubbed a hand over his mouth and made an obvious effort to get hold of himself. "How ... Tell me ... how do we proceed?"

No fragging guano.

The runners had called him Cannibal.

With her head lowered and hair hanging around her face, Farrah watched the runner watching her, trying to look as if she were doing anything but paying him any attention.

He made her nervous.

According to what she'd overheard, the runners had brought this Cannibal in specifically to stay with her, to serve both as guard and jailer. The ork runner had referred to Cannibal as a "hired gun." He looked like that. Like the kind of person who would do whatever someone asked, as long as the pay was satisfactory. Red and black slash-tats made his face a vicious mask. His teeth were filed to points and colored jet-black. He wore some unusual dark metallic armor on his upper body, and a small grayish skull dangled from his left ear. He carried a compact rifle-possibly a submachine gun-a pair of pistols, a rather short-looking sword, and numerous knives.

Farrah wished the runners had trusted her enough to leave her by herself. She would rather they'd left her here in handcuffs and manacles than leave her unfettered with this scuzpunk for a guard.

Cannibal leaned against the wall opposite and watched her. Some unknown quanta of time slipped past. Cannibal pushed away from the wall and turned and walked slowly out of the warehouse lounge. His footsteps moved up the hall. The door to that space beyond, the loading area, squealed and then banged. Silence descended, but lingered only moments.

Too soon, the door squealed and banged again and Cannibal returned. He leaned against the wall again, facing her, cradling that rifle in his arms. He grinned.

"Do I make you nervous?"

How to reply to the sociopathic personality? Farrah tried to decide. She could not expect him to observe any of the ordinary social conventions. Almost any response at all would only encourage him. An outright challenge, looks or words of defiance, might well incite him to violence. Better, it seemed, for her to do nothing, say nothing, make no response whatsoever. Better to appear completely cowed, in hopes of providing little or no provocation.,

"I could do you in a second," he said. "I could do you in a way we'd both enjoy. One time I did this biff in bed.

First we bopped, then I took her heart out. I could do you like that. One minute, you're in heaven. The next..."

Farrah suppressed the tremor that rose up through her insides. If he came near her... if left no choice but to try to save herself, she would have one chance and one chance only.

If would be do or die.

37

No alarms, no shouts ...

So far so good.

Rico watched Surikov pull on the hi-visibility orange jumpsuit with built-in plastic shoes. Intended to ID him as a noncombatant, then helped him get into a commando-style harness. Surikov moved slow and fumbled a lot, like he was still feeling whatever he'd been drinking, and like he'd drunk too much.

Rico hustled him out to the living room, the slag stumbling and tripping in the dark. Rico kept him upright and forced him ahead, then keyed his headset. "Time check."

Piper replied, "Time is oh-two forty-eight hours."

Maybe another minute went by. Rico kept his eyes moving, glancing toward Shank and the entry to the condo. He kept expecting to hear shouts, shots, detonations, a Fuchi security team blasting into the place and spraying the room with autofire. What he got instead was the mumping of a helo. As the sound drew near, a blackish blur shot through the hole in the exterior window panels, smashed across the top of the wetbar, shattering bottles and glasses, then thudded against a wall.

The blur was a stickihook, a macroplast weight with an adhesive skin and a loop connected to a rope. Shank rapidly freed the rope from the hook and brought it over. The rope had three ends, each with a mountaineer's heavy metal clasp. Rico snapped one clasp onto Surikov's harness and one onto his own. Shank took the third.

Surikov seemed to wake up then. He pointed toward the hole in the window panels, saying adamantly, "We are *not* going out through mat-"

Right.

Rico put a medjector to Surikov's right arm and fired.

The slag blinked and jerked his arm away, then got woozy-looking, like he might slump to the floor.

"Time check."

"Time is oh-two fifty hours."

Shank helped get Surikov over to the hole in the window panels. The rope connected to their harnesses grew taut.

One quick look and they went together through the hole.

The roof of the foundry gave easy access to a window on the warehouse's fourth floor. Claude Jaeger waited several moments, watching. The window, easily visible from the street below, slowly settled into a gummy, glutinous mass oozing over the window sill like mucus. The mage got that much right, at least Claude hopped through the empty frame, landed lightly on his feet and sank into a crouch. This floor of the warehouse smelled of resin and paint. Piles of antique furniture, some apparently made of actual wood, divided the space into long, narrow aisles. Claude found his way to the stairs. Two flights down, he paused before a metal fire door and listened.

Footsteps approached, softly echoing—the calm, measured footsteps of a sentry, one wholly unaware of any intrusions onto his turf. Claude drew back and flattened himself against the wall to the left of the doorway. In a moment, the door banged and swung inward, right past Claude's nose. The sentry followed through. In that instant, Claude saw the sentry's face from only a few steps away. The man's eyes gazed straight ahead, into the greater darkness of the stairwell.

Claude's fist shot forward and back, and the sentry collapsed. The satisfying feel of snapping bone and crunching cartilage lingered. Claude smiled, then dragged the sentry's body fully into the stairwell.

One down, one to go.

When the rest of the runners returned to this hideyhole, they would find only death. By then, Claude would be waiting in ambush.

He moved cautiously through the doorway and into a large space, the truck-loading bay located at the front of the building. He stood on a loading dock at the rear of that bay. The extra-large door to a freight elevator stood immediately to his left. Beyond that an ordinary-sized door. This led into a narrow hall, past an office, a lavatory, then into a smallish room outfitted like a ramshackle tongue.

The woman there, seated on a cushioned bench, looked like she belonged with the slitches in the holopics on the walls around her. enormous hair, jutting breasts, a face both sublime and whorish. As Claude entered, she lifted her head and drew back fearfully, eyes wide and round.

She gasped and blurted, "Who are you?"

Claude smiled and continued toward her. "Your friends sent me to get you out of here."

"What?" She looked at him as if astonished.

But when he reached for her, astonishment turned to animal fear. She jerked aside and began rising to her feet. Claude seized her elbow and flung her down onto the bench. Her head tilted back and her jaw dropped open and something like a blackish length of spaghetti or string shot out from under her tongue. Claude felt the tap against his chest and saw the string whip back into the woman's mouth, vanishing before he could really grasp what was happening.

Cybersnake. Narcoject delivery system. The burning spike of pain that suddenly pierced his chest suggested hypercyanide, but then he felt his heart hammering like it would burst and realized his eyes had gone out of focus.

What was it? Atropine? Working this quickly? He felt his legs give way and suddenly found himself lying on the floor on his back, staring blindly at the ceiling.

How had that happened? What was going on? Why was he so hot, burning up? He couldn't breathe. It felt like he had a metal strap ringing his neck and another around his chest, crushing him. He tried to force air into his lungs, but the pain was overwhelming.

Angels. He heard angels singing ...

Surikov was wide-eyed and looking around as the towers swung by, but then the winch above their heads pulled them up beside the door in the helo's flank. Dok reached out, and in another moment Rico, Shank, and Surikov were all inside.

Dok hooked a safety line onto Surikov. Rico popped the line off his own harness and moved forward to the copilot's seat. The helo banked and picked up speed, vectoring down a long chasm of steel and crete towers.

"Three birds!" Thorvin shouted. "Coming in on freaking intercept!"

Rico shouted back. "Port Authority cops?"

The Port Authority had jurisdiction over Manhattan air space and regularly put patrols in the air. Thorvin shook his head. "I don't think so!"

Who the hell could it be? Rico wondered. Piper'd had the Crystal Blossom tower locked down solid. They'd been in and out in just minutes. Who could even know they'd been there, much less have helos in the air and coming down on them this fast? "Can ya lose 'em?"

"Do I HAVE A FREAKING *CHOICE!*"

"Master," the voice whispered.

Bandit closed his eyes to the tilting, vibrating world of the helicopter's interior and looked to the astral plane. The raccoon-like form of the watcher crouched before him.

"*You must come,*" it said.

Bandit considered that.

Very risky.

Claude Jaeger dead? Killed by a woman? There was no doubting the witness of his astral senses, yet Maurice struggled with the concept, astounded. The physical adept had often seemed sufficiently formidable to be virtually indestructible. He should have known, Maurice thought Time disproved all such lies.

Now he would have to finish the job himself.

Disgruntled, he left his biffs in the Mercedes and crossed the street to the narrow front of the warehouse. The smaller of the two doors clicked and opened at a word. He stepped into the long, narrow, rectangular space of a loading area, then mounted the loading dock at the rear and continued on through another door, down the hall and into what looked like a lounge. The woman was there, huddled on a cushioned bench and quietly sobbing, her face and head completely hidden under a disheveled mass of shiny whitish-blond hair. Jaeger lay dead on the floor, on his back, a look of inexpressible bliss monopolizing his features.

"*Master,*" said Vera Causa, his ally, murmuring into his ear. "*Beware ...*"

Maurice shifted to his astral perceptions in time to see the radiant figure emerging from the wall at the back of the lounge.

The shaman ...

The slugs in the pursuing helos were pros. Thorvin's evasive maneuvers didn't throw them. Neither did the halfer's E.C.W. They came in high and low, and Rico had no choice but to point Thorvin toward the Hudson River. They'd have to sprint for the Jersey Side, hoping Thorvin could find the speed to get them dear of their pursuit.

As they passed out over the dark expanse of water, the first slugs clattered against the helo's hull. One penetrated the airframe to gouge Shank in the upper right thigh, another fractured the window at Rico's side, spitting a jagged sliver of transparex across his cheek. The wound wasn't deep and the blood loss was minimal, but it didn't improve his mood any.

He looked to the rear and saw Bandit sitting cross-legged, unmoving, eyes closed, flute lying across his lap.

No help coming from that quarter.

They're GAINING!" Thorvin shouted.

"Push it!"

"I'm freaking pushing, ALL RIGHT?"

Bandit paused at the rear of the lounge. He had seen the corpse in the stairwell and now he saw the body on the floor here in this room. Things were happening. It seemed that Rico's concern for Farrah Moffit's safety had been more than justified. Bandit only wondered how two men had come to be dead, while Moffit still lived.

A tall, thin man stood at the head of the lounge, just in front of the door to the hallway. His aura now grew radiant, revealing truths. The man was a magician, and he was using his astral senses. That meant he was probably looking at Bandit, seeing him. That didn't bother Bandit much. What bothered him was what he saw standing beside the man.

The spirit had a female form. It looked from Bandit to the other magician and back again several times. Was this a conjured spirit or an ally? Either way, it boded no good.

Two against one.

Bad odds.

Bandit felt inclined toward just leaving. The equivalent of one step back and he would be on the other side of a physical wall and all but immune to spellcasting. There was a problem with that, though. Farrah Moffit was important. Rico had made a point of impressing that on everyone. If Bandit simply stepped out, she would be at the mercy of this magician.

"I regret this," the magician said. *"Have you any last words?"*

Bandit nodded. *"Goodfellow."*

The spirit so named emerged from the wall at the rear of the lounge and paused at Bandit's left. It took the form of a human, but slim, short, and bearded, and wearing peculiar clothing with ruffles and lacy trim. It looked at Bandit for a moment, then across the astral terrain to the other magician, then, with a flourish, bowed, extending one arm with the hand palm up.

The floor rumbled and quaked and split open. The magician opposite shouted and fell through the hole, down and out of sight.

Goodfellow bowed again and vanished.

The other magician's spirit leaned over to gaze into the hole, then looked at Bandit and smiled. "You should go away," it said, "before my master wakes up."

Bandit could see the wisdom in that.

Manifesting on the physical plane, he moved over to face Farrah Moffit. She sat on a cushioned bench with her back pressed to the wall and her legs drawn up before her body. Her eyes were wide and round and she held one hand thrust back against her mouth. She looked terrified. She went on staring at the hole in the floor till Bandit moved directly into her line of sight, then her eyes widened further as her gaze met his.

"Come with me if you want to live."

Moffit gasped, then slowly nodded her head.

The LZ became a killing zone.

They had no choice but to put down. It was that or wait to get shot out of the air. The pursuing helos didn't hesitate to fire even as they passed over heavily populated sections of the Newark metroplex. Populated, sure, but by who? Nobody that mattered.

Thorvin's hideaway for the helo was in the ruins of Sector 13, an old abandoned airport near the wastes of some long-forgotten cemetery. Chain-link fencing topped by coils of razor-wire surrounded one of the smaller hangars. Thorvin put the helo down inside the fencing, and the other helos closed in.

Bullets hammered against the airframe. Thorvin turned the helo parallel to the front of the hangar to provide cover. One of the hangar doors slid open and Thorvin's van came rolling out, guided by remote. The weapons pod on top opened up and began blazing. By then, Rico could see that the other helos were dropping uniformed troops to the ground.

Bandit was still in a trance. Shank grabbed him up and Rico grabbed Surikov and they broke for the van.

It was a straight run-from the side of the helo to the side of the van-no more than about five meters.

The troops moving in cut loose with a storm of autofire.

Abruptly, Dok veered left and out beyond the front end of the helo, shouting and blazing away with his Ingram. It was a suicide move. The instant he saw it happening, Rico thrust Surikov toward the van and lunged across the ferrocrete. But not even his enhanced reaction time and speed could get him going fast enough. His ears were full of the stammering of autofire weapons and Dok's shouts of vengeance and wrath, and none of it mattered. None of it made any difference.

Dok rammed a fresh clip from his belt into the Ingram, then his head snapped back and he plunged to the ground. Rico didn't hesitate.

As he moved beyond the front of the helo, slugs pounded into his chest. The impacts stole his breath. He staggered and fell to one knee. It didn't feel like the bullets had penetrated his armored jacket, but it hurt. Mother of God, how it hurt. He forced himself forward, grabbed Dok beneath the shoulders and started dragging him back toward the van. More slugs slammed into his chest and shoulders, Another moment and he'd probably be dead, laid out as limp as Dok, but then Shank was there, grabbing Dok around the chest, lifting him off the ground and shoving Rico toward the van.

They had only one chance left. They had to dive like devil rats into the transitways before armor-piercing slugs or a wire-guided missile took them out They had to go where the helos couldn't reach them. It was up to Thorvin now.

And it didn't get any closer than this.

Farrah Moffit huddled in the corner formed by the rear of the dumpster and the wall of the alley. Bandit hovered, sitting cross-legged, just far enough above the ground to see over the dumpster to the street. Hours had passed and that was bad. If he didn't get back to his body soon ...

Moffit broke down again. She had a strange way of crying, like a series of violent coughs, one rolling swiftly into the next. The upset seemed genuine. Her first episode had started when he asked her what had happened to the slag called Cannibal and to the other man, the one lying dead in the lounge with Moffit. She seemed deeply disturbed. Perhaps she had led a sheltered life in her corporate towers, insulated from the realities of the plex. At least she didn't make too much noise.

Some more time passed, then a rumbling arose, then Thorvin's van pulled into the end of the alley.

Rico got out and looked around.

"They're here," Bandit said.

Farrah Moffit rose and went to the van and all but fell sobbing into Surikov's arms.

Bandit rejoined his waiting body.

Dok looked dead.

38

It didn't end till they did the final check on Surikov.

The slag had a snitch, a microtransmitter implanted at the back of his neck, just like the other Surikov, Michael Travis, who they'd busted outta Maas Intertech. Farrah Moffit had told them to expect that. All the senior research staff at Fuchi had them, she said. She herself didn't rate high enough for that.

Getting the snitch out took some work. Rico had some experience with emergency med, but Shank had more so he did the job. Dok's equipment did most of the actual cutting. By the time Shank was finished, Surikov was pale and faint, but Dok's gear indicated that he'd get over it.

They lost their pursuers. They picked up Farrah Moffit, and Bandit too. A second Bandit. A Bandit that looked like a ghost. A Bandit that hovered, floated over the ground, and finally disappeared into the body of the Bandit that had been with them from the beginning. It was eerie and would have been freaky only Rico had seen things like this before.

Astral projection, it was called.

They headed for the bolthole in Rahway, Sector 13. It seemed called for. They were shot to piss, the rain had come and gone, and they all needed some sleep.

One last piece of work: they called Osborne to set up the exchange of Surikov and Moffit for nuyen. The meet was set for that night.

When Rico finally lay down, it was almost noon. He seemed to fall asleep in just moments. Piper shed her clothes in the dark, then carefully lay down beside him, shifting in against his side, lowering her head lightly to his shoulder. She lay there with him throughout the afternoon, moving little, resolved to let him sleep.

She could not, would not allow herself to sleep. These final few hours before their meet with Maas Intertech might be their last time together, intimately, as man and woman. She tried to savor every moment, tie feel of his body, his musky aroma, his warmth, the soft sound of his breath. She called to mind everything she had ever admired about him. She struggled against the tears that welled time and again into her eyes. She prayed silently to the kami for deliverance, but had no real doubt about how the night would end.

Life provided few pleasures, and scant love. Too soon it was all over. She struggled against regret and bitter sorrow.

She had known all along how it would end, this run, everything. Fate would not be denied. The corps had all the power. Maas Intertech, through its parent organization Kuze Nihon, had virtually unlimited resources. The complete operational forces of Daisaka Security might be waiting for them tonight when they arrived at the meet. What chance did they have against such an army? They would be crushed like worms beneath the feet of giants. She only wished she'd met Rico sooner, that she'd spent more time at his side. He was the only man she had ever really loved. There would be no life without him.

One thought brought a fleeting token of contentment. If she died tonight, she would die not for Ansell Surikov or Farrah Moffit. She would die not to further the battle against the oppressive megacorps, and not to save the planet Rattier, she would die for *jefe*, for her lover. She would die defending all that he believed in and all he considered good. She would die for him, and for him alone.

Nothing else seemed to have any meaning now.

The argument started as dusk descended into darkness. Shank looked at Thorvin, and Thorvin shrugged.

"I don't believe it either," Thorvin said.

It began with Piper declaring, loudly, somewhere down the hall from the main room, that she would accompany the rest of the team to the meet with Maas Intertech. She could do nothing in the matrix. At the meet, she could at least carry a gun. Rico told her, curtly she wasn't going. She protested. He cursed. They both started to shout. It was the first time Shank had ever heard Piper yell.

By nine p.m., they were standing in a room with plastic flowers, perfumed air, and quiet music at the Chapel of the Eternal Light in Sector 7. For five hundred nuyen, they got the same deal for Dok that they had gotten for Filly. Only this time, when the pre-recorded trideo service ended, nobody had anything to say. Dok had said it all himself when he ran like a wild man out onto the tarmac, shooting his SMG. It was about Filly and revenge and doing what you had to do, damn the consequences. Damn even death.

After the service, a slag in a neat black suit came with an urn full of ashes. Rico thrust a fistful of the ashes into Surikov's pants pockets.

"Don't ever forget," he said. "What you're getting didn't come free."

Surikov paled, and said, "No. No, indeed."

The meet came down in Sector 9 amid the gang-ravaged projects of Owens Park. The street was just one block long. Piles of building debris, the empty shells of gutted autos, and every kind of junk and garbage lined the street. Plastic sheeting and thin macroplast panels covered the windows of the buildings, all abandoned but for squatters and derelicts.

Heavy clouds lingered overhead, backlit by the moon and reflecting a strange, almost unearthly light.

Nobody seemed to be around.

At just past midnight, a pair of white, short-frame Toyota limos turned the corner and came slowly up the block. They stopped across from the van, near the opposite curb. Rico waited and watched. Thorvin had a drone in the air, keeping everything under surveillance. Bandit was in a trance, watching astrally. No warnings from either of them. Maybe Osborne was straight.

Maybe things would work out.

The rear door of the lead limo swung open. The slag who stepped out was nothing like the punk-like clown Osborne had brought to the first meet. This one was a real cutter, cool and corporate, easy in his movements, watchful and wary without showing more than he had to.

Shank stepped out of the van, showing his iron. Rico followed, then moved out as far as the middle of the street. Osborne met him there. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the air felt unusually warm and humid. "Sticks?" Rico said.

Osborne handed him a synthleather wallet containing seven certified credsticks, which checked out on the reader on Rico's belt. Rico handed the wallet back, then keyed his headset.

The side door on the van slid open, giving Osborne a plain view of Surikov and Moffit. Piper was in the van with them. Rico hoped she had the sense to stay clear, stay under cover. She knew how meets like this worked, but he feared she wouldn't do what she should. "My tech's in the other car," Osborne said. Rico nodded.

Osborne waved, and a slag in a dark blue suit came forward. After Dok's diagnostic analyzer declared the tech's DNA and retina scanner safe, Rico nodded toward the van. The tech went over to scan Surikov. Rico kept his eyes on Osborne and the cutter, but neither looked suspicious or like they had anything more on their minds than the careful biz of "buying product," or "recruitment."

The clouds overhead seemed to be coming lower. A few curling tendrils of fog drifted along the street. No warnings from Thorvin or Bandit, though.

The tech returned from the van. Nodded.

Osborne motioned him back to the second limo, then looked at Rico and said, "Anytime you're ready."

"You're satisfied the product's real."

"As real as it gets."

Rico keyed his headset. As Surikov and Moffit came walking out to the middle of the street, Osborne handed over the credsticks. "Thank you," Moffit said, looking at Rico.

She even made it sound sincere.

Rico backed away, then turned quickly and climbed into the van. Shank followed and slammed the side door.

The van rumbled and rolled ahead, accelerating quickly.

Surikov and Moffit and the pair of white limos disappeared into the gathering fog.

Then, the van rounded a corner, and Bandit said, "Trouble."

There was no distinguishing fog from clouds. The van slid into a sea of whirling, billowing white. Thorvin shouted curses.

Abruptly, something came straight at them. Rico had just enough time to see it was a helo flying right on the deck, barely two meters above the pavement. It seemed almost near enough to touch. The only detail he noticed was the black annis logo on the forward slope of the helo's nose.

Something exploded. Maybe a rocket. Rico saw fire. The world roared and crashed and tumbled and when it finally came to a halt, he could barely see anything for all the smoke. Blood was running into his mouth, he felt a tightness in his left side, and if he breathed too deeply it hurt like hell. The van seemed to be lying on its roof, windows cracked and smashed. Rico struggled to stand, but something hanging above him kept getting in his way, and then he realized Piper was right beside him, gasping, grunting with pain, suddenly coughing.

He found her shoulders. Her grunts rose into shrill cries as he pulled her up. Smoke filled his eyes. It was turning from gray to black. Where the hell was the door? any door ...

Something crashed. Shank shouted. They stumbled out onto the street. Smoke mixed with fog. Burning debris littered the roadway for as far around as Rico would see.

The shooting started, a full company's worth of weapons blasting away on autofire.

"WHERE'S THORVIN?" Shank hollered.

The ground roared at their backs with the fury of another explosion. The shock wave all but knocked Rico off his feet. Rico staggered and caught himself, but Piper stumbled and fell to her knees. Rico tugged her back up, but she wouldn't stand, wouldn't stay on her feet. That was when he saw the bloody mass of hair at the side of her head and the dark stains on the back of her jacket.

"She's FINISHED!" Shank bellowed.

Shank yanked Rico forward, and Piper slipped out of his hands, falling like a sack, a sack of meat. Rico tried to stop, but Shank kept pulling him and then half a dozen rounds slammed into his shoulders and back and he nearly passed out.

This was it, he realized. The end. There was no cover anywhere. It seemed like a thousand machine guns were stammering from all around. He tried to pull the Predator 2 from the holster on his hip, but he couldn't get a firm enough grip to tug the weapon free.

He stumbled over chunks of debris, piles of trash, with Shank shoving him forward and shouting, "Keep MOVING!"

When finally Rico stopped and looked around, he stood in an alley and Shank wasn't around. The alleyway was deserted. He staggered forward a few steps, then turned and started back. All he could think of was leaving Piper sprawled like a bag of meat on some street in no-man's land without anyone to mourn her passing.

What the frag ...

What the frag was wrong with him?

His legs gave out. He hit the ground hard. He felt so tired, so weak. He couldn't keep his eyes open. He laid his head against the cool, gritty concrete and exhaled deeply.

Fade to black.

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Minx hesitated and looked away, a faint smile curving the corner of her lips. When she did that, Monk now knew, she was listening to radio calls or maybe getting a telecom call over her implanted headware. She had once been a sort of messenger. Now, she mostly took calls from friends.

The *change* didn't affect that, the implants. After the *change* you couldn't get stuff like that put in, for various reasons that Minx hadn't yet explained, but anything you had before the *change* went on working just like before.

Which was good, Monk thought.

Now, Minx looked at him and smiled.

"It's time," she said.

"Uh-huh."

They ran-ran and ran-down stairs, down a long tunnel, more stairs, through a door, then onto the elevated walkway beside the lanes of a transitway. They had to run because they had what Minx called "only a small window of opportunity." That meant they had to be fast. They had to be "on time."

The red-hued darkness didn't slow them down. Monk could see just fine. Better than in full daylight, in

fact.

A huge stepvan with flaring strobes and flashing lights came screaming around the corner of the transitway and screeched to a halt right in front of them. The passenger door banged open. Minx tugged on Monk's hand and they scrambled inside.

The truck roared and raced ahead. The slag at the wheel in the Omni Police Services uniform looked at them and grinned. His eyes glared a fiery red. He laughed. Minx covered her mouth and swayed with silent laughter. Monk couldn't resist a grin, though he wasn't exactly sure just what he was grinning about.

Minx had this sort of private joke between her and her friends that wasn't entirely clear. Monk guessed it had something to do with what they were, or what they had become, or the *change*, or something, but he hadn't quite figured it out.

Minx didn't seem to mind.

"You're so booty," she told him. "You'll scan it. Just give it time."

The stepvan roared out onto some ground-level street, and everything got hazy and foggy. The haze and denser patches of fog all looked kind of reddish. Everything did.

Abruptly, they came to a halt in what looked like the middle of a war zone. Police cruisers everywhere, flashing strobes, slags in uniforms, slags with guns. Minx grabbed Monk's hand and pulled him from the stepvan. There was a body on the pavement just a few meters away. The body of an Asian woman.

Minx smiled and nodded, urging him with her eyes, her whole expression, to go ahead.

Monk knelt down. The Asian woman might have looked dead, just at a glance, 'cause there was a lot of blood, but she wasn't really dead, not quite yet. The subtle radiance of the living lingered about her body. It was hard to see, and Monk had only just recently begun to notice this kind of thing, but now that he knew what to look for, now that Minx had pointed it out, he could see it and see it clearly, as long as he took a moment to look.

He leaned down and put his mouth over the woman's mouth, then slowly inhaled. He kept inhaling till he felt a tingling suffuse his whole body. With that tingling came a pleasure even better than sex, at least in his limited experience. It was more than just physical pleasure. It made him feel full, strong, powerful, almost indomitable. If he let his imagination run wild, a danger Minx had warned him about, he could almost see himself possessing such great power that almost anything ...

Minx squeezed his shoulder, and bent to kiss him. They exchanged breaths, exhaling into each other's mouths, then inhaling that sweet, sweet breath.

"Now it's my turn," she said softly, smiling.

Monk nodded. "Sure."

There were other bodies waiting.

* * *

They were at Chimpira when the call came in L. Kahn took it via the telecom at his booth. Ravage, sitting beside him, heard the entire exchange. An informant reported that the runners who had been hired to bust Ansell Surikov out of Maas Intertech had just been ambushed up in Sector 9. Police were at the scene, but the informant believed the runners to be dead.

L. Kahn broke the connection, sat still for a moment, then softly cursed. "I hired backup in depth and what happens? Daisaka Security gets them with a gunship. There's no justice. No justice at all."

Ravage agreed, and reached over and picked up L. Kahn's drink, drew it to her mouth and had a sip. L. Kahn frowned and looked at her. It was his unhappy frown. Intolerant

"I've had enough problems lately," he said. "Don't test my patience."

"I get these impulses," Ravage replied.

"You'll have to learn-"

If he had more to say, he didn't get it out. Ravage splashed the drink into his face. As he began reacting to that, she slashed her hand across his throat. The razors protruding from under her synthimplanted nails tore through flesh like a knife through air. No significant resistance.

As the first blood came pumping, pulsing, spraying out through the wounds, she reversed direction, making a fist and slamming it back into L. Kahn's face, shattering bone and gristle and driving his head against the back of the booth. The man bled, banged backward, and slumped in little more than an instant.

Then Ravage hopped up and away, before any of the blood and gore could stain her clinging silver-hued bodysuit.

The pair of orks L. Kahn had hired as extra guards turned to look, then just looked at her and waited. These particular orks had no illusions about their place in the Newark underworld. They understood that when orders came from above, the good soldier simply nodded and obeyed. In this case, they had accepted

nuyen from her, from her new employer, before nodding and pledging obedience. With a quick gesture she indicated that they should take charge of the body.

"Toss it in the Ditch."

Sanitation would cart it away.

On her way out of the club, Ravage stopped at a telecom and dialed the number her new boss had given her. The boss' helper answered, a dark-skinned elf. He looked a question at her.

"It's done," she told him.

"*Muy bien*," the elf replied.

That finished her biz for the night.

The sunlight seeping through the dark, grime-smearred window swelled and faded away. Days were passing, but Rico hardly noticed. He lay on a bare mattress on the floor of a squalid room in an abandoned building. He had a bottle by his side and some food. He had bandages wrapped around his chest and covering more cuts and gouges than he had interest in counting. Some fleeting instinct for survival had compelled him to find a street doc and go to the safest refuge he knew.

When he finally woke up in that alley, he'd gone back for Piper, but by then the streets were deserted, the bodies gone. Even the wreck of the van had been removed. It took the heart out of him. Maybe it had cost him his soul.

Little things came to mind now, how. Piper used to smile or laugh, the way she cast her eyes down when something embarrassed her. For all the razor-edged skill she'd had as a decker, she had been and would always be in his memory a reticent Japanese, a soft-spoken, loving, and loyal woman, more beautiful than any he had ever known. It occurred to him that this crumbling building wasn't far from where they had first met. This very apartment was where they had first made love. The place hadn't been such a wreck those few years ago. It had been tired and worn, but safe. Quiet.

How many months had they lived here? He couldn't remember. He'd been surprised to find the building still standing.

It was all he had left. He hadn't been smart enough to save anyone. He'd let them be used by the megacorps. Sure, they got Farrah Moffit together with the real Surikov-and had turned the pair over to Maas Intertech, but so what?

What did that matter now?

In the night he smashed the bottle and brought the jagged end to his neck, and held it there a couple of minutes. He felt the jagged knife-edge of glass grazing his skin, but he knew that this was futile. He didn't have the strength to do it. He didn't care enough to end it. He lowered his arm and let the broken bottle roll away. It was over. He was already dead. He would just lie here till the final fragments faded into the night.

Hours passed. He became aware of some soft sounds, faraway creaks and squeaks. He thought of rats and devil rats and the other creatures that inhabited the darker corners of the plex, and then the door to the room slowly swung inward.

A pair of dark figures appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by the deeper black of the hall. One looked small and seemed curved like a female. The other one had the heavy build of a big male, big enough even for an ork. "I knew I would find you here."

What the frag ... The voice was Piper's. Slowly, Rico sat up, shifting his Jikku eyes to low-light to better scan the doorway. To his astonishment, he saw Piper standing there, and Shank. They looked battered and bloody, but they were standing there alive. Rico struggled to speak. He couldn't manage anything coherent. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"One short sleep past and we recycle endlessly, *jefe*," Piper said softly. "And I'm going to prove it to you, my love, but first you must let me kiss you."

She shifted closer, smiling warmly.

Her eyes glowed a fiery red.

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The chopper settled lightly onto the aeropad atop Fuchi Tower Five. By then, Gordon Ito was up, out of his seat and waiting at the front of the passenger compartment. His deputy director, executive aid, and exec sec all scurried to shut down notebook comps and close briefcases. His personal bodyguard simply rose and moved to stand beside him.

The moment the hatch was open, the steps lowered, Gordon strode down to the aeropad and across to the rooftop lounge. He moved briskly, but did not rush. He had something he wanted to attend to immediately, but that did not call for haste. Nothing could, in Gordon's view. Haste made waste, and in his

position, hasty decisions and actions most often promised to result in disaster.

The elevator delivered him twenty stories down to his office suite. Moments later, he stepped into his private office. The tea lady delivered tea. Gordon lit a Platinum Select cigarette, then took up his tea and spent three minutes staring out the wall of windows behind his desk, considering how to proceed.

The decision made, he returned to his desk and brought up the telecom. In another moment the Fuchi logo, veiled by a black triangle, filled the screen. "Mr. Ito."

"Mr. Xiao."

"Konichiwa."

"Konichiwa."

"What brings you to my screen this evening, Gordon?"

"I've just had some intelligence handed to me. I thought you might find it interesting. I'm told that Ansell Surikov and Marena Farris have been recruited by Maas Intertech."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, Gordon."

"Were you planning to do anything about it?"

"I think not."

Gordon forced himself to pause a moment. Xiao's reaction was too complacent even for a man who demonstrated practically no emotion. Something had to be up. "You took the lead on this. You specifically ordered me to lay off Farris and Surikov. Now they're both with Intertech. That's going to improve Kuze Nihon's position in at least one or two key technological areas. And you don't want to do anything about it?"

"It is not necessary, Gordon."

"I'll remind you that Surikov is a leading light in bio-technical research."

"Maas Intertech does not have Surikov."

Gordon sat back in his chair, took a drag on his cigarette, and considered. His intelligence couldn't be wrong, it came straight from the source. That meant Xiao had to be wrong, or lying-or did it? "Then who do they have?"

"They are back to square one, Gordon."

Gordon hesitated an instant, then said, "You sonov-abitch."

"Yes," Xiao replied. "I fear I've done it to them again." Xiao had set them up-Maas Intertech, everyone. Gordon included. "How did you do it? Obviously, you fabricated another impostor. But you didn't do it the way I did it. You'd never use someone else's trick."

Two moments of silence, then the display screen blanked, the connection broken.

Bastard.

Epilogue

Raccoon was clever.

His paws were cunning hands. He could break open any trap and escape any danger, whether in forest or city, mountain or subterranean tunnel. But that did not make him perfect, not hardly. Or untouchable. Or fearless. Or certain of his own motives. Not as far as Bandit could see.

He had managed to avoid injury when the van turned over. He had managed to avoid being shot by any of the dozens of guns which had raked the street with bullets. He hadn't, however, quite managed to avoid being singed by the fiery explosion that had turned the van into a smoky inferno. Neither had he wasted any time removing himself from that fog-laden street of death.

His ways were Raccoon's ways, and Raccoon did not fight when so obviously outnumbered. It did not seem sensible to Bandit that anyone in such a situation would stand and fight, or do anything except run.

Or was he kidding himself?

It was not often that such troubling thoughts followed him to his medicine lodge. This was his private place, his alone place. Here, in this tenement basement, he had gathered the trinkets and fetishes and ritual materials of the ways of magic. Here, in this dark little room, he had survived the ordeal that had given him his first true taste of the deeper truths of metamagic. The problems of the outside world, the mundane world, seemed strange and alien in this place, as if they did not belong.

Now, he looked down at the flute lying in his lap, then lifted-it to his mouth and slowly, quietly, began to play. He didn't worry about playing any particular song or certain special notes. He let the music flow from within. He let something other than his rational mind decide how the song should sound.

In a while, he became aware that he was no longer alone. The Old Man had come again.

Bandit turned to find him sitting cross-legged right behind him. The Old Man looked vaguely Asian, but his thin gray hair flowed down over his shoulders and everything he wore appeared made of natural leather, brown leather, tan, like native people used to wear long before the Awakening, with necklaces and beads

and bones. Bandit turned to sit facing him. They watched each other for a long time.

Was this Raccoon in some human guise or merely a spirit that had chosen to serve as his guide? Bandit wondered. The Old Man's voice was as dry as sand and as creaky as old wooden boards. Yet there was a power, vibrant and strong, beneath the scratchy, sometimes wavering old voice.

"So," the Old Man said. "What do you want? You called me. You must want something."

"I don't know," Bandit said, frowning. "I'm troubled." The Old Man shrugged very slightly. "I have no answers. I'm just an old man."

"You're wise."

"Sure, that's what you think, I'm old and wise. I must have all the answers." The Old Man nodded, faintly. "Maybe you're wrong. If I ever had any answers, I probably forgot them. A long time ago. Before you were even born."

"There must be something you can tell me."

Another silence passed, then the Old Man said, "I could tell you a lot of things. Old people can talk for hours. A long time ago I heard two people talking. I think they came from across a great ocean. One kept asking questions and the other one kept trying to answer. How many fish are there in the pond? one asked. The other one didn't know. He tried to guess. What he didn't seem to understand was that there was no answer. Maybe there aren't any answers at all, except the ones you find for yourself."

"What about truth?"

The Old Man shrugged again. "Truth is one of those things. Everyone sees it their own way. You're a shaman.

You should know that better than anyone. Ask twenty magicians the truth about magic. How many answers do you get?"

"At least twenty."

"I could tell you a lot of things, if I could remember, but what would it mean? What things mean to you is what counts. What are your answers? What do they say about you? Where do they lead you? What kind of shaman does that make you? Things like that. How do you like my answer so far?"

"I'm not sure."

"That's probably good. I'm an old man. I've had time to work things out. You're still pretty young. You should have questions. Things you're not sure about. I've made my peace with mother planet. You haven't. Maybe you haven't even started yet."

"I don't know what you mean."

The Old Man frowned. "Maybe you've been spending too much time in the city. I guess you haven't paid much attention. That's understandable. It can be hard to think in the city. What I mean is the planet's our mother. It's simple enough. You understand. You just haven't thought about it much. Everything comes from the Earth. Without her we're just so many unlikely ideas floating around in empty space. Without the Earth, we're all dead."

"Maybe I should attune myself with the Earth. With nature."

"You tell me. You're a shaman. You've attuned yourself with spell foci so you could do better magic. What about nature? What about the Earth?"

"How do I do this?"

"You're a shaman. You tell me."

"Maybe I should go to the wilderness."

"If you think so. The wilderness is part of the Earth. I don't think anybody can argue that." The Old Man paused, then said, "Maybe I'm not being clear. All I'm saying is that maybe you know the city so well that you've forgotten something. Something important."

Bandit considered. "The city is part of nature, too."

"I don't think anybody can argue that."

"Is, that what you meant to tell me?"

"I guess that's part of it."

"What am I missing?"

"What good would it do to tell you what I think? I could be wrong. If I said the wrong thing, or if you took it wrong, you might waste a lot of time chasing after bad ideas. Why should I have that on my conscience? You're the one asking all the questions. You think you're missing something. What do you think you're missing?"

"It could be anything."

"You're right. If that's what you think. Maybe that's your answer. Me, I'm thinking of something specific. I'll give you a hint. You decide if it means anything."

"Okay."

"What's in the city?"

"People."

"What about them?"

Bandit frowned and exhaled heavily, and looked at his flute. The flute gave him his answer. It forced him to see it. "People are part of nature, too."

"I don't think anybody can argue that."

"Maybe I've been around so many people for so long I forgot about that. There's a lot of people in the city. It's easy to tune them out. Maybe I wanted to tune them out. Maybe I had to tune them out to concentrate on the magic. To learn. To grow."

"Maybe that's your answer."

"Maybe I should tune people in."

"It's an idea," the Old Man agreed. "The one thing I'm sure about is that people are part of the world just like every other living thing. I don't see how you can be in tune with nature without being in tune with people too. It's okay to go to the wilderness. Go wherever you want. Nature is everywhere. It infuses everything, surrounds everything. Just don't forget about people. You know what I mean. It's obvious."

Bandit nodded.

"If you want to know nature, you have to experience nature, not just the parts of the world you like. You have to hear the cry of the hawk as it dives down to kill a mouse. You have to hear the roar of the tigress when one of her cubs comes up missing. You have to listen to the murmuring of the mountain stream, the hiss of the snake, the death-cry of the prairie dog, the croaking of the frog, the rustle of leaves, the whisper of the wind. You have to hear the voice of the Earth, no matter what form it takes.

Maybe every form it takes. And I guess you have to listen to people, too. They're part of the Earth."

Bandit nodded. "You're right."

"I'm an old man. I just listen to things you say and tell you my opinion, I could be all wrong. What you think is what matters."

"I think I must attune myself to people."

"Then that's your answer."

An answer, yes, but not the whole answer. Bandit thought about that a while, then said, "I wish I could have done more. I wish ... I wish I could have helped my friends."

"Your friends the runners."

Bandit nodded.

"Sometimes you don't know you've got friends till they're gone."

"I'm not sure what's happened to them."

A long silence passed, then the Old Man said, "Sometimes people get a bad hand. Sometimes the odds are too great. You did what you could. When the time came, you saved yourself. Probably that's all you could have done. Maybe that's all you should have done. The shaman's path can be hard to know. I guess you still have things to learn."

Bandit nodded.

"Maybe you just have to put this behind you."

"I feel ... regret. Maybe remorse."

The Old Man stretched out his arms and yawned. "Then you must be human. Every human being wishes that he or she could have done some things differently. It's like a law. Part of nature. Part of what you are. You try to learn from your mistakes. If you're smart, you'll do better next time."

Bandit nodded.

"I need some sleep."

"Will we talk again?"

"Sure. Just play that flute. I think you've been looking for it a long time. Maybe you didn't realize. Just play the song and I'll come. You know which song."

Bandit thought about that, then nodded.

"Just remember I sleep a lot. Old men get cranky when they miss their sleep. You understand."

"I guess."

"Remember this, too. The world wasn't built in a day. It took a long time to get this far and it still isn't finished. It never will be finished. When something's finished, it's dead. But even then, it isn't finished. Nothing ever really is. Sometimes it just looks that way."

"Life is a journey. Not a series of destinations."

"There's your answer. See you later."

Bandit hesitated, gazing into the empty darkness at the rear of his lodge. Then he spoke softly, gently, saying, "Sleep well."