

The Snow is Black

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PROLOGUE

The United World Council assumed the burden of global leadership on Dec. 25, 2056. Its takeover was instantaneous, and almost uncontested. An organized union of eleven major religions, which carried too much weight to be opposed by any weak governments still surviving in a divided and disoriented world.

By 2085 the Council had changed the world order. Population growth had been halted. Less than one percent were hungry. The Robotics Repealment Initiative of 2070 had given work to desperate billions. The virtually autonomous Arbitration Forces maintained strict order. And the body human worshipped the One Deity with reverence and hope, taking the great doctrines of acceptance, gratitude, and humility as their guiding lights.

But there were those who saw a different picture. The Snow Temple grew from an intellectual spark into an underground cult, there to fill the needs of those whom the Deity had rejected or forgotten. A home for the homeless, a family for the empty and lost. It grew. The stifled voices of bright intellects, rejecting the parasitic extraction of their ideas, began to seek out the Temples. The Snow developed its own schools, preached its own ideas, and began to disrupt the peaceful compliance of the populace. When the AF clamped down in 2095, it was already too late. The seed had been sown. And in its new hidden centres around the world, like a weed that feeds on adversity, the renamed Black Snow nurtured the brightest of the world's youth, taught them independent thought, and the meaning of the Council's deception.

The year is 2111—the conflict is about to heat up. And for Kyle Andrews, the harshness of life is about to leap at him with teeth bared .

CHAPTER 1 : Beware the Jackal's Teeth

Kyle looked straight ahead and tried to keep his pace casual. It had taken him two hours to figure it for sure, but he knew he was being Marked. The remote monitoring device was tailing him from about sixty meters up, blending with the gray stone of the buildings. His mother had taught him the rules: act normally, never panic, and don't let on you know. It was simple in principle.

He turned left into Earlet Street, the down-trodden shopping strip. At one in the afternoon, the place bustled with DT's. The whine of speeder horns filled the air, and a typical press of the sleek hover-cars jammed the narrow roadway. Kyle picked his way confidently out between the bumpers, breathing deeply of the ozone as he squeezed his way to the street's north side. He felt the familiar tingle in his chest, the sharp acrid odor making his eyes and nose run. But it calmed him.

He glanced lazily back the way he had come, his gaze at street level. A good ten floors up, near the south-east corner: the momentary shimmer of the Marker's propulsion trail. Kyle turned and headed slowly west along the street.

He made a point of looking in at shop windows as he walked, feigning interest. Twice he paused briefly to scrutinize the merchant displays. The reflection from the windows gave him a clear view of his pursuer. It was larger than he'd imagined. Menacing, somehow.

He stopped outside a decrepit two-storey brick building. The window held a curious mix of DT clothing and outdated electronic gadgetry. The entire display had a uniform gray-brown hue, the residue of many years' environmental exposure. Above the window a faded, almost unreadable sign proclaimed the grand opening of the Gizmo Bargain Center: February, 2031. After eighty years in the air, it was a wonder the sign still existed. Kyle stepped into the entrance alcove, pressed the door cycle switch, and walked in.

“Can I do something for you, kid?”

The salesman appeared around the end of a rack of green canvas business suits. He wore one himself, and gave the impression of having just come off the rack with his suit. Both man and clothing were equally stiff.

“I need a present for my mother,” Kyle answered. He pointed to the back of the store, where he could see a row of glass-fronted cabinets containing electronic hardware. “Something in the gadget line. She likes to tinker with electronics.”

The salesman nodded knowingly and drifted in the indicated direction. Kyle followed at his heels.

“Do you have anything in the way of a portable med-kit?” Kyle asked.

“Got something special in mind?”

“My mother's a V70 in chem research. She's always wanted a portable kit to custom equip and carry with her.” It was the introduction his mother had taught him. He hoped he'd delivered it properly.

“Back this way,” the salesman said. He led Kyle through a narrow doorway and into a small room with a mirror opposite the door, the side walls lined with tiny identical drawers. There was a faint humming as they entered. The man began opening drawers and inspecting the contents.

“Tell me about it,” the salesman said. He did not look round, but continued to open and close drawers with studied concentration.

“I—what do you mean?”

“You've made it this far, kid,” said the man. “Don't blow it now. This room's good against most audio sensors, but it's purposely open to outside view so's it won't upset Snoopers. Keep your cool, and let's have it.”

“It's a Marker. I picked it up a couple of hours ago. Stays fifty or sixty meters up, hard to spot. But my mother taught me.” Kyle really felt like a kid beside this man. It took him a few moments to realize that the salesman must have Presence, like his mother. She had only ever used it on him once, so he knew how it felt.

“OK. Who's your mother?”

“Cyndi. Black Snow local, chem tech V70, R75. Julia Anderson.”

The man paused in his task. Kyle thought he was going to turn and look at him, but instead he moved to a new drawer and continued his carefully choreographed search.

“The Law gave her those stats, kid. That's not how she rates in the Black Snow. I give her work at least a 95 V value, and a 100 percent R rating. Right at the top. She's saved a lot of lives with the curatives she developed.” Again, a pause. “You got one hell'va mother, kid. Damned if I ever knew she had a son, though.” He chuckled. “But I guess you fit the bill. Pretty audacious for a youngster.”

Kyle took a deep breath to calm himself. “So, mister, what are you going to do about the Marker?”

“Take it easy, kid. Name's Rex. I hate being called mister. Makes me feel like a regular DT.”

“I'm fourteen —and I'm not a kid,” Kyle said. “The name's Kyle. And don't put down the DT's. I live with some, and they're good people.”

“OK, enough. About the Marker. What were you doing when you first—”

There was a high-pitched buzzing noise. Rex turned casually to look in the direction of the door. “Looks like they're hot after you, Kyle.”

Kyle followed his gaze. Sky blue against the drab Gizmo clothing racks.

“Arbitration Forces,” Kyle whispered. “Why all of a sudden am I so damned important?”

“We'll know soon enough. Stay here until I call you out.” Rex turned and walked out into the main store area. “Drawer thirty-one,” he said over his shoulder.

Kyle turned to face the mirror and made a show of straightening his coveralls. The fear he felt reflected clearly back at him from the glass. At only sixty-eight kilos his slim one-seventy five centimeter frame looked fragile and weak, and in spite of his words to Rex he decided he still did look like a kid. There was no denying the gleam in his green eyes, but the narrow boyish face with its jutting chin and the stupid bowl-cut on his thick brown hair made him look younger than his years. If he was going to be an adult, he'd better start behaving like one. He gave himself an unconvincing glare, set his jaw, and turned to the rack of drawers.

Drawer thirty-one, Rex had said. He scanned the tiny numbers. '31' was at the top of the fourth column. He reached out and gave the handle a tug. It didn't budge.

“Great,” he muttered. He examined number thirty-one more closely. The drawer was equipped with a Rackham sensor lock, the kind you usually found on doors to public transit systems and telephone booths. Kyle checked to see that Rex had the AF officer occupied, then set to work on it using his sensory decoder card. Another present from his mother. He never had to pay for transportation.

The code was simple, having only three sections. Kyle scanned the card's standardized set of pressure-temperature combinations across each stage, waiting only for the card's faint validation

glow on each before moving to the next. He had the drawer open in less than five seconds.

Inside he found a small gray disk, a tight fit in the drawer. It had a set of numbered touch-sensitive pads on the top, and a slight thickening in the center. He had just picked it up when he heard Rex's voice behind him.

“Hey kid! There's an arbitration forces officer out here says you been making trouble.” Rex took Kyle by the collar and made as if to pull him out into the shop.

Kyle slipped the disk into his inside jacket pocket just as Rex jerked him upright. He struggled, not sure whether to fight or go peacefully. Rex hauled Kyle roughly over to him.

“Key three to activate, Kyle. We'll find you,” he whispered. Then he propelled him forwards through the door.

“Here's the troublemaker, sergeant,” Rex said. “Take him away and teach him how to behave.”

The officer grunted. “Let's see your ID, kid,” he said.

Kyle reached down to his belt and pulled free his card. The officer snatched it from his hand and slid it through a scanner, then consulted the scanner's monitor.

“OK, you're the one we want,” he said. He turned to Rex. “Your cooperation will be duly noted.” He wrinkled his nose in a peculiar manner, as if trying to shake loose a fly that had landed there. Rex made no reply, but stood with his arms folded, watching.

Kyle allowed the officer to apply leg constraints, which effectively reduced his maximum stride to about thirty centimeters. Then he was marched to the door and through the air cycle, out to the street. As always, his eyes watered on first contact with the untreated outside air. The tangy tart smell of octane exhaust mingled with the ever-present ozone made his lungs burn.

The AF officer coughed convulsively as he emerged. “Get going,” he said hoarsely. He took a deep breath and the cough subsided. Then he pointed down the street. “Over there.”

Kyle looked in the indicated direction. Two other officers stood beside an unmarked speeder, and a third sat inside at the controls.

“What's this all about?” Kyle said. “I've never caused any trouble.” He turned to face the officer, patterning his features to show fear and outrage. The eyes—just so. The mouth, round and open. He reached an arm up towards the man in supplication, while the other moved inside his jacket, depressing the third key on the hidden disk.

“None of that shit, kid,” said the officer. He yanked on Kyle's arm and reached inside the jacket. Kyle twisted against his grip, but the man was as strong as he looked.

“What's this little baby?” the big man said. He held the gray disk high so his companions by the speeder could see it. “Got a Black Snow operative here, have we?” A sinister smile spread across his gorilla-like face.

“I don't know anything about that,” Kyle shouted. He tried to turn and run, but vice-like hands clamped onto his arms and held him fast.

“Don't worry, kid,” said his captor. “You'll get plenty of chance to exercise when we get where we're going.” There was harsh laughter from behind him, and Kyle realized the other two officers had moved in.

“Get him into the speeder,” said gorilla face. “We got a long ride ahead of us.” Kyle struggled wildly now, but only succeeded in hurting his arms. His shouts and yells were drowned out by the traffic noise from the street, and pedestrians gave the group a wide berth. In moments, he was in the back of the speeder, with one officer on either side and gorilla face in front with the pilot. Then the car sped away, using maximum climb rate to rise quickly above the other vehicles into the emergency air route. They were sparing no expense to get him...somewhere.

Kyle was truly scared. He had lost his only contact with the Black Snow Temple, and they

wouldn't be able to find him. It took him several minutes to calm himself enough to pay attention to his surroundings. The car was heading west on Currier Street, the high V district. Only the steady whine of the vehicle's motor broke the silence—his captors were not very talkative.

“Where are you taking me?” Kyle asked. He tried to keep the tremor out of his voice.

“Never mind,” said gorilla face. “Keep quiet, and you'll get there in better shape.” The big man turned to look at Kyle. His upper lip was curled back on one side, revealing long yellowed teeth. He chuckled. “Get it, kid?”

Kyle nodded carefully. He waited until gorilla face was looking the other way once more, then began to study the operator's panel of the vehicle. It was a far more complex machine than any he had yet been in. Apart from the usual manoeuvring controls, there were several banks of buttons and slide levers which could only be offensive and defensive weapon systems. A fifteen centimeter square screen glowed blue in the middle of the dash, and Kyle noticed that the driver checked it frequently. After a few moments, he was able to discern shapes on the screen, some fixed and some mobile. A scanner system, he guessed, plotting the surroundings of the car.

Suddenly there was a bright white streak across one corner of the display, and a series of lights on the defensive panel winked red. A shrill whistling noise filled the speeder's cab.

“What the hell is it?” gorilla face said.

“Some kind of homing missile, Captain,” said the pilot. He made some adjustments, and Kyle saw a greenish glow appear around the center of the display screen. “I can't get a classification, though.”

“Whad'you mean, you can't classify it?” Gorilla face was getting agitated. He slid across to the center of the front seat, shoving the operator against the driver's door. There was a series of beeps, then “Deity be damned! This is supposed to be the most up-to-date databank we have. What kind of

monkeys do we have in weaponry, anyway?"

The speeder was now moving erratically, partly due to evasive manoeuvres and partly because the operator was no longer fully able to use his controls. Kyle checked his safety harness, and pressed his head back hard into the seat—just in case.

“Use the damned sonic shields on it!” shouted gorilla face. He was pressing buttons as he talked, and Kyle saw several new white streaks appear on the display. Glancing out the window, Kyle sucked in a sudden breath as he saw how close they had just come to hitting the stone facade of a stately high-V residence.

“It's no good, sir,” said the operator. “None of our defenses can shake it. And our offensive missiles are tailing it, right in towards the speeder...they can't catch it.”

“So what do you suggest, wiseguy? We give up and land? That thing's going to....”

There was a sudden reddish flash from the display screen, and the cab went silent. They were only six meters up, moving at about seventy K. But they were going down fast.

“Thruster engine's dead, captain,” yelled the operator.

“You don't say?” replied gorilla face. Kyle could see him strapping into his harness as he spoke. The operator aimed the vehicle as best he could along the street, then deployed the crash bags, outside and in. Three seconds later, they hit.

There was no massive impact, no flaming wreck. Just a slight jolt followed by a short bouncy ride. The bags deflated. The car had come to rest against the curb, half way along a block of classy stone mansions. Their three-by-three gardens were adorned with carefully pruned pale green plant life, the best they could manage in the polluted air.

“Max. Rip.” Gorilla face shattered the spell. “Grab the kid an' get him into one of them gardens. Pronto!”

The two officers shoved at Kyle, half-pushed, half-pulled him through the door and onto the street. They headed for the nearest gate, an ancient design with wrought-iron spikes and massive hinges. Kyle thought he heard the hum of a speeder but his guards pushed him through the gate, and the shrubbery blocked his view.

The sudden sharp bark of a pistol startled Kyle's escort. For an instant they relaxed their grips, and Kyle controlled his own fright enough to jump free. His feet were hampered, so he knew he would not be able to get far. He dove under a gorse bush and wriggled vigorously forward, oblivious to the stabbing pain from its long thorns. When he felt hands grabbing at his ankles, he pulled his legs in tight and let fly with a vicious kick. Something yielded with a soft 'crunch.'

"Little bastard," came a voice from outside the bush. Kyle crawled in further, and squirmed around so he could see out onto the tiny plot of grass. One of the two men was down on the ground, not moving. Blood trickled from his nose. The other man was scrambling to his feet, fumbling at his belt. He drew forth a red pistol, smooth-edged and garish. Then he bent to his knees again, aiming into the bush....

'Whump.'

The muffled explosion came from the street. Kyle thought he heard someone speaking, but he wasn't sure. There was a sweet scent, like roses. He had seen a real rose once—beautiful yet dangerous. He breathed deeply. The danger seemed past. Outside on the lawn, he saw the man drop his weapon and sit down. He looked round expectantly, as if waiting for something important to happen. Kyle heard a voice from the street again, this time unmistakable.

"In the car," it said. "Leave."

There was the sound of feet moving on paving, then a door slammed. An engine whirred into life, and a vehicle drove off. Footsteps approached.

Suddenly, Kyle seemed to regain control of his actions. He saw the man on the grass shake his head, roll across to his weapon and spin quickly to face the garden gate.

“Drop it.” A woman's voice. Strong, commanding, self-assured. The officer on the lawn lay still for a moment, pistol raised, his eyes on the speaker. Then he dropped the weapon to the grass.

“Come out.”

It was an order that could not be disobeyed. Kyle felt his body move automatically, as if it were controlled by something other than his own mind. He crawled out on the grass, past the immobile officer, and stood to face the speaker.

The woman was slender and tall, taller than him. Strikingly beautiful. Short dirty-blond hair, with a natural rippled appearance. Her green coverall hugged her body, accentuating every tight curve. Kyle stood transfixed.

“To me,” she said.

He moved to obey. She had not even looked at him—her steel gray eyes were focused on the guard, who still lay on the grass. Kyle couldn't seem to think straight. He was just going through the motions, whatever she asked. It was as if...

He reached her and she grasped him firmly by the arm, turned, and sped out through the gate. Gorilla face's speeder was nowhere in sight, but the big man himself stood at the edge of the street, glaring. He held a red pistol like that of the man in the garden. It was levelled at the woman's chest.

“Enough of this shit!” he growled. “Back off, ragger. I'm taking the kid.”

“Put it down,” the woman said. Her voice was calm, relaxed, yet commanding. She took a slow step towards him as the weapon wavered in his hand. They were two meters apart when gorilla face shook his head and tightened his grip on the gun. He looked straight into her eyes and sneered.

“No rag-bitch fucks with my mind and lives,” he said.

In that instant, Kyle lost track of events. Things were suddenly happening, but he couldn't sort out their order. He fell sideways to the pavement, hitting hard with his shoulder. Gorilla face's pistol glowed, and there was a humming noise followed by a muffled explosion. He saw the woman dive ahead and to the right, rolling aside and scissoring her legs round to hit gorilla face at knee level. The pistol went skidding out onto the street, and the man fell heavily to the ground.

Kyle propped himself on one elbow. He wanted to run, to get away from this scene of battle and danger, but his body would not respond.

He watched the woman spring to her feet. She took up a combat stance, the kind Kyle had learned from his mother. Gorilla face was almost as fast, incredibly agile for his size. With a feint to the left, he dodged right and came in with a vicious punch. The woman blocked it and Kyle winced at the impact. His left arm ached just below the elbow. Exactly where she'd....

The woman caught gorilla face's striking arm, then moved in to the man's open left side. She swept her right leg forward and back, catching his legs and pulling them from under him. Then she was on top, landing a sharp blow to the lower abdomen. Gorilla face yowled in pain and rage. He arched his back and bucked her away. Then he rolled clear and scrambled up, favoring his right side. His face was savage with fury as he leaped forward again, spinning at the last instant and landing a solid kick to the woman's chest. She grunted as the booted foot struck. Kyle felt a jabbing pain shoot up the left side of his rib cage, and he suppressed a cry. Somehow he knew he must stay quiet. The woman must win the fight, and he could not distract her. Through tears of pain, he watched.

She recoiled from the kick, and in the same action moved under the kicking leg and punched, a solid blow to the groin. Then her fist came up again, straight up, into the now down-turned face, striking full force between the eyes. There was a sharp crack, and gorilla face went down like a wet

sack. Blood flowed from his fractured face, and he writhed convulsively on the hard pavement.

Kyle nursed his left hand. It felt like it was broken. He was suddenly aware of strong arms lifting him from the sidewalk. The woman half-carried him across the street to a wrecked looking speeder. She bundled him in from the driver's side, pushing him roughly over as she took the controls. Then the engines whirred softly, and they were in the air. Kyle had a final glimpse of the guard they'd left behind, just getting to his feet beside his bloody-nosed companion on the grass below. And on the roadway, gorilla face's massive body looked small and fragile, lying broken in a growing pool of blood. The faint sounds of far-away music drifted in upon him.

But the entire scene seemed remote and unimportant. For in a sudden flash of awareness, he knew who the woman was. And he knew something else, something which drove away all thought of the pain and fear he felt. He knew that his mother was dead.

CHAPTER 2: A Dreamer Awakes

Kyle did not know how long he watched the city speed by around him, how long he sat huddled in that corner before he mustered the strength to speak. “Gillian,” he said at last. It was not a question. He did not look at her, but continued to stare out the window at the lights of early evening on the streets. A soft, unfamiliar rhythm filled the speeder's cab, and a few words filtered through.

'...and though I fall, I will not crawl...'

“I know who you are,” Kyle said. “I know—” He swallowed, trying to keep his dry throat from choking him. The music suddenly seemed loud, pounding in his ears. “I remember. Gillian, she's— she's dead, isn't she?”

Kyle turned then, and looked at the woman beside him. Her face was grimy with dust, smeared red across her chin and up one cheek. Dark wet clumps of hair stuck to her forehead, and the sleeve of her torn coverall dangled free beneath her wrist. Dried blood caked the knuckles of her left hand, yet the fingers moved in time to the beat as she gripped the wheel. Her gaze was fixed on the road ahead of her. Slowly, she nodded her head.

“Yes.”

There was a finality to the word, such power that Kyle’s blood ran suddenly chill. Gillian turned slightly and regarded him, seeming not to see him. Her face was hard, her teeth clenched tight. Fresh streaks trailed down the bloodied cheeks. She looked away again. “She’s dead.”

Kyle felt the need to cry out, but nothing would come. It was there inside him, but he could not release it. His body was cold, numb.

“What happened?” The words came haltingly, but it was like the opening of a floodgate. Rage flared within him. He grasped Gillian by the arm, pulled savagely at her. “What happened to her?” he shouted.

Gillian carefully pulled the speeder to the side of the roadway and shut down. The music stopped, and silence flooded into the cab like a black vapor. She swung round to face him, clamping his wrist in a vice-like grip. “I don’t know. Nobody D-damned knows. But you can bet your ass I’m going to find out.” With a violent thrust, she pushed his arm towards him and released it. “I’m going to find out everything.”

Her words did not falter, but Kyle could see the tears rolling down her cheeks as she spoke. He too felt the flood of hot liquid flowing from his eyes, and knew that his body shook with sobbing. He collapsed in his seat and wept, oblivious to his surroundings. When he at last calmed himself, he found that Gillian was still looking at him. She had made no effort to clear the streaks from her face.

“What’s your name?” she asked quietly. The emotion was gone from her voice. Her words were controlled, calm, clad in armor that penetrated his soul.

“Kyle.” He felt self-conscious under her gaze, as though every thought was open to her scrutiny. “I was—how did you find me?”

Gillian had restarted the speeder. The vehicle slipped smoothly out into the traffic stream. Kyle heard the music again, and wondered if he was imagining it.

'...they break you down, assault your brain,
'til you forget even your name...'

went the words. It was a strange, compelling rhythm, nothing like the monotonous drabness of the music he knew.

"Your mother left me a letter about you. To open if she ever..." She paused and cleared her throat. "Your ID code was with it." Gillian indicated a display on the speeder's front panel. "I scanned the database for your address, traced you to the delivery service. Then I picked up a distress from Quantum—that's Rex at Gizmo. I followed the trace on that Tracker you got from him." She glanced quickly at Kyle, then back at the traffic. "Rex took out the Marker that had been tailing you. He said it was a nasty piece of business. Just so you know."

"But what could have happened to her?" he said. "Last week—" He marshalled his courage. "She was fine when I saw her last week."

"Snow operations lost her trace at nine twenty-four last night. She'd been working late at the lab. I think she was onto a new drug. Something to do with energy storage." Again, she looked at Kyle. "She ever say anything to you about it?"

Kyle's head was still a bit fuzzy. He couldn't think as clearly as usual. Then, too, he had had quite a shock. And the injuries...for the first time, Kyle thought about those injuries. He fingered his knuckles, found them to be entirely unhurt. His ribcage no longer gave him pain. In fact, the only place he felt discomfort was on his right shoulder, where he remembered hitting the sidewalk just

before the fight. He stared in puzzlement at his companion.

“You were hurt. In the fight with gorilla face. And I...”

“He hardly touched me,” Gillian replied. “Damned feeble attack for a huge mother like that. I didn't want to break him up, but we had no time to waste.”

“But he **did** hit you hard,” Kyle said. “I saw—I mean, I felt it. Every time you hit him, I felt it. Every time he hit you....” Kyle reached across to Gillian's far side, gently pressed in on her ribs. She winced in pain, but didn't try to push his hand back. Instead, she looked at Kyle curiously, as though he had just solved a puzzle she had been working on for years. For a few moments, she said nothing.

“Looks like we have a few things to talk about, Kyle. Other than Cyndi. But right now, we're on the run.” As she spoke, she pulled the speeder left into a dark alleyway, cut the lights, and dialed a code into a lighted panel on the dash. Ten meters along the alley she turned abruptly left into what Kyle could have sworn was a solid wall. They drove in pitch blackness for some seconds, then stopped. Slowly, a vast garage took shape around them as a soft bluish glow filled the chamber. There were at least a dozen speeders of different sizes and vintages. Kyle noticed that Gillian was wearing a tight metallic band across her eyes. It glittered in the strange light.

“This is where we get out. Follow me.”

Gillian pulled two small cards from the control panel, slid them neatly into slots at her belt. Then she popped the door seal and jumped down from the speeder. Her boots thudded softly as they hit the sagging wood of the floor. Kyle fumbled for the door control on his side and followed her out into the garage.

“Gillian,” Kyle said. “Why did you come for me?” His words echoed hollowly about the dark high-ceilinged hall, sending shivers down his spine. There was a faint sulfurous odor, mixed

strangely with the residual tang of ozone. He hurried to keep up with the retreating back of his companion.

Gillian stopped beside a small dark-blue speeder. The front bumper had been twisted off, and the whole right side had been scored and dented as if from a massive grazing impact. The thing looked entirely undrivable. But the passenger-side door swung open soundlessly to Gillian's touch, and she turned to face Kyle as he approached.

“Your mother was my friend, Kyle,” she said. “She gave me a second chance. She was the first person I ever knew that cared about me for who I was—not for what I could do, or what I looked like, or what she could get from me.” Gillian's gaze never wavered. Kyle felt transfixed, an almost physical link tying his eyes to hers. “Cyndi was my best friend. My only true friend. For Cyndi, I came to get you. For her.”

Kyle sighed as she turned back to the speeder. He felt drained, as if all the energy had been suddenly sucked out of him. With stumbling steps he moved forwards and leaned against the battered side of the car.

“She told me you'd come for me,” Kyle said softly. “She told me so many things about you. I— Gillian, I hoped I would never meet you. She said if ever you should come, it meant—well, we both know what it meant.”

Gillian pulled her head out of the cab and, without looking at Kyle, walked past him around the front of the speeder.

“Get in,” she said.

Then she was at the driver door, and inside the speeder. The motor caught. Faint strains of music drifted out into the dark emptiness of the parking garage. Kyle hauled himself through the door and into the passenger seat, hurriedly cycling the door lock. He was glad to be inside the cab,

sheltered from the eerie coldness of that vast hollow chamber. Somehow the music seemed to soothe him, surround him with a protective shell that calmed his shattered emotions.

'...I'm going away, far across the sea,
and my ragged sails, will watch over me...'

Gillian spun the speeder about and nosed it forward into deepening darkness. Kyle knew she was looking at him, in spite of the blackness. "It affects you the same way," she said softly. "This is something Cyndi and I shared, too." And as the speeder moved out into the dim light of the alley, the music filled the cab, rolled around Kyle like waves lapping at his consciousness, dulling his pain, sharpening his senses. By the time the speeder reached the street he felt a tingling alertness, a tautness of mind that he had never before experienced. As if, for the first time in his life, he was truly aware. And the part of him that mourned, now deep inside, laughed quietly. It was as though his mother were there, within him, spreading her joy and energy, laying waste to the numbness he had felt. He turned to Gillian and smiled, letting the new strength flow from him like sunlight through a long-shuttered window.

"It's more than that, Gillian," he said. "My mother's still here. For both of us. Can't you feel it?"

And as Kyle watched, he sensed Gillian's awareness grow with his. Aware, in some intangible way, of each other, and of Cyndi tying them together. Gillian smiled grimly as she drove. "Damn you, Cyndi," she said, shaking her head. "What in Deity's name have you done to us?"

CHAPTER 3: Ice-Eyes

A flood of new sensations assaulted Kyle's brain—a whole new set of senses, externalized, feeding into his bewildered mind. There was Gillian. He felt her energy and determination, the raw power of her body, the rigid calm glazed thinly over a vivid palette of emotions. Fiery and alive. Complicated. Bitter.

Kyle faltered. He had reached a teetering brink, a black hole of emptiness that threatened to swallow him up. Hidden deep, it gnawed at Gillian's consciousness. Pain, resentment—and guilt. Flowing from it like a thick vapor, smothering all about it.

Kyle recoiled in shock. He shrank back into his seat, fighting for breath. Slowly, a calmness crept back over him, and he sensed the Presence of his mother. Cyndi. His mind cried out to her. Almost, he turned to look for her, to seek the reassurance of her face. He checked himself in time. She was not there. Only inside him. Her strength restored his composure.

At last he struggled free of his inner thoughts. The speeder was out on the street, amidst the early evening traffic. He dared not look in Gillian's direction for fear of renewing the dark vision. The music played softly now, its rhythm seeming to fit the movements on the street. The winking of speeder lights; the regular flowing glow of street arcs as their brightness tracked passing vehicles;

the slower fading in and out of ground-level walkway lamps. Kyle found that with effort he could shut out the new sensitivity. Gillian, and Cyndi. He was Kyle once more, Kyle alone. But not the same.

“Where are we going?” he asked. His voice was strained at first, but it did not break.

“Safe house,” Gillian replied. “You've got to drop out of sight for a while.” There was no hint of emotion, and Kyle shuddered to think of the thin shell of cold reason which kept her in balance.

“What about my guardians? They'll worry about me.”

Gillian glanced at him briefly, a flicker of compassion showing in her eyes. Kyle sensed the effort as she shut out the emotion, and looked back at the road.

“It'll be taken care of,” she said at last.

Kyle nodded. “OK. But if you won't take me home, I want to go to the temple,” he said.

“Cyndi didn't want that. Else she would have brought you in there herself a long time ago.”

“She tried to protect me. That was all.” Kyle turned to look at Gillian again, but now he could see through the mask that was her face. “You know all about that, don't you Gillian?”

“Don't push it, Kyle.” There was Command in the words. Kyle felt the desire to concede, found his thoughts opening to the new corner of himself that was Cyndi. A wall of mental force snapped into place and shut out her demand.

“My mother would have wanted me to be there—now,” Kyle said. “Something's going on. You know it. My mother would be alive otherwise.” He looked earnestly across at Gillian as she sat rigid at the controls. “It wasn't your fault. Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault.”

“Sure.” Gillian spun the wheel viciously to the right. Kyle threw out a hand for balance, his palm pressing against her leg just above the knee, muscles like steel beneath the coverall. The speeder straightened and accelerated into the faster traffic on a trunk collector. Kyle pulled himself

upright again and mustered his courage.

“Listen, I don't understand much about any of this,” he said. “But I want to find out what happened to her at least as badly as you. Not just what, why. Vendetta won't answer any questions.” He paused, in spite of himself. It was hard to fight against Gillian's Presence, and she was willing him to silence. “Gillian, the last thing Cyndi would have wanted is for you to throw your life away trying to avenge her—”

“Enough, Kyle,” Gillian said quietly. There was no hint of Command this time. “Give me a fucking break already. I've had one D-damned shitty day, and I can't sit through some kid lecturing me on how to live. I'll take care of this my way.” She reached forward to the dash and flipped a switch, exposing a now familiar display unit. She began to tune it, the dots winking in and out, their color varying from red through yellow, green, and blue. At last, only one yellowish-orange dot showed at the center. She leaned back in her seat, and looked at him. “Now sit still and shut the fuck up.”

Kyle knew he would only make things worse if he said more. He had a new vitality, a gift he did not understand. Yet the shock of the day's events had taken a dreadful toll. He was aware, but exhausted. He allowed himself to drift slowly away, the music lulling him now, bringing peace where before it had brought....

“Strap on the crash harness.”

Gillian's words snapped Kyle back to reality. The speeder was still in traffic, moving about one-twenty, just over the limit. Kyle felt a new tension in the cab, not directed at him. His attention was drawn to the display screen. Three blue-green dots were closing with the orange marker that was their speeder. Closing fast.

“What's going on?”

“Maybe something, maybe nothing,” Gillian replied. “Could be three stone heads drag-racing for kicks. Could be a lot of things.” She looked at him. “What's your guess, Kyle?”

Kyle ignored the sarcasm in her words. “What do we do?” he said.

He was not extending his senses, yet he felt it—a sudden wave of pain and regret, quickly covered. It was like a beacon to his mind. Suddenly he knew what he had to do to help his mother. As if she had opened a set of blueprints within his head.

“We sit tight,” Gillian said. “We drive, and see what happens.” She indicated the display. “Keep an eye on it. Violet is fast, red is slow. Let me know if...”

“Gillian!” Kyle pointed frantically at the display. There were several purplish streaks, vague and intermittent, moving out across the screen. The three other dots shifted to green-yellow.

“Shit.”

Kyle's stomach heaved as the speeder suddenly decelerated and spun through one-eighty degrees, dropping six meters to near ground level. Two other speeders in the fast lane passed within centimeters as they swerved aside. The street-level lanes were crowded, but Gillian picked a gap and swung neatly in line with the moving throng. It all took about five seconds.

On the screen the purple streaks went deep violet and advanced through a maze of new yellow dots. They shot forward, on past the center of the screen where the orange marker had been. Kyle thought he heard a faint hissing noise from above. Looking up out the window of the speeder, he saw only the steadily-moving traffic. When he glanced back at the screen, the streaks were gone. But, nearly over the screen center, three dots were fading in color from yellow to orange. Then they too vanished.

“Gillian?”

“If they're AF's, they'll follow us down,” she said calmly. “If not—well, we'll see.”

“What were the streaks?” Kyle's voice shook despite his effort at control. “Gillian, how the hell did they find us?”

“Take it easy,” she said. Kyle let the words have their designed effect. He needed it. “Warning shots, dressed to look dangerous.”

Suddenly, she pulled the speeder into an empty space at curbside, and cut the engines. She looked at Kyle. “Let me do the talking.” She turned off the music, shut down the display screen, then held out a hand. “Give me your ID. Quick.”

Kyle obeyed without hesitation. Gillian pushed the card quickly into a slot at her belt, waited for a soft beep, then withdrew it. She handed it back. Kyle opened his mouth to speak, but she waved him to silence.

“Don't ask. We got visitors.”

Kyle caught the flash of intense yellow light that all AF vehicles sported when on the job. Two sleek AF speeders pulled in beside them, blocking them into the parking spot. The street traffic flowed up and over the AF speeders, giving the scene a wide berth. It was not until Gillian opened her door that Kyle realized there was a third AF vehicle hovering above them. He sat tensely in his seat, and waited.

“Step out of the car, please.” The burly AF constable stood outside the driver door, trying to look only at Gillian's face. He was failing badly. He gave up entirely as Gillian swung her legs out and stood up beside him. The man didn't look stupid—but Kyle had felt the power of Gillian's Presence, and he knew what it took to fight it.

“Rick,” Gillian said conversationally. “What is it? Have we done something wrong?”

The constable cleared his throat noisily. Kyle noticed that there was another AF officer behind

the man, standing with his arms folded. “Uh—yes. Well, I mean, no, not really. We uh....”

The second officer moved forward, pushing his companion gently aside. This man was short and feeble-looking, but there was an icy chill in his gaze. His eyes were small and deep-set, with heavy drooping lids. They dominated his narrow, pale face. When he spoke, the voice seemed to match the eyes. Cold, lifeless.

“You're driving a stolen vehicle,” he said. Kyle's body went rigid.

“Stolen?” Gillian said, her voice rock-steady. She sounded genuinely surprised. “That's not possible. I've owned this speeder for three years now. There—must be some mistake.” Gillian aimed this last volley directly at the man, but it seemed to have no effect.

Ice-Eyes held out a long-fingered hand. “Your ID,” he said. “And registration. Let's see them.”

Gillian nodded submissively, turned and reached back into the speeder. She blocked Ice-Eyes' view of the cab with her body. From her belt, she drew forth an ID card, and some other plastic. The latter she plugged briefly into a slot in the dash of the speeder, then put it in her other hand with the ID. She backed out of the cab, and Kyle caught a sincere smile. She was enjoying this.

“Here you are, officer,” she said, handing over the cards.

Ice-Eyes passed them to his weaker-minded companion. “Check these,” he said. The bigger man climbed into the nearest AF speeder, while Ice-Eyes stood with arms crossed, eyeing Gillian. He held her gaze a full fifteen seconds, then looked away, an expression of distaste on his face. Kyle could sense Gillian's mirth. By the Deity, she was strong.

“They check out, sir.” The bigger constable passed the cards back to Ice-Eyes, and Kyle could see the disappointment register on the latter's face. “I stored her name, though. Here's the printout. We must have had a false report on this speeder.”

“Bullshit,” said Ice-Eyes. “This is a fucking set-up. These cards are probably fixed.” He looked

at Gillian again, his face hard. "You're a D-damned Snow operative if ever I saw one." He glanced at the paper in his hand, then looked up again. "Gillian Gekyll, is it? Electronics Tech, V75. R90. Well now, isn't that a surprise?" He smiled, his thin lips curling evilly back from even, well-tended teeth. Kyle felt his limbs stiffen, his blood freezing in his veins. "Seems we've seen your name a few times in the AF wanted lists. Strange how there's been nothing firm to pin on you. Gyl." He spat the name like an icicle. Even Gillian flinched slightly.

Ice-Eyes brushed Gillian aside and glared across at Kyle. "ID," he demanded.

Kyle fumbled at his belt, and finally put his fingers on the card. He handed it across. The man's touch was as cold as his gaze.

"Run this through too, Jones," Ice-Eyes said, handing the card to his companion. He turned to Gillian again. "We'll keep the names together on our lists. A woman like you, running around with a kid like this. Could be bad for your reputation." He chuckled.

The bigger constable handed back Kyle's card, and Ice-Eyes glanced briefly at the printout before he leaned across to Kyle. He favored him with his grin again. "What're you doing so far from home, Kyle?"

Suddenly, inside Kyle, there was a stillness. Cyndi's calm took over, and he responded. "I get the evenings off. I can do whatever I want. It's none of your business."

Ice-Eyes looked ready to strike him. Instead, he backed out of the cab and addressed Gillian again. "I've got your fucking ticket, lady. Sooner or later, you'll make a mistake. And I'll be there. Waiting for you."

He spun on his heels and strutted back to the second AF speeder. His companion took one last appreciative look at Gillian, then climbed back in beside the driver of the first speeder. A moment later all three AF vehicles sped away, leaving Gillian standing at the edge of the roadway traffic.

“Gillian,” Kyle called. “Gillian, you OK?”

She climbed in and started up. “AFS,” she said. “Never seen that creep before, but they're AF Special for sure. I ran a scan on their ID, and their speeders were genuine.” She glanced at Kyle. “The Arbitration Forces hire slime like that, and they wonder why people hate them.”

With a short laugh, Gillian pulled the speeder back out into the traffic, then turned about as she ascended to the faster lanes. “What I don't understand is why they picked up on us—now, the same day as those other guys grabbed you off the street. It doesn't fit. Something about this whole fucking business stinks like a Deity-damned sewage plant.”

They drove north for another ten minutes, then descended and wound through the streets for two or three K's before pulling into the third floor of a run-down ground level lot. Kyle was thinking about what he had to do. He didn't notice the silence in the cab until the speeder stopped and the engine drone slowly faded.

Gillian gestured him out and led him down the street-access steps. He followed cautiously. There was something about this place, something nagging at the back of his mind....

“Gillian!” he called.

He was alone. His voice echoed hollowly from the cement of the ancient stairway. Kyle ran down another two flights, to where he was sure the ground exit must be. The staircase just continued down. He called again, his voice hoarse now, panic rising to choke off his words. Then he thought of Cyndi. Desperately, he sought her calming influence, and found it. There was more. A sense of familiarity flowed into him as he stood there. Still he did not understand it, until....

“Welcome, Kyle,” said a voice behind him.

Kyle turned. Two men stood just outside an open doorway, cut from the cement wall itself. One Kyle did not know—he was small and wiry, but had a quiet strength about him. The other was Rex.

“Welcome to the Black Snow Temple,” said the smaller man. “We've been expecting you.”

From somewhere inside Kyle, words came unbidden. “I know,” he said.

CHAPTER 4: Safe House

There was a ship, black and gray, racing off into the darkness of deep space. Somehow Kyle was following. Ever behind, the ship always just beyond reach. An endless pursuit, with unknown purpose. Ahead a vast structure loomed, slowly forming into the shape of a monstrous, multi-pinioned bird. It swung ponderously about, turning its red-eyed gaze upon him. The elusive ship slid snug under one great outstretched wing, and from the eyes there came a deadly glow. He felt a sudden burning, a heat so intense that his flesh seemed to self-combust, his skin bubbling and flaring, his lungs aflame with agony as he tried to scream....

“—do you expect us to sleep with that going on?”

Kyle shook his head to clear away the last shreds of the dream. His throat ached with screaming. He felt a chill despite the thick blankets—the bed was cold with sweat. A face looked down at him, vague in the dark. Then a bright light stabbed out from his left, and he shielded his eyes with stiff arms.

“Take it easy, Kyle.”

It was a girl's voice. He tried to remember—the Temple, he was at the Temple. Images flashed across his mind, and then a face. Dark green eyes, keen and intelligent. Fine-featured, framed with

curly brown hair. A scar—there was a scar on her right cheek, extending up into the hairline.

“Suzanne?” Kyle said. He opened his eyes a little and peered cautiously about.

“Yeah, it’s me. And Yuri. You woke the whole D-damned dorm. What’s the problem?”

He suddenly felt stupid and embarrassed. A childish nightmare, witnessed by his peers. He sat up and looked around the room, his eyes still screwed tight as they adjusted to the relative brightness.

Suzanne stood at the foot of his small cot, arms folded, wearing what looked like light blue underclothes. She was Kyle’s age, short and slight. Her expression was one of mild exasperation. Yet Kyle was sure there was a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

“I guess I had a rough day, that’s all,” Kyle answered. The memory of his dream was not pleasant. “Caspar warned me not to tell you about it, but—well, I’m just not used to being hunted.”

“Neither were we, Kyle. When we first got here.” That was Yuri—a burly youth, sixteen at least, and brown-skinned. He had a deep voice, at once both harsh and gentle, and a face that suited the latter tone. Kindly. Untroubled. Confident. Yuri smiled warmly, and reached down a hand.

“Come on, Kyle, get up and walk it off,” he said. “A few days here and you’ll sleep a lot better.” He helped Kyle to his feet, then gestured across the dorm at one of the occupied beds. “Like Mike over there. He’d sleep through a bomb blast.” He laughed, and Suzanne scowled at him.

“He doesn’t need our excuses, Yuri,” she said. She strolled gracefully back to her bed, the second over from Kyle’s. It was a short walk, but it got their attention. She lay down on her side, her head propped on one elbow, and eyed them both.

“Cut it out, Sue,” Yuri said. “He’s not used to your sense of humour. Give him a break.”

Suzanne sat up abruptly, stood, then walked back over to the two boys. She put a hand on Kyle’s arm.

“Sorry, Kyle,” she said. “I’m not at my best when I wake up in the middle of the night, that’s all.” She looked up at him, and Kyle was sure now. There was concern in her eyes. For a moment, he tried to extend his senses, to see what was really there. Only vague sensations. He couldn’t reach her.

“You’ll be OK,” she said. Then she turned and launched herself at her cot, one quick movement, a soft quiet landing.

“Come on, Kyle,” Yuri said.

Kyle followed him down the aisle between the beds, out the unpainted steel door into the main hall of the Temple residence. The place had the air of a bomb shelter, which it probably was. Deep underground, how far he wasn’t sure, walls of concrete breezeblock decorated with years of multi-colored graffiti. The door to their dorm was new, as yet unadorned. He’d heard a rumor that the last one had been virtually destroyed in some recent incident which nobody seemed keen on describing in detail. Kyle glanced at the boy walking in front of him, and wondered if he had been involved.

Their room was closest to the emergency stairs at the end of the dormitory hall. They headed past the other dorms, their bare feet making soft scraping sounds which seemed loud in the stillness. A dozen doors, six per side. Then they were through the swinging double doors, into the guard vestibule. This had once been an airlock chamber, with heavy metal doors in air-tight frames—the double doors to the residences were recent, custom fitted into the massive frame. Kyle thought they looked out of place.

Two people were on guard, a woman Kyle didn’t recognize and a man he remembered as Alex.

“Where’s the action, Yuri?” Alex said. “Taking the new kid for a midnight tour?”

“He needs some distraction,” Yuri replied. He led Kyle towards the outer door. “Thought I’d do the rounds up at Activities with him.”

“Save me a game of TT,” Alex said. He waved them through with a smile. Kyle noticed that the woman had remained sombre throughout the exchange. And neither of the guards had taken their eyes from the two boys while they moved through the area. They cycled the air seal on the door, then took the first left in the next passage and started up the stairs.

“What's the deal, Yuri?” Kyle asked. “Why's everyone so edgy when I show up?”

Yuri hesitated a moment, and Kyle knew the answer to his question. Partly sensed, partly reasoned. “Not you in particular, Kyle. It's anyone that's new. All the tests can come out clean, but how can we be sure? People need to know a new member for a while before they're really comfortable.”

They had reached the first floor, and turned left to the Activities block. Yuri chuckled.

“You should be honored to get so much attention, Kyle,” he said. “You're a celebrity.”

And that, Kyle thought, was exactly the problem. His mind was not on the table tennis when they played. He lost badly. And he didn't sleep the rest of the night.

“You'll have access to all the general living areas, but only with an escort. I've assigned Yuri to you for now, but that won't last long. He's almost finished his schooling, and we need him out in the work force.” Caspar, the Snow's Chief of Internal Affairs, eyed Kyle quizzically. “What kind of training do you have, Kyle?”

“Mostly just Council school. The usual basics in computer systems, a bit of chemistry, simple electronics. I did some extra courses in languages—Americas Spanish and Root Chinese. But I'm not fluent.”

“What about combatives—physical skills?”

“Not much. My paren—I mean, my guardians, they didn't believe in violence of any form. My mother taught me some self-defense skills, though, just for the street. I've been in scraps a few times, and I made out OK.”

Caspar nodded. Kyle could sense the man's hesitation, his uncertainty as to what to do with him. There must be more to his responsibilities than just Internal Affairs. Either that or he was acting in more than one capacity for this interview. Kyle felt like he was being interrogated for admission to a prison rather than the Snow training school. Maybe there wasn't much difference.

“When do I get to go out? Work in one of the stores, or go on patrol? I don't like being cooped up. That's why I took the delivery job. It got me out and about.”

“You'll have to take that up with Diane. So long as you're inside the Temple area, you're under my jurisdiction. But as soon as you go outside, it's a security issue.” He smiled, but not with his eyes. “I can arrange for you to see her later this afternoon if you like. And I'll pass on your background information to Sandy so she can set up a training schedule for you. She'll probably want to run some aptitude tests tomorrow to get you into the right group.”

“I want to learn to fight, not just use my brain. If I'd been able to fight like Gillian, I could have got away from those goons by myself yesterday. Make sure you tell Sandy that. I want to learn to fight.”

“All the kids in the Snow schools get combatives training, Kyle. And if you're lucky, you might even get Gillian as an instructor. Be patient.”

“I'll do my best,” Kyle said. But he knew inside that he would never be able to just fit in and be part of the program—and he knew Caspar knew it too.

Yuri picked his way through the maze of tables and chairs that filled the cafeteria, nodding greetings to the few others in the room as he went. He was one of the most affable members at the Temple, and everyone liked him. Kyle had been lucky to have him as a shadow for the past week. If not for Yuri, he would have had no companionship at all. Even now, with five of his classmates on the same lunch break, he sat alone. The others were afraid of him, of the mysterious way in which he had ended up here, and of the cloud of death that still hung over him. He was an outcast, shunned by all but those who had to deal with him. Only Yuri seemed genuinely friendly—and Suzanne. Of the two, Yuri had been **assigned** the job of watching Kyle. Suzanne—Kyle still couldn't figure out Suzanne. But he would have liked to have her in some of his classes.

Yuri pulled up a chair and turned up his nose at the brown lump on Kyle's plate. “Beef for lunch again?” He grinned. “You learn after a while what to eat and what not to. Me, I stick to the compressed veggies and freeze-dried chicken. When the menu's bad, use up your snack vouchers. That way, you don't have to try and force that crap down your throat.”

Kyle smiled at him. “Yuri, I wish I could be in your good spirits all the time. I feel like a prisoner in this place, and Diane says I'm stuck here until she gives me clearance. Deity knows how long that'll take.”

“It's for your own protection Kyle, and everyone else's. If you show your face in public again, who knows who'll pick you up, or how quick.” He looked Kyle straight in the eye, his face serious. “Kyle, they don't even know who it was tried to take you, that day Gillian brought you in. It's got everyone spooked.”

“How do you think I feel?” Kyle said it quietly, the words catching in his throat. “It was my

mother they killed. She may have been a top Snow operative, but she was my mother.”

“And whoever took her out, Kyle,” Yuri said, “could be on a crusade against the Snow. If they could catch Cyndi off guard, they could pick off almost anyone here. Everyone's on edge, and you just happen to be the focus.” He put a hand on Kyle's shoulder. “Hey, I'm sorry.”

Kyle nodded. He poked at the meat on his plate, chasing it around with his fork.

“I got some other news. Maybe you'll like it, maybe not.” He paused as Kyle looked up. “Caspar's taking me off your tail on internal. He's assigned Rooster to you. I've got to finish off my training.”

“Great. Just great. Yesterday in combatives class Rooster tried to break my D-damned ribs. When I complained to Diane, she said she'd talk to him. Why do I think he won't make a very compatible escort?”

“You can hold your own,” Yuri said. He picked up Kyle's plate and stood, then nodded his head towards the exit. “Anyway, for the next month most of my classes are at the same times as yours, and I'll be around. You'll manage.”

“I don't want to manage, Yuri,” Kyle shouted. “I want to do something to fix the problem. I want to find out who killed my mother, and who tried to kidnap me. I don't want to hide away in a hole and hope the whole thing blows over.” He kicked his chair back so that it crashed loudly on the floor. The cafeteria was silent as the two boys headed to the exit, and all eyes were on them. Neither spoke until they were out in the Facilities hallway.

“That kind of public display's only going to make things worse,” Yuri said. “Try and stay cool. Save your anger and frustration for the combatives floor.”

Kyle brooded in silence as they walked down to the Education block. Lounging outside the chemistry lab waiting for them was Rooster, the heavy-set redhead who was to be Kyle's monitor.

Kyle grabbed Yuri's arm and brought him to a stop ten meters short of Rooster. He locked eyes with Yuri, and sensed the other boy responding to his unspoken Command. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Rooster leave his post and advance on them.

“Yuri, I have to do something,” he whispered. “Help me. Find out where Gillian is, and get a message to her. I need to see her. Please.”

“Ask Suzanne, Kyle. She can get hold of Gillian faster than me.”

Rooster elbowed Kyle none too gently in the arm. “Ready for chemistry class yet, Kyle? We're all waiting for you to show us some of that special stuff your mother used to do with drugs.” He smirked. “Come on.”

Kyle looked from Yuri to Rooster and back again. Yuri shook his head very slightly, rolled his eyes in the direction of the chemistry lab. “See you later, Kyle,” he said. “I'll tell Suzanne you were looking for her.” Yuri headed back up the hallway and turned in the direction of the physics labs. Kyle turned and followed Rooster into chemistry.

The hallway was more crowded than usual when they emerged from AF Regulations, a class Kyle thoroughly hated after only four days. He was sick of Rooster too, after only four hours. He had taken all he could of poking and prodding, and was about ready to explode—but he kept his temper under control. Yuri's message had been clear.

Through the jostling crowd of faces Kyle was surprised to see Suzanne's scowl approaching. He decided she must have made a special detour from her day's schedule, because she was usually in Electronics most of the time. She grinned at him when she saw him, and gestured towards the

lockers half way along the hall. Kyle pushed his way through to the spot, ignoring Rooster's protests.

“You wanted to see me, Kyle?” Suzanne shot a demeaning glare at Rooster as he shouldered his way to Kyle's side and grabbed him by the arm. “I see you've picked up a Marker on your travels today. Want that I should take it out for you?”

Kyle felt Rooster's grip tighten on his arm, but he couldn't keep the grin off his face. “Rooster just needs some companionship today,” he said. “He has a job to do, and neither one of us likes it much.”

“Right,” Rooster said. “And this little tart best get back to her gadgets or I'll flatten her.”

“Nice talk, big boy,” Suzanne replied. She leaned her head on her right hand, her elbow propped against the nearest locker. “Kyle and I want to talk for a few moments. Alone. Find some garbage to root around in.” She waved her free hand in the direction of Disposal.

“You little—”

Rooster's fist smashed into the locker Suzanne had been leaning against as she dodged nimbly to the side. Blood trickled across his grazed knuckles. Kyle tried to pull Suzanne back, but she shook free of him. A space had suddenly opened up round the little group as the other students in the hall gave them space.

“Better quit while you have the chance, Rooster,” Suzanne warned. “Remember how upset Diane got the last time you brawled in the halls. You might get two weeks cleanup duty this time.” Despite her careless words, Suzanne stood poised, ready to leap away from any attack. Rooster was well over two meters, and he towered over her.

“It would be worth it, just once, to shove my fist down your throat and shut you up, you little sleaze,” Rooster growled. He lunged forward clumsily, and Suzanne dodged toward Kyle, swinging

round as she went to hook a leg between Rooster's. He stumbled and fell noisily to the floor, just as Caspar appeared with a pair of security people. The crowd fell back. Suzanne stood in front of Kyle with her arms folded as Caspar pulled Rooster to his feet.

“What are you doing here, Suzanne?” Caspar asked. “You're supposed to be in class.”

“I had some business to attend to. And Rooster attacked me again.” She held her hands out palm upwards in a gesture of innocence. “I didn't lay a hand on him.”

Kyle imagined he saw a fleeting smile flash across Caspar's set features. Caspar looked at Rooster, then back at Suzanne. “You have five minutes to get back to class. And both of you report to Diane at six tonight.” He turned to Kyle. “I'll talk to you later. Get to class.”

Kyle nodded. “I guess that means I'm on probation too, Caspar? Are you going to assign me another Marker?”

Suzanne's eyes twinkled with amusement as Kyle walked past her. She had enjoyed the whole episode. It made him smile. And it brightened up the rest of his day to know that she had probably anticipated just such a scene—but had come to see him anyway.

“I need to get in touch with Gillian, Sue,” Kyle said. He kept his voice low so that the others in the dorm would not catch the words. “Yuri told me you could get a message to her. I haven't seen her anywhere since I got here.”

“I haven't seen her all week either,” Suzanne replied. “D-damned strange. She's usually in the Electronics labs at least three times in a week, and unless she's reported to one of the senior staff without telling me, nobody's heard from her. Kind of bothers me too.”

“I’m not really worried about her. But I want to—well, I need to talk to her. Can you get a message to her?”

“I have the number for her hover. Usually she picks up on messages from there. I can let her know.” She looked puzzled. “What’s it all about?”

“I don’t want to get you involved in any more trouble. Just let her know I want to talk to her.”

“Listen, Kyle. I can take care of myself. If you need help, tell me.”

Kyle smiled at her. “I kind of got that message today. Thanks for the support. It means a lot.”

“No problem. And by the way—I’ve been working on Diane. She’s agreed to let Yuri and me take you out to see the neighborhood tomorrow. Only under protection, but it’s a start. I know how cooped up you’ve been feeling. It’ll give you a chance to stretch your legs.”

Kyle could hardly contain his gratitude. He put a hand on Suzanne’s arm and squeezed. “Thanks,” he said.

“Get some rest—you’ll need it.” She turned and made her customary leap onto her cot. Kyle lay awake for a long time before he finally fell asleep. But his dreams were good that night.

“OK, good. My scanner shows a perfect mask. Now the distorter.” Suzanne handed Kyle a small flat rectangle, with two recessed switches and a dial on the surface. “I got my first taste of this gizmo two weeks ago. It goes against the skin, best around the belly where it can get good contact.” She pulled her shirt free from her skirt to reveal a similar unit fitted flat against the tight curve of her stomach. A small green light winked on it suddenly, and when Kyle looked up he gasped.

“Shit,” he said. He looked her up and down for a second, taking in the thin graying hair, deeply

wrinkled skin, and limp sagging bosom. “I think I liked you a lot better with that thing off.”

“Thanks.” She let her shirt drop loosely back in place and pulled her other hand from her pocket. It held a five centimeter square gray metal wafer. “Remote control. Negligible power surge when used, hard to trace. But, of course, you can override directly on the unit if you need to.”

She smiled at Kyle and tapped the distorter in his hand. “This,” she said, “is one of Gillian's most recent home projects. It might not do wonders for your looks, but it'll make you D-damned difficult to identify.”

“Sue—did you get a message out to her?”

“Yeah. Sent it off first thing, before the Com center got busy. If she can, she'll get back to me today.” She cut her voice down to a conspiratorial whisper. “See, Kyle, I'm her apprentice. It's unofficial, only between us. Keep it that way.”

She took the distorter from Kyle again, and held it up. “Gyl lets me help in her research and on prototype assembly. This gadget, for instance, distorts the light reflection characteristics of your body by changing the surface charge distribution of the skin.” She hefted the little unit in her hand, her eyes shining. “I put most of this one together myself.” Kyle was surprised at the wave of emotion Suzanne sent out. She was more than just proud of her apprenticeship.

“I guess we'd better see if it works, then,” he said, grinning broadly. He took the device from her and pulled up his shirt. “Don't laugh.”

He pressed the flat electrode against his stomach and toggled the 'on' switch while he held it there. There was a faint tingling sensation, then only the cool hardness of the metal on his skin. Suzanne went into an instant fit of coughing and almost fell to the floor.

“Didn't I ask you not to laugh,” Kyle said. He feigned indignance, to see if it would change her reaction. Not a chance. She was rolling on the ground now, holding her stomach, in complete

hysterics.

“Turn—ha, haaaa, haaa—turn it down—”

Kyle walked over to the mirrored wall, thankful that there was nobody else in the tiny study room with them. When he saw his reflection and got over the initial shock, he too burst out laughing. A wizened-looking stranger with dark shadowy eyes and a craggy face looked back at him from the mirror.

“...check out the new Deity Center on Westmore. From what I hear, it's quite the place.”

“And also monitored in every possible way,” said Yuri. “What's with you, Sue? We're supposed to be showing Kyle his new neighborhood, not dangling him in front of the AF like a carrot. That's Diane's orders. Make it quiet, and keep to the streets.”

“Come on, Yuri. What're you afraid of? You're supposed to be the best, right? Top junior op. Scared because you're the only one without a distorter?”

“You've never tested those things against the best AF detection gear. It's a stupid risk to take when Kyle's with us. You know it as well as I do.”

“They work, Yuri. Gillian figured the AF had nothing that could see through them. That's good enough for me.”

They were walking together along Reimer Street, a busy DT commercial strip a few kilometers from the Temple. There was no real commerce, only the sight and sound of it. Most of the workers here did manual labor jobs, retained for the sake of giving them something to do rather than out of any need. The shift was changing. Kyle could tell who was coming off shift, and who was going on.

Off shift meant a few hours of pleasure, some company, some peace. There was mild anticipation, a faint sparkle in the eyes, a smile or a few words of greeting. The grim, resigned faces—those were the ones going to work.

“What do these people do?” Kyle whispered the words, to himself he thought.

“DT business workers, Kyle. In this district, it's mostly assembly.” Yuri waved an arm in the direction of a big four-storey cement prison on the next block. “Toilet assembly plant. Forty years ago the Government took out the robots, and put people back on the lines. Now the robots supervise, and the workers do the assembly. Kind of the reverse of how it was originally intended. Needless to say, it fucks with the minds of the workers. They give them classy titles like 'Master Sanitary Assembler', and 'Waste Management Engineer', but the jobs carry Value classifications of 10 or less.” Yuri turned to Kyle. “Even your delivery job had a V25 rating. How do you think these people feel about their work? Can't you see the pride in their faces?”

“Don't be so damned vindictive, Yuri,” Suzanne cut in. “Don't you believe the Council broadcasts? And what about the Deity's Decree: All workers are equal in the eyes of the one Deity. Before the Council instituted its robotic restructuring program to eliminate unemployment, most of these people had no work at all. Not even the Deity has respect for you then.”

“Listen, I know all about this stuff,” said Kyle. “My DT guardians lived this life—and I've had the same conversation with my mother plenty of times. It doesn't make it any easier.” He looked at each of his companions in turn, smiling slightly when he thought of how Suzanne really looked beneath the sallow, unhealthy facade. “And I know neither of you really believe any of those Council propaganda lines. Especially the Deity thing. Else what would you be doing with Black Snow?”

“Not on the street, Kyle,” Yuri cautioned.

“What the hell does it matter around here?” Suzanne said angrily. “He's right, and you know it. And the AF couldn't care less about what goes on in this district, unless there's trouble.” She turned to Kyle, her eyes smouldering. Kyle felt her emotions bubbling forth, flowing across the physical gap between them. A flame and an energy that seemed somehow unassailable, fuelled by the anger and bitterness inside her. It was almost as if...

“The Council's done wonders for the world, Kyle. Everyone has work, befitting their status. Nobody's starving or homeless. There's free medication and no disease. The AF keep the wild rebels off the streets, everyone stays nice and peaceful. Right, Kyle? Your mother must've told you—”

“Cut it, Sue. Now!”

“Fuck off, Yuri. You're the biggest pain in the ass sometimes. Go find yourself a weak-willed DT to order around.”

Suzanne ducked under Yuri's grasp as he tried to get hold of her. She skipped off through the crowd, a number of heads turning in surprise to see such a feeble-looking woman move so quickly.

“Shit.” Yuri leapt after her, his pace matching his appearance. “Get the Hell out of sight!” he called over his shoulder. Then he too was gone, leaving Kyle standing still in the midst of the flowing crowd.

He wanted to move, but he was fascinated. He felt electrified by the wave of emotion that Suzanne had sent out in her outburst. By the Deity, the girl was dangerous. She was wild, she was unpredictable—alive. Truly alive.

Along the street, half way down the block, he saw Suzanne emerge from the crowd and squat down at the curbside. She picked something up from the rubble, then with a vicious heave she threw it out, arcing across the heads of the shuffling DT's to bounce noisily off a faceless metal sign

at the next intersection. There was confusion near the sign as people reacted to the sudden clatter. Then Yuri was beside Suzanne, his hand on her wrist, hauling her into the entry alcove of the nearest factory. She didn't struggle as he cycled the door. Five seconds later they were gone.

It took Kyle a few moments to shake himself out of his daze, and a few more to realize what had happened. And why. Why Yuri had pulled her away, why Yuri had been assigned to them on the walk this afternoon. By then, it was too late.

As soon as he saw it, he knew. He knew he could not follow them, knew he had to start walking and keep walking, try to look like one of the crowd, the only hope for him or the others. There was no Gizmo Bargain Center to run to this time. No Gillian to appear suddenly and help him. He moved off the way he had come, forcing himself not to look back, nodding greeting to the few responsive DT's. Past doorways and occasional food vendors, across almost empty streets, intent now only on putting distance between himself and his companions. After five minutes he began to breathe again. He noticed a faint tingling across his entire body. Adrenalin rush, he decided.

On his right, Worldwide Metal Containers reared its massive five stories, squatting like an ugly grey beetle over the roadway. Kyle turned, stepped up into the entry alcove, reached a hand towards the air cycle. He watched his hand move, slowly, ever more slowly, almost at the panel, fingers outstretched, never quite getting there, body rigid, unmoving, cold sweat standing chill on the back of his neck, icy tingle down his spine, humming in his head, roaring, like waves rolling in, ebbing away, his consciousness sliding down, down in the icy water, fighting for air, helpless, going down, down, down....

As if through a mist, slowly closing in to suffocate him at last, he heard a vaguely familiar voice.

“Nice to see you again, Kyle....”

And the blood froze in his veins.

CHAPTER 5: Guardian

The sound was harsh, sharp, metallic, steel on steel. Echoed for an instant in the silence, a hollow sterile resonance, chilling. The door of a vault, closing on its victim—but not silent, like a tomb. There was a steady droning, inside his head, or seeming to come from there, slowly washing over him and nearly drowning out the rest. Footsteps now, soft but distinct, plastic rubber on stainless, squeaking faintly. A voice, garbled words speaking to someone else far away.

"Ererry tin ergy or awoo ngo issor."

Kyle felt something touch his head, cold flowing from it, liquid ice. He tried to open his eyes, but they burned too much, seemed glued shut. The coldness trickled down through the fire in his eyes, travelled past to remote places he could not sense. Then the VOICE came. Not in the room. Not distant, like the other. This time close, so close it was inside him, speaking to a part of him that stirred in automatic response.

'Take me there, Kyle,' the VOICE said. It spoke gently, soothingly, yet he tingled with revulsion. 'Show me what you've seen.'

Surroundings formed about him. He was in a tiny room, the walls covered with drawers, searching for one, opening the lock. The room was ghostly, like a mirage that shifted and flickered. Only the metal drawer against his hand seemed solid and real. Cold and hard to the touch. Voices reached him, but the words were slurred. He was propelled out of the room, through a larger chamber filled with racks. There was no sensation of touch, just uncontrolled movement. Faces drifted past, out of focus.

'That's not good enough, Kyle.' The VOICE was loud and distinct, different from before. Compelling. A figure approached, striding across the chamber, sharp and clear against the blurred background. Kyle smiled as Gillian planted herself in his path, hands on hips. 'Try it again, Kyle.'

Get it right this time. It's important.'

Back in the tiny room, whispered words with no beginning and no end, meaningless gibberish. A face, close to his, swam vaguely past, then left him alone. The drawers again, this time less clear, removing something from one. Small and round, flat. Cold and metallic. Slipped into a pocket. Rough hands grasping, words in his ear, a foreign language. Out through a large room, past racks of—bodies?

'Kyle!'

Kyle obeyed the Command, turning to face the VOICE. It was Gillian again, but something wasn't quite right. The shape and the face, the clothes, something....

'This has gone far enough. I didn't bring you here to fool around with us. You've got to let go, or we won't be able to help you. Show us all of it. Let it happen.' She put her arm on his shoulder. The touch was gentle, but he sensed the hand shaking slightly as it rested there. A smile was on her face as she looked into his eyes. 'Come on, Kyle. For me.'

A shudder ran through him as he looked into those eyes. He shrank from the touch, retching. He could not get away from the fear, and watched in terror as the figure of Gillian faded before him. Someone else was there now, in the room. A different room, not the chamber with the racks, but a cold, sterile cell, all gleaming metal and harsh lights. There was no face now, no figure. Yet the voice was one he knew.

'You think to keep me out with these petty tricks.' The words flowed around him, inside his head, through his body like needles of pain. 'Where kind words and gentle persuasion fail, force can always be applied. I **will** see what you have seen, Kyle. You will show me. It is only a matter of time. And you will convict yourself and your friend Gillian. Struggle, but do not expect mercy. This is a battle you cannot win.'

Kyle felt an impact, as if a sword had pierced his skull. The pain was unbearable, splitting his head apart, tearing free his thoughts, ripping away all barriers. As if from far away a calming wave washed over him, numbing the pain, dulling the shock. Yet he could only watch, unable to interfere, as the scene at Gizmo began to unfold, this time clear and sharp. The street outside, searching for the Marker. The shop window, the sign above it almost tangible in its decrepit clarity. The door cycling open, moving inside.

Suddenly, blur.

The salesman appeared, but he was a ghost, mumbling incoherently. Kyle could sense it, this time, could see the pattern of blocks making the wall that cut off the channels to his memory. Only enough to ruin the image, conceal the faces, garble the words. Minimum energy expended. And he could feel the energy drain, sapping his waning strength. But in that moment of clarity he knew and recognized the source, and took up the fight consciously for the first time.

A wave of will force rose before him, too vast to be denied, and Kyle made no effort to hold the blocks. He drew back, into himself, and allowed the assault to wash over him, let it collapse all resistance—conserving strength. Then as his memory was tapped once more, he followed the guidance within him and sought the weakest links. The battle in the tiny garden was near. He could smell the earth against his face, sense the tangle of thorns about him. But his assailants were only shapes when he looked for them. The voice on the lawn, full of power and Command, was distorted beyond recognition. The wall held once more, and a new wave washed in. And another. In the cab with Gillian. Innocuous words spoken, clear and distinct, then garbled. The AF visit. Faces swimming, words drifting apart into meaningless shreds. The parking garage, a black smear. A large room with beds, filled with faceless people, walking in a dream, a girl's laughter ringing in his head, loud and clear, echoing about the room....

'Enough!'

Ice-Eyes was there this time, his face stark and terrible inside Kyle's skull, spittle flecked about the mouth as he shouted obscenities that stung like shards of steel. Kyle could not tear his gaze from those eyes as they ripped open all defenses, baring his mind. He felt his body go rigid, stiff with effort, as his last resistance crumpled like wet paper in a fist of iron. He had nothing left. The little energy he had conserved had been spent, and there was no reserve. The tiny points of ice that were his assailant's eyes glittered in triumph as Kyle's body convulsed, then went limp.

'Now, we shall see,' gloated the face.

Kyle was in the study room, looking straight into Suzanne's eyes. Her face was clear—and her words. He wanted to warn her, to cry out. 'No, please not her.'

'It goes against the skin, best around the belly where it can get good contact,' she said. She demonstrated its use, her features distorting to that of an older, uglier woman.

Kyle's eyes were hot again, hot and wet. He could feel them, really feel them, for the first time in what seemed like hours. As Suzanne's shirt dropped back down across her stomach, Kyle sensed his mother's power within him. From somewhere, she drew on strength Kyle had not known was there. He had squandered all his energy, but her wisdom had prevailed—she had saved a last burst, hidden from both defender and assailant. It surged forth towards the mind of the invader, a barbed dart of searing force, slicing through into the very core of his mind. The link was cut, abruptly. As it dropped away, Kyle could sense the silent scream of his inquisitor, the shocked pain of one who has never before felt such mental agony.

Kyle's body slumped in exhaustion. And the warmth around his eyes stole across his face, down his cheeks, and slowly dampened the back of his neck.

CHAPTER 6: Vacancy

The ship was gray, dark gray, with bright red lettering along its side. MISTRESS MIRA, it said. Glistening red, like wet blood. Small, narrow windows along the front, and large panels open underneath. Protruding rods, barrels of weapons, black against the brightness behind. The light came from ahead, a vast cavernous opening, ready to swallow the gray bug as it drifted past. Along the side of the cave figures moved, like ants, articulated, multi-jointed. Small shapes, meaningless movements. Words formed somewhere, faint at first, then clearer, the light burning brighter so that it stung, a sharp agony, and the words searing into his brain. 'I've been waiting. Waiting. Only the last one would know....'

Kyle woke to his own screaming again, the scream that he had uttered so often in recent days. Horror and terror filled him. This time, his eyes opened to blackness, and he felt sure he must still be living the nightmare. He thrust his hands out, touched hard steel beneath him, against his left side. Cold and rigid, unforgiving. Fear welled up in him again, but he swallowed the cry that lurked there, forced his body to stillness.

"Where am I?" he said to the dark.

"Detention cell 445, AF Enforcement." The voice was remote, mechanical.

Kyle's mind raced. AF Enforcement. Interrogation. Ice-Eyes....

"Su—" He almost said her name. The struggle had drained him of strength, mental agility, and sense. How long had he been lying here? How long had he been captive?

"What day is it?" he said.

"August twentieth, twenty one eleven. Time oh-six forty one."

August 20th. Three days. He had been here three days. He tried to sit up, but the pain in his head kept him down. His probing hand found fluid leaking slowly from his ears, his nose. Sticky.

Head injury. Or maybe the trauma of the mental encounter. Ice-Eyes had stretched him across the worst kind of mental rack. Physical torture would have been easier, he decided.

"Why am I here?"

"The question is irrelevant. Arbitration has been imposed. That is sufficient."

His mother had told him about the AF data storage system, which allowed all subjects to talk to their heart's content. Any information they revealed through such conversation could then be used against them. Often, in edited form.

"What will be done with me?" he asked.

"Secondary interrogation will proceed at oh-seven hundred hours. Primary interrogation was successful. Additional information on distorting device to be acquired by verbal questioning. Subject to be interrogated in conversation chamber sixty one."

Kyle felt at his waist, across his stomach. Nothing. They'd taken the distorter, then, and would only be confirming information they already knew. His hands came across a small piece of material that crumbled to his touch. His fingers smelled faintly of burned plastic.

Even that small effort exhausted him, and he sank back against the hard slab of cold steel. His body felt drained and feeble, as if all the blood had been sucked from it.

There was a sudden clanking of metal on metal, and harsh bright light flooded into the chamber. Kyle screwed his eyes tight shut, then opened one a slit. The cell was about a meter wide, two high, and two long. Just large enough for the steel bed to fold from the wall. Rough hands hauled him to his feet, and he was thrust through the door into a narrow hallway lined with other doors. He could not walk. Two men half carried, half dragged him along the corridor, through an open area that smelled of sweat and tobacco, and into an elevator. They plummeted downwards for some seconds, then moved out into a large room with several exits, all barred. A heavy-set woman sat behind a desk, a cigar between her teeth. The desk was ringed in by bars. She wore a gash of red lipstick across thick lips, and too much green eyeshadow. In her black and grey uniform, she looked like a giant fly squatting behind the blue steel.

Kyle's escort pushed him toward the desk, and leaned him against the bars.

"Andrews, Kyle," said the man to his left. "88345-3871-293-12-0. Illegal electronics. Inciting riot. The usual shit. Seven o'clock in room 61."

"Ah yes, Mr. Andrews." The fly's lips hardly moved as she spoke, and the cigar jiggled only slightly. "Mr. Urko is eager to have a nice little chat with you. Please go right on in." There was an unpleasant twinkle in the words as well as the eyes. She stabbed at the panel on her desk, then pointed to a door. Kyle coughed and spluttered as a cloud of thick brown smoke enveloped him, and he heard a soft chuckle as he was dragged away.

Heavy boots grated on steel mesh as Kyle's guards hauled him along the hallway and threw him

into a three-by-three room. A small man with thick bushy eyebrows got up from behind a desk and hustled over to where he lay.

"Tsk, tsk," he said. He reached a small hand under Kyle's armpit and tried to pull him upright. "Such treatment of our citizens, and by certified AF guards. You there, Private. Help me get him into his chair, or I'll have you reported."

"Sir," grunted the guard. Kyle was yanked to his feet, and thrown into a soft, cushioned vinyl chair. Plastifoam, conforming. He sank back gratefully into the relative comfort of the seat.

"Now leave us," ordered the little man.

The guards retreated, and the door slammed with a clang. The man moved back around the desk and sat, fidgeting slightly. Kyle sensed his uneasiness, and smiled in spite of himself.

"Now, young man," he said, shuffling through his papers. "I am here to represent the governing forces in the matter of your illegal activities on the afternoon of August 17, 2111. I see that you were not only involved in a disturbance, but also were wearing an illegal item of electronics, referred to in my report as a—" he scanned his sheets, "—camouflage unit. What do you have to say about these accusations?"

The man looked up at Kyle, his large brown eyes dwarfed into insignificance by the black forests that sprouted above them. His tiny, thin-lipped mouth was puckered tightly, as if he intended to plant a tentative kiss on Kyle's nose. The face was narrow and care-worn, lined with years of stress and tension. He shifted uncomfortably inside his bulky gray uniform, the bright blue collar jutting above his short neck and cutting into his chin.

"I don't care to answer."

The man raised a long-fingered hand to his neck and tugged at the tight collar, then cleared his throat noisily. "Ahem—"

"I'm not interested in cooperating with you, mister," Kyle continued. "Do what you're going to do, and get it over with."

"Young man, you are treading on very dangerous ground," the little man said. "It is well within my authority to have you imprisoned for an extremely long time. Even to recommend your execution. Please do not take this matter lightly."

"You're full of shit," said Kyle. "Nobody can touch me. Not you, not Ice Eyes, nobody. You're scared to death of me, and you were hoping I was too stupid to know it. Suck that one in, asshole. You lose."

The little man went suddenly white. He drew a handkerchief from his chest pocket and mopped his brow. The hand visibly shook, and he swallowed noisily.

Now, Kyle thought. Now's your chance.

He tapped into the feeble energy he'd held in reserve, saved for use now instead of wasting it

walking from his cell. Out went mental feelers, sharp and sudden, finding only an agitated, high-strung, defenseless mind. Kyle tapped in. The nervous energy of the little man flowed across, bridging the physical link to his body, filling him with a new strength. The little man did not even cry out, but sagged into submissiveness. Kyle got to his feet, shakily at first, then as he learned to draw more effectively on his new resource, with more confidence. He let his mother's skill direct his probing, but not even she could help him in the task he knew he must do.

Kyle reached into the brain of the man across the desk, almost physically feeling the pathways, searching. He read there the limited knowledge the man had of his case. He read the fear, borne of rumors that a top mental disciple had been injured in attempting to probe his mind. He read the procedure for access to the Enforcement block, and acquired the man's codes. Then, he released him. The man collapsed in his chair, unconscious, drained.

Now, Kyle thought, now for the real test. He had been thinking about the distorter since he recovered consciousness, trying to understand a nagging sense of familiarity, as if the device still clung to his body, despite its physical absence. He concentrated, directed his temporary strength to the task. There, it was still there. Against his skin, cold and metallic, the leather straps digging slightly into his lower back. He felt again with his hands. A solid bulge, familiar, reassuring. He didn't stop to wonder why, or how.

"Revo Urko, Conversation officer 2259. Conversation complete. Door release requested." Kyle spoke into the communicator attached to the desk, the procedure he had learned from the little man. The big steel door swung wide, and he walked out into the corridor, shutting the door behind him. The guards would be along soon, he knew, and he had little time. He reached the hallway access door, buzzed the fly-woman, and repeated the order. The door opened.

"Fast work, Mr. Urko," the fly said as he walked past to the elevator. "That kid's in deep shit now." She laughed, a hollow cackle that suited her appearance.

"I'm sure they'll be pleased with my results," Kyle piped. His voice was a little high, he decided, but the woman seemed not to notice. The elevator opened, and Kyle descended. Through the three levels of security, Revo Urko bustled in his usual nervous, uncertain manner. As he left the massive Enforcement complex, an alarm sounded loud in his ears. Revo Urko shrank back into a shadowed corner on the street, and emerged a few moments later as an old, shabbily-dressed man, with shrunken face and gnarled hands. The old man fled, hobbling, along an alley. And was gone.

CHAPTER 7: Street Scene

Kyle watched the dance of light and color from his corner, huddled close, shivering. A cold wind swirled around him, mocking, sucking the heat from his numbed body. His thin shirt clung to him like wet paper, rain-soaked and sweat-stained. Only the dance of the wet flakes in the streetlights kept him company.

He was at the end of his resources. All day he had run along randomly chosen streets, away, as quickly as his weary body would allow. Somewhere in the first three blocks he'd ditched his ID and resumed his own appearance, sighing at the strain his effort had cost. Another person's energy, not his own any more, kept him alive.

Hard to do, throw away your identity. A lifetime of habit had gone with that card. Without a name, without a home, alone. He'd felt that, as he ran. Unfamiliar roads, buildings, faces, all a blur of drab color and pattern. But he had nothing, now. His mother was dead. The AF were after him, and the Temple had sacrificed him. Not a shred of his old life remained. Kyle Andrews was no more.

At dusk he'd found a man lying under a worn groundsheet, his face unshaven, his clothes torn and ragged. In the heart of the DT district the sight was not unusual. Here in the commercial zone it seemed out of place. Providence. The ID card was new, probably re-issued recently for the fiftieth time. Henry Marshall, it read. The digitized face was strong and handsome, eager, full of hope. The card held six job classifications, each with a lower V rating than the last. And the picture hardly matched the face any more.

Then the rain began. Dark gray drops had changed slowly to soot-colored snowflakes as evening fell, quickly shrouding the streets in a thin black blanket. The damp and the night chill had sapped the last of Kyle's stolen energy, reducing him to a cowering heap in the corner of a shop

entryway.

The ped-lights across the road flickered and shone dimly, for the first time since he'd arrived. Slowly, they glowed closer. Kyle could see a shadow moving against the light, larger than life. It floated past, soundless, the snowflakes dancing about it like rainbow clouds. It stopped.

Kyle watched. The smell of wet snow, the gentle drip of runoff water, eerie streaks of light across the wet metalled road. A snatch of conversation, close. Kyle lay there, numb, not caring. A dark shape detached itself from the wall to the right of his doorway, planted itself in front of him. No ped-lights flared in response. Kyle wondered at that.

"Whez t p'ty, ked?" The voice was deep and throaty, but forced. It suited the shadowy shape in front of him, though. Big, solid. The words were street-talk, the DT dialect Kyle had spoken much of his life. He replied in kind, his voice sounding remote and lifeless.

"I'm a dead man. Let me be."

"Nobody dies round here less I say so," the man said. He knelt, hefted Kyle under the arms, then up onto his shoulder. "Kid got no right to lie in corner like this on my turf."

Kyle felt a wave of nausea, and his head spun wildly. When he could focus again, he saw the feet of others moving along the pedway, many people walking together around him.

"Where are you taking me?" he moaned.

"Move you in off the street, boy," said his captor. "Lucky we found you on the way home. Else I'd been mighty pissed to find you lying there dead in the morning."

Kyle conceded. The big man didn't speak to him again as they walked. A low conversation amongst the group blended into the background shuffle of leather on concrete. He caught a few words, soft laughter, the smell of alcohol. The talk was of action, recounted experiences, close calls with the AF. The group was restrained for a street gang fresh from a party. And still the ped-lights, he noticed absently, did not wink on as they passed.

It was warm when he awoke. He felt cosy and comfortable, rested. He opened his eyes slowly, blinked at the bright light of day shining in through a small grime-etched window. The bed was soft and well-sprung, and smelled faintly of perfume. A large makeup table, complete with telescoping mirror and full lighting, occupied the wall opposite the window. It was littered with bottles and vials, tubes, applicators. He noticed a crack in one corner of the mirror, and a slight slope to the table itself. One bottle lay on its side, open.

"So, kid. Awake 't last."

Kyle rolled sleepily towards the voice, wondering how anyone could have known he was

awake so quickly. For the second time, he saw the massive frame of his captor. This time, though, he could put a face to it as well. A strong square jaw jutted below a flat twisted nose, the green eyes strangely soft and gentle beneath thin brown brows. The hair was shaggy and long, hanging down across the right side of the face, pulled shorter on the left. Diagonal wedge cut, the latest DT fad.

"Who are you?" Kyle asked.

"My question t' you, kid." The big man grinned broadly, showing uneven teeth. The smile was warm and genuine. He pulled an ID card from the pocket of his overalls and waved it at Kyle. "Henry Marshall my ass."

"Why not?" Kyle said.

"Too D-damned old for a start. Let alone the picture. Not even a good 'stics job could do that to your homely face."

"So I'm not Henry Marshall. What does it matter to you?" Kyle was feeling weak, too weak to flee if he had to. But somehow, he didn't think he would need to run. Not just yet.

"So, word on t' street is some kid escaped from Enforcement. Name of Kyle Andrews, 'f I 'member right. They offering enough credits for him t' keep us in food'n booze for a year." He leaned heavily on the rails at the end of the bed, his eyebrows raised. "So what's't be? Do I call my medic t' do DNA on you?"

Kyle hesitated. "What do they say I've done?" he asked.

The big man sucked in air slowly, let out a long sigh. He began pacing the room, his huge arms folded across his chest. Kyle could hear the clatter of dishware in the next room.

"Well now, 't's a long story, or so 't seems. Kyle then, is't? T' cop killer? Black Snow agent, wanted for illegal electronics, smuggling, kidnapping, public nuisance. Hell, t' list's as long 's my fucking arm. You'a D-damned dangerous little shit, Kyle." He stopped pacing, turned and looked menacingly at him. "Didn' seem so tough last night, though, when I hauled your ass in here from t'street."

Kyle sighed, and relaxed back into the pillow. For a moment, he'd not been sure. Just for a moment. "I guess you can't believe everything you hear."

"Sure, isn't that t'truth? Take me, now. Hot shot AF had my number for seven D-damned years. True, they've to keep changing t'name, cause I only keep one for month 'r two 'fore I pick a new one. But then, life's more fun that way. Right, kid?"

"I don't know yet. My life only fell apart about a week ago." Kyle rubbed feeble fingers into aching eyes. He was almost afraid to ask, but it had to be said. "I'm grateful for your help. What do you want in return?"

"Rena," boomed the big man. He walked around the bed and out the door. Before Kyle could so much as sit up, a woman, tall and slim, fortyish, with long dark hair and a face heavily masked with

makeup, entered the room.

"Lie still and don't give me any trouble," she said. She had Presence, not strong, but there. Kyle let the demand settle him back on the bed, breathing deeply, giving in. "Kids these days. Just can't seem to follow the rules. Where's your mother, anyway?"

Kyle felt, for a moment, like he was back in the home he had lived in up until a few days ago. Being reprimanded for staying out past curfew, or playing too close to a restricted area. Years ago. Year-long days, since that faraway time. He brought his eyes back into focus, looked into Rena's severe face.

"I don't have anyone," he said. "Not any more."

Then she bent down beside him, smoothed the hair back from his face, touched his lips with a solvent stick. Gently, softly. He slipped into deep slumber, restful, secure. And he did not dream.

"How do you feel, Kyle?"

Rena carried a tray of steaming food. Real food, not freeze-dried mush or concentrated tablets. She set the tray down beside the bed, and Kyle sat up so he could see it better. A potato lay beside a small brown scrap of meat in a pool of thin gravy. There was even a vegetable, something strange and green, like a shower of little droplets spraying from a bright green stem.

"I feel like a person again, almost," Kyle said. He couldn't take his eyes off the plate. How long had it been since he'd had real vegetables? Years, at least. Hot food. "Where—where did you get the food?"

"That's my business. Concentrate on yours. Eat. I run a tight shop here. Can't have patients getting all cerebral on me." Without another word, she turned and went out. He did not waste any more time.

When he had finished, Kyle rolled carefully out of bed and stood. The floor was covered with rough-woven plastic carpet, the kind that came with modern easy-clean apartments. Little comfort, little warmth, but they wore well. He noticed he now had on a simple one-piece gray coverall, like Rena's. He walked tentatively to the door and looked out.

There was a kind of large sitting area, surrounded by doors, several of which were open. From one issued the sounds of people singing, several keys and out of sync, but soothing to the ear. A familiar street song he had known for a long time: 'When Man Returns.' From another, he heard grunts and thumps, occasional interjected commands to 'break!' or 'fight!' Combatives. Through a third he saw a large kitchen, with at least three figures in coveralls and aprons busily preparing a meal.

There was nobody in the sitting room itself. A large rack of books sat against one wall, with a media-sized viewer beside it. The place had a lived-in air, comfortable and relaxing. As he stood there a door to the right opened and a man walked in. He wore a coverall like his own, somewhat dirty, and carried a long-handled sword under his arm, nestled against his side, point downward. There was a spring in his step that signalled action readiness. He nodded in Kyle's direction, and went into the combatives room.

Kyle walked over and examined a round target on the opposite wall. There were several small pointed darts randomly embedded in it, and a light-pen and screen attached to one side. He removed a dart and was studying it when he heard someone approach.

"Care for a game?" The man was small and slight, only a little taller than Kyle. He moved with the ease and confidence of training. Reaching past Kyle, he plucked four of the darts from the board and gestured for Kyle to collect the remainder.

"I've never played before," Kyle said.

"Fine. That means for once I might win a game." The man laughed, and clapped Kyle on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll give you a few tips on how the game works before I trash you."

He waited for Kyle to collect his darts, then pulled him back about six meters until they stood behind a line of tape loosely stuck to the carpet.

"Cock it first," he said, twisting a small knob at the blunt end of the dart. "Then sight at the board. The center is worth most points. If you miss the board, you start at zero again. First to a hundred wins." He raised the dart in front of his face, lined it up, and touched a small button at the tail. The projectile hissed in the direction of the board, and planted itself in the top of the third ring from the center.

"Damn. Should practice more often." He turned to Kyle. "Your shot."

Kyle followed the actions he had been shown, and sent the dart twisting away a meter from the board—almost through an open doorway. He was sure he'd aimed well.

"Hooked it," said his companion. "Over-wound the sucker. Don't twist the cocking knob so hard next time." He prepared another dart, and sighted it. "You're that Kyle kid, aren't you?" The man's second dart sailed neatly to a spot directly below the first. He thumped his fist in his hand.

"One of these days I'll master these Deity-damned darts. Never seem to behave the way you expect." He gestured towards the board, then looked at Kyle again. "How do you like our place, Kyle?"

"Sure beats some of the spots I've seen the past week," Kyle replied. This time, his dart found the edge of the board. "But for me it's like something out of a dream. I didn't expect to see another morning. Somehow I collapsed just in time for you to find me."

"Chance, maybe. People round here don't think so. It's like you got something special. Someone

watching over you. Know what I mean?"

"Not really." Kyle knew exactly what he meant. "Luck is all. And I'm grateful."

"So you should be, kid." The voice came from behind him, spoken softly, no thunder. Kyle turned and felt his heart skip a beat. Beside the big man who had plucked him from the door of death stood a woman he had thought never to see again. It was Gillian.

CHAPTER 8: Discovery

"L'iy siz s'unna tk yo, ked." The big man waved a thumb at Gillian as he spoke, his eyes rolling to indicate the rest of the room. Kyle noticed it then: he had not arrived alone. There were three men positioned in doorways, all armed. "Won tk?"

Kyle walked slowly forward to where Gillian stood. She looked relaxed, her face as impassive as ever. He resisted the urge to throw his arms around her, but could not prevent his eyes from misting over. He reached out and took her by the hand, squeezing it with sudden intensity, looking at her as steadily as he could. "It's alright," he said. "She's—"

"A friend," Gillian said. She turned to the man beside her, a slight smile on her face. "Like I told you."

"Yeah, sure," he replied. "Like you said." He swung to face Kyle. "Listen, kid, this here lady could eat you alive 'f she wanted. I'm not leaving her alone wit'you, not in my place. Friend or not, she's under guard 's long as she's here. Else," he waved an arm at the door behind him, "you both leave now."

"Fine," Gillian said. "Just so long as he and I can have a little talk. We're due for one." Her eyes were on Kyle again, and he got the message. He nodded slowly.

"OK. Take a seat, and make it peaceful." The big man left, but the guards did not. Kyle's dart partner sat in a chair under the board, and smiled at him.

Even before he'd sat down, Kyle had reached out to Gillian's mind, pouring out his relief in a flood of emotion. He sensed her caution, reassured her. He also sensed....

"You're lucky these people found you, Kyle. I understand you were pretty far gone when they brought you in four days ago."

That he hadn't expected. So it had been a week since his capture, four days since his escape,

and the AF hadn't found him. It was good to know.

"I wouldn't have been alive if not for them. They've kept me safe, and got me back on my feet." Kyle sat back in his chair, trying to look relaxed. "This is a wonderful place."

`How did you find me?' he sent over their Mental link.

`Not too D-damned easily,' Gillian replied. `These people are good. Shut off every line of information in or out of this place. An independent refugee group for non-conformists. Like the Snow, only a lot smaller. They're backward, but they're good. Kyle, I was sure you'd gone down. I'm...glad to see you.'

Kyle felt a surge of warmth flow through him, and he had to feign a cough to cover his surprise. Whether it was because she'd been given the responsibility of looking after him, or because she really had been worried about him, Kyle didn't care. Just knowing she'd searched for him, that she felt relief at finding him gave him renewed hope.

"We'll have to pay these people for taking such good care of you. Perhaps I can make a donation to the cause?"

Kyle noticed Rena's face at one of the doorways, and gestured for her to come over.

"This is the lady who fixed me up," he said to Gillian. "She's a first class medic. I'm sure you could use help in keeping up your facilities, Rena?"

"Damn right," she replied. She looked at Gillian. "You don't take this kid out of here 'less I get some assurances, lady. I got some sense about me. You going to look after him?"

"I think you can rely on me, Rena," Gillian replied. Again, the slight smile. "I left others to look after him for a while, last time. That's how he ended up the way you found him."

Rena nodded. Kyle noticed Gillian had not used her Presence to enforce belief in her words, artificial confidence, unwilling compliance. Yet Rena looked satisfied.

"Alright. You got my OK, 'n that'll be good enough for Raj. Just make sure all my work with this kid doesn't go down the drain as soon as he walks out the door." She touched Kyle's cheek gently, took one more quick look at Gillian, and left. Kyle saw that the guards had faded away.

`She's got quite the arsenal herself, that Rena. Strongest Verity Force I've ever seen.'

`Is that why you didn't use your Presence on her?'

`She'd have flipped out. Anything artificial in what I told her would've given her bad vibes. A pretty good test of sincerity and good intentions, that one.'

`She was good to me. They all were. But Gillian—'

"Come on, Kyle," Gillian said aloud. "We'd better get going." She flipped open a pocket in her coveralls, inside right thigh, and pulled out several ten-credit tokens. "We'll leave these for Raj and his people. It's the least we can do for the help they've given you."

As Kyle got to his feet, the big man Raj walked into the room again. This time he was smiling,

the smile Kyle remembered from his earlier visit. It was reassuring.

"So, Kyle. You'll be leaving us." He held out a massive right hand, and Kyle shook it. The grip was gentle but firm, the big man's strength buried deep. "Where you be going?"

Kyle looked at Gillian for guidance. She held out the coins.

"For supplies," she said.

Raj chuckled. "We take 't where we can get 't," he said. He pocketed the money. "What you goin' t' do with this here boy? He's hot, D-damned hot."

"I know a few places. I have friends. Mostly, though, he's got me to look after him."

The big man let out a roar of laughter. He smiled at both of them, in turn. Then his face turned dead serious as he looked at Gillian again. "Glad to know you' not against us, lady. I've not met your strength often on the streets." He offered her his hand. "Rena has trust in you. I have trust in t' boy, here. We will be there if you need us."

They shook hands, and now Kyle felt, through Gillian, the strength in his arm. He tucked his aching right hand under his shirt.

Gillian bowed, slightly. "Thank you, Raj," she said. "And if ever you or your people should need my strength—they call me The Jackal."

Kyle saw Raj's eyes go wide, then he smiled again, nodding slowly. "Now I understand," he said. "And I am indeed grateful for your offer, lady." He bowed, in turn. "Come. You should leave while 't's still light."

He led the way rapidly through the complex, a series of chambers opening off one long corridor, each with its own activity. Kyle saw at least twenty people in the place, but he sensed there were many more. They reached the corridor end, and Raj gathered them together against the end wall. He stood in front of them. "One," he said.

The floor dropped from beneath them, and they plummeted downwards. Kyle's panic quickly subsided, as he realized they were dropping gently, too gently for free fall. A column of air supported them, or so it seemed. After some seconds, they slowed and stopped in the darkened corner of a factory floor. Raj walked forward calmly, not waiting for them to follow. He addressed a nearby worker, who nodded and turned to face them.

"Arnie here will take you out," he said. "May t'Deity guide you." With that he turned and walked back across the shop floor, away from their arrival point. In a moment, he was gone amidst a maze of moving machinery.

Without a word, Arnie led them along the production lines, down aisles of robotic vacuum-form machines, a plastic container plant. Workers stood beside each machine, watching for errors. Apparently that was their job, all of it.

Kyle recalled his mother's lessons. This factory was operating on pre-Repealment hierarchy.

Illegal nowadays. If a problem occurred, the workers called in the repair robots to fix it. Robotic Repealment had reversed the roles, giving robots the monitoring tasks, and people the labor. He had often wondered which was worse.

His thoughts turned suddenly to Suzanne, the day he'd been taken. He ached to tell Gillian about what had happened, the danger Suzanne was in, that the AF would be onto her and the Black Snow. But he kept calm, following, until they were shown out a rear entrance that opened onto a narrow waste-collection alley.

Gillian waved to Arnie in thanks, and led the way down the alley towards a street thirty meters away.

"Gillian—"

"Follow me, Kyle. Just stay quiet, and follow." She turned to him. "Whose ID're you carrying?"

Kyle checked for the card—it was there, in his belt. Henry Marshall's ID. "Not mine."

"Good. Just follow. It's important."

He obeyed without another word. Gillian led him out onto the street, an industrial factory area with few people at this time of day. Between shifts, about three in the afternoon. She turned left, walking openly along the decrepit ped-way, crossed at the intersection. Slowly, resignedly, head down in contemplation—or perhaps feigned listlessness. Past a huge complex belonging to the Reese Syndicate, the world's largest metal processing combine. The sulphurous odor of molten grafsteel, their chief product, fouled Kyle's nostrils, leaving its characteristic sour taste in his mouth.

They turned into an alley just past the complex, walked past the fenced storage area where a huge transport hover was unloading rolls of wafer-thin metal. Then out on the next street, half a block down, she turned into a parking tower and punched twenty on the elevator panel just inside the entrance. When they arrived at the elevator shaft the doors were open, ready for them. Thirty seconds later, they walked off at the twentieth level, and over to a once-sleek grey speeder, battered and scraped, looking barely drivable. Gillian pulled the control key from her belt, touched it against the passenger access panel. The door swung noisily aside.

"Get in," she ordered.

Kyle climbed in and buckled the harness. The interior looked barren and rudimentary, in contrast to what would be expected in a once top-model car. Gillian got in the driver side, closed the doors with the remote. Then she pushed the control key into a small scratched slot in the panel, and the dash was transformed. Entire sections slid back to reveal instruments, controls, displays. Kyle had never seen anything like it, not even when he'd once been allowed to look inside the control cab of a transport hover. He gasped.

Gillian smiled. "This baby's my own design," she said. "Got most everything, and a lot no other vehicle has. Like, for instance...."

She adjusted a series of knobs, watched readouts change, then snapped a switch to 'on.' The engine came alive, and the vehicle spun smoothly in place. It moved towards the exit port, down the long aisle of parked speeders. Gillian sat back, her hands free of the controls. The speeder moved out of the building and down to the nearest cross-city traffic lane. The gentle thump of a familiar musical rhythm filled the cab.

"Now," she said, turning to look at him, "we can talk."

The urgency of Kyle's message overcame his fascination with the vehicle. He started from the beginning, pouring out the tale of his capture, his interrogation. When he reached the point where he had revealed Suzanne's face and name, his voice broke.

"I—I couldn't do anything, Gillian. I had nothing left. He kept coming at me, and I was too weak. Suzanne...."

Gillian put a hand on his arm, a vice-like grip, the pain snapping Kyle back to the present. "Suzanne and Yuri are missing, Kyle. Have been since the day you disappeared. And we—not even I've been able to trace them."

Kyle gave her a look of despair. "The AF—"

"No. Not the AF. If they'd picked Suzanne up, given what you've told me, they'd have swarmed the Snow Temple within hours." She looked away, out at the traffic, the speeder cruising systematically through the slower vehicles, keeping below the legal limit. "It's bigger than that, Kyle. Much bigger. I haven't quite figured it—"

"But what about them? What about Suzanne? After what Yuri did that day I don't much care what happens to him, but—"

"No, Kyle. Yuri was only doing what he'd been told. It was a Snow decision, not his. He was ordered to fade out if there was any trouble, and that's what he did." She looked back at Kyle, her face hard. "In fact, it was almost a setup, so far as I can see. I wasn't in on the decision, else I'd never have let them send you out with those two. It was Oris and Jasmine's idea. A security experiment. They knew Yuri and Suzanne could never keep from arguing for long. Suzanne's got a temper and no patience. Yuri's always too blunt, and won't back down from what he says. So they set it up, leaving you to be caught—and to test whether you'd give the others away."

"Then Suzanne didn't know about it. She wouldn't have gone along."

Gillian looked pensive for a moment, and Kyle sensed the anguish she suppressed. She smiled. "No. She wouldn't have gone along. Sparks would have flown."

Kyle smiled at the thought, but only briefly. How could the Snow set them up, knowing they all might be taken?

"Gillian I was carrying a distorter. Weren't they worried it would fall into AF hands?"

"That was part of the experiment. To see if the self-destruct failsafe worked."

Kyle looked at her in shock. "Then how did I..."

"From what you've said, the distorter fried itself the moment they tried to take it off you. The thing was basically booby-trapped."

Kyle frowned. He began to think he had imagined the entire episode at AF Enforcement. How had he escaped without the distorter? Yet the memory of Ice-Eyes' inquisition was too vivid, too real. And Suzanne had disappeared. If not in AF hands, where had he been?

A snatch of music drifted through his thoughts, as if placed there by an outside will.

'...Ever forward rolls the wheel,
Time walks in its wake.
Yet one wheel, one alone we ride,
It's course decides our fate.'

"...was my fault, Kyle," Gillian was saying. "I'm sorry. I told Oris about your Empathy, and your Mental strength. He was fascinated. We both knew how strong your mother had been. I suppose that was part of their test. To see how strong your defenses really were." She sighed. "They didn't anticipate what might happen. Suzanne and Yuri gone, and you—nobody like Grezman has ever appeared in AF Interrogation before."

"Grezman?"

"The man you call Ice-Eyes. Wilfred Grezman. I got the wind up on him when he pulled us over that day I found you. Not quite right, him cruising around with a regular AF patrol. I ran a check on his background."

Kyle looked at her quizzically.

"Don't ask," she said. "I have my methods. This guy wormed his way up in the AF in the past year, and there's bullshit written all over his history. Nothing I could nail down, just a feeling. He's a plant. Someone's goon. Manipulation of AF records is a craft, Kyle. Whoever pays Grezman his danger money has lots where that came from. And a powerful mind twister like him goes for a high price, too. Not a salary the AF could ever afford."

Kyle told her what his mother's reserve energy had done for him, how the interview with Ice-Eyes had ended. How he had tapped into Revo Urko's energy, built up the power of the distorter. It made Gillian smile, yet there was doubt written across her face that disturbed him. She shook her head.

"Beats hell out of me how you did all that." Gillian eyed him narrowly. "But how you escaped without the distorter? That scares me."

Kyle nodded. "It scares me too. If it ever happened at all."

"It's not the if that bothers me, but the how and why. Still however it happened, Grezman's going to be after your entrails for it, Kyle. Shit, Cyndi was a strong woman. See what even a shadow of her power can do?" She paused. "That's why I couldn't understand her getting caught like she did. She could sense danger, better than me, could pick up direction—Kyle I even saw her dodge aside from an impact missile once. She was too fucking hard to kill!" She grabbed Kyle by the shoulders, her fierce eyes locking on his. "I've been working on it. I needed to know, Kyle. What happened to her. I—"

Suddenly she closed her eyes and looked away. She put her head in her hands, and Kyle could sense her sobbing, her pain. The horror of what she'd been trying to tell him was there, just under the surface, in her mind. He reached across and put an arm around her. She did not remove it.

"Gillian. Gillian, what did—"

"It was a fucking mess, Kyle," she screamed at him. "Her mind. It was just gone. Torn to shreds. Not physically, just psychically. There was nothing there at all."

"What—how do you—"

"I had to see for myself. I went to the morgue, Kyle. She was physically untouched. Only her head, inside, blasted. Drained of every scrap of order, all structure. There must've been a lot of them for that, Kyle. What you felt with Grezman, ten times over. She had no chance. They broke down her barriers, tore out her soul, left her open and bare, squirming in torment, the agony of mental pain that only those with the gift can know." She turned and looked at Kyle then, her eyes wet with tears, her face a mask of hatred and loathing. "You know now, Kyle, what it feels like. They didn't want any information, Kyle. Not much." She swallowed convulsively. "Just you, Kyle. They wanted you."

CHAPTER 9: Probe

A feeble lamp shed its sickly orange glow on the tattered wallpaper, giving the hallway a look of imminent collapse. The wooden floor was uneven, canted to one side, littered with scraps of fallen paper, the warped boards squeaking underfoot. It was like a passage in a haunted house Kyle had seen once in an old vid. He expected to see rats scuttling through the rubbish, and peering out from holes in the walls. Gillian led the way towards a set of stairs at the far end of the hall.

"This guy we're going to see—"

"Crypto's not a guy. That's just her street name. And yeah, she's a bit weird. Let me do the talking."

"What does she do when she's not probing desperate criminals like me?"

A slight smile crossed Gillian's face, eerie in the shadowy light. "Maybe you'll find out."

They reached the stairs and went up, two flights. Another dim corridor, narrow and stretching in both directions. No wallpaper here, and the painted walls might have been green once. The familiar orange lamps were wall-mounted at eye height, every six or seven meters. There was an acrid chemical odor, one that stung the inside of Kyle's nostrils, made him want to sneeze. His nose wrinkled in disgust. As they walked down the hall, he pinched his nose tight to shut out the smell.

"What is it, Gil—"

"Not here. Here I'm Jackal, nothing else." She rubbed her nose gently, then sneezed. "And you need a street name. I've been thinking about that one—"

"Phoenix. Like in a book I read once. One who rises again from the dead. In another form."

"Phoenix, then." She pulled Kyle's hand away from his face, and he sneezed violently. "Let's do what we came to do, and get out. The smell of ammonia always gets me, too."

The double doors at the end of the hall had small frosted glass panes, metal reinforced. They

swung open soundlessly as Gillian approached, and a wave of fumes blew out into the corridor. The sudden sharpness of the ammonia and formaldehyde stench turned Kyle's stomach, and he retched. Gillian gripped his arm firmly and steered him into the room. His head spun wildly as she swung him round to put his back against cold hard steel. His groping hands found the edge of a stool and he sat, dropping his head between his knees as he did so.

"What this time, Jackal?" The voice was soft and gentle, but with a hint of menace. Kyle could see around the room as his vision stabilized again. It was like a low-light morgue. "Come for some news? More details on your friend..."

"I've brought someone for you to probe, Crypto," Gillian replied. "No advance information. Look for what we want, and nothing else." There was an emphasis in the last words that Kyle didn't like. He opened his eyes fully to see what was happening.

Gillian stood about three meters away beside a large slab of stainless occupied by a partial corpse, the upper half of a man's body. The torso had been neatly severed just below the ribs, a clean cauterized cut, as if the man had been sliced in two by a giant white-hot razor. To Gillian's left, sitting on the table beside the corpse, was a youthful woman in a loose green smock. She wore round dark goggles over her eyes. A yellowed face mask dangled from a strap around her neck. She raised the goggles and set them across her forehead, then looked at Kyle.

"Got some secrets inside that young head, have you?" she said. She smiled at him. Her mouth was small and delicate, set against a high-cheekboned face with deep dark eyes. She wore her blond hair long and straight, one side braided neatly. "Want Crypto to dig it out of you?" She slid gracefully off the steel table and walked slowly towards him. Her eyes were locked on his as she approached. "What's it all about, Jackal?"

Gillian did not move as Crypto reached out her long hands to grasp Kyle gently at the temples. She stroked back his hair, and Kyle felt a desire to pull free, to run away from this strange woman who lived amongst corpses, hidden in the dimness of her orange-lit laboratory.

`Gi—Jackal, help me!

"Good!" Crypto smiled at him, soothingly, compelling him to release his thoughts. He groped for protection, but he was alone. Somehow, his mother's influence had been withdrawn, and he could not summon strength from within himself. A moment flashed by, brief but intense, and he knew he had been opened, violated, his thoughts bared.

Then he was aware again and he struck back. Not consciously, but with an automatic instinct which he could not control. He penetrated her brain, seeking her motives, his conscious mind watching in horrified fascination as the woman's defenses fell to his savage onslaught. There, deep within her, he saw her very soul exposed. Greed and self-interest, masks across an inner loneliness and isolation that came with the powers she had been given. He sensed her long anguish, her

bitterness at those who could have what she could not, who could be just themselves and not what others wanted. He felt her shock and her terror.

'I'm sorry. I can't control it.' The message was to nobody, but to everyone. A glimpse of this woman's isolation had struck fear into his heart. Could his gifts lead him to such sorrow as she now suffered?

His psychic will force withdrew, having found no threat, no direct danger worthy of retaliation. Kyle was shaking violently. He saw Gillian help Crypto to a seat, watched her collapse weakly onto it, the dark goggles on her forehead stark against the whiteness of her face. Her eyes were still on him, incomprehension and puzzlement replacing the confidence and power he had seen there before. Kyle looked at Gillian.

"You—you should have warned me," he said weakly. "I can't control it."

"I'm sorry. It had to be this way. Neither of you would have had anything to do with each other if you'd known. And even I didn't know what would happen." She looked seriously at him. "What did happen?"

Kyle raised a hand and touched his head. "She knows everything that's in here. She was in and out of my head before I even knew what hit me. You heard me send a distress signal—"

"No. I got no message. But then, I didn't expect to."

"But I've always been able to reach you, when you were this close." He looked at the woman in the chair, who now had a faint color in her pallid cheeks. "How was she able to block me?"

"That's why we came here, Kyle. So she could probe you and interpret for us. You can't understand what's going on inside you, and neither can I. We had to get someone to read you."

"Holly Masters." Kyle looked again at the woman in the chair. "Crypto. Not a pleasant gift to live with is it, Holly?"

"You're—the only one that knows," Holly replied. "I've never...." She shivered, a deep body-wracking shake that sent a soft moan from her throat. "I don't know what to say."

"We probed each other. Maybe now you don't need to be so lonely any more." Kyle felt suddenly very sad about the life this woman had been forced to lead, using her skills to probe whatever minds she was paid to invade. She was a tool for the AF, and for anyone else. But she could never escape from herself and what she read from others. Others. Sometimes weird or vicious street punks, sometimes criminals, often victims of crime. Surface thoughts. Emotions. With the dead, residual images. And with the mentally gifted....

"I won't let you be isolated like this." Kyle turned to Gillian. "Not any more."

"This isn't why we're here, Kyle," Gillian said. Her words were cold and unfeeling, like the surroundings. "Crypto, what did you find out?"

"Don't answer, Holly." Kyle glared defiantly at Gillian. He knew if she wanted to she could

probably make Holly speak, but he also knew she wouldn't. "Holly. We have information about each other that could be dangerous if it got out of this room. What are we going to do about it?"

Holly gave him a faint smile. "I know what the Jackal came for. At least, some of it." She turned to Gillian, looked sadly at her for a few long moments. "You and I have more in common than I would ever have thought, Gillian. Kyle—"

"Leave it!" Kyle stumbled as he moved off his stool, still weak and disoriented. He leaned on Holly's chair, placed a hand on her shoulder. Her muscles turned rigid at his touch—yet she did not visibly react. "Leave it, Holly. Let me work that out by myself."

He sighed. Gillian was looking from Kyle to Holly, her expression quizzical. Her gaze came to rest on Holly. "Tell me what I need to know, Crypto. No more."

"What **you** need to know? That Kyle's got a mind that could blow away any of the probes and headcases I've ever come across? That's what you want, isn't it? That with training he could probe any mind within a mile without flinching? That he can channel energy from another person without any physical contact?" She glanced over at Kyle. "That he's a complete psychic freak and he scares me shitless?"

Kyle's knees, already wobbly, gave way beneath him. He stared up at Gillian, disbelieving. With all his heart he willed her to scoff at Holly's assertions. It couldn't be. He had strengths, some of which he could not understand. But he was not a mental freak. He was just a normal, confused, scared kid who....

"A summary, Crypto. Most of this we know. Give us details." Gillian kept her eyes on Holly. Her face, if anything, showed less emotion than before.

"Gillian." The word came ghost-like from Kyle's lips, an almost silent exhalation. "It's not me. Not me. It couldn't be—"

"You must have figured some of this out by now, Kyle. Don't sit there and deny having any idea of what we're talking about. Whoever killed your mother was after you for a reason. And Cyndi knew it, before she died. She knew you had some power, maybe not how much. So she planted a spark in you, a part of herself, enough to start the fire going. Enough to stimulate your mind." Gillian's voice was harsh, her anger barely contained. "You've got enough power in that mind of yours to scare even the Council out of their wits. And you can bet your D-damned ass if I'm responsible for you I'm going to find out what I'm dealing with."

Holly was on her feet, standing poised between Gillian and Kyle. She was smaller than Gillian, less solid, but her stance was not casual. "Give the kid a break, Gillian. He's even more fucked up right now than you are. Almost as bad as me. And still he's trying to consider the good of others first. You think about it—two weeks ago, he was just a kid. Now, who the fuck knows what he is?"

Gillian's gaze turned frigid. "Don't tell me what to do," she said slowly. "You do your job, and

stay out of the lifestyle decisions. That's not your strong—"

Gillian moved as the blow flew towards her, taking a glancing punch to the side of her head. Kyle felt it and winced, but he did not move. He watched in fascination as Gillian set her arms on the table behind her then swung one leg through a lightning arc, sweeping up to where Holly's head should have been. But Holly was just as quick, ducking under the attack and aiming a vicious kick up into the small of Gillian's back, just to the side of the spine. Or maybe she had another target. Gillian took the blow in her left kidney as she rolled back on top of the severed corpse, grunting in pain.

Tears came to Kyle's eyes as he clutched his lower left side. Through blurred eyes he saw Holly spring up onto the steel table, positioning herself above Gillian's head, out of her immediate grasp. A heel kick landed, but not where it was aimed. As Gillian's shoulder took the impact, she grasped Holly's leg below the knee and twisted, using her body weight to give leverage, toppling Holly sideways. The falling woman smashed her arm on the edge of the steel table, and to Kyle's horror he felt his left arm suddenly on fire with agony.

Holly twisted as she fell, and rolled free from the table. Gillian was on her feet again, poised for another leap....

"Stop it," Kyle moaned, his teeth clenched against the pain. "Stop it. You're killing me."

The two women stopped abruptly. For several long seconds they stood in readiness, their breath coming in deep controlled gasps, their eyes locked. Neither moved. Then Holly took a small pace backward, another, and another. She circled round towards Kyle, keeping the steel tables between herself and Gillian. Gillian made no move to intervene. A few moments later Holly was beside Kyle. She helped him into the chair she had so recently vacated, and examined him quickly, still keeping an alert eye on Gillian. "I didn't realize you had so little control, Kyle. Empathy is one bitch of a gift if you can't keep it in line. Sorry."

Holly walked over to a cabinet, opened it, and began to remove dressing pads from it. By the time she came back, Gillian was at Kyle's side.

"Sorry Kyle," she said. Her voice was impassive once more. She reached down slowly and touched first the side of his head, then his lower back. "I didn't think."

"You didn't think, is right," Kyle replied. The pain was beginning to subside, almost as quickly as it had come. "Neither of you." He glanced at the smaller woman. "And where did you learn to fight, anyway? You two behave like you went to the same school."

Holly met Kyle's questioning look with a cold stare. "Crypto has to deal with a lot of rough situations. She needs to be able to protect herself." She turned the stare on Gillian. "And no trumped-up street mercenary like the Jackal's going to tell me what to do and get away with it. I don't take any shit."

Kyle raised a hand at Gillian as she started to respond. "Gillian, don't. Try to put the professional pride on hold for a minute. Everyone seems to know your reputation on the street except me. Let's keep the peace until we sort out what's going to happen here."

"What's going to happen is Crypto will tell us what exactly your skills are. And when she's done, she won't ask for any payment, because you have the inside goods on her, too. And you are not under any oath to keep quiet about what you've learned either, like she is. That's what's going to happen."

"Right except for one small thing." Kyle was almost enjoying this now that the pain had begun to recede, and he was over the initial shock of Holly's revelation. He turned to Holly, who stood with a quick-bandage kit poised in her hand. "I'm just as terrified of my supposed powers as anyone else. Like you said, I don't have a clue how to keep them in line let alone use them. Holly seems to be an expert, and even the Deity knows she needs a chance to do something less hateful. I want her to teach me."

"Kyle don't be an ass. She's AF trained and almost full-time on their payroll. And I can help you learn about your powers just as well as her. We have a job to do, and she'll just make it harder."

"Maybe not, Gillian." Holly's smile was genuine, not mocking. "I admit to being paid mostly by the AF. But then, so are you. And you know all about my training. But what he says is also true. I do want to get out of this filthy job. Away from probing corpses and sex-crazed assholes who raped and murdered for the sheer pleasure of it. I want to help." She looked slowly down at Kyle. "And not only could I do a better job than Gillian in your training—but I also know who murdered your mother."

CHAPTER 10: Vision

"Try that again, Crypto." Gillian's voice compelled attention. The words fell on the ear like long thin daggers, penetrating, twisting, wrenching. Command directed at another, but so viciously powerful Kyle almost responded himself.

"I—will—not." Holly struggled to get the words out, her face contorted. Her mouth opened and closed slowly, her jaw shaking with effort. A puppet with a mute master.

"I don't believe you. Try it again."

"Gillian, stop—"

"Kyle, stay out of this."

Kyle was struck dumb. He felt the awful power Gillian wielded, full force. She could not invade his mind as others might, but she still could make him obey. He had to look....

Guilt. Guilt and fear, blazing like a white-hot light inside her mind. Kyle felt Gillian's defenses slam into place, but he had seen it. 'What is it, Gillian? What is it you fear? How can this woman scare you so much?'

"Stay out of my brain, Kyle. Just stay the fuck out!"

'I want to help you. Tell me what you know, what happened. It's not Holly's....'

Kyle didn't even see it coming. His head snapped sideways, and his vision swam. Fireworks burst across the blackness that swept in on him. Then he sank deeper into the pit that opened before him, dark and terrifying, down, down, falling and spinning, the endless dark. Not endless. Below him he saw, as unconsciousness swept over him, a woman standing. Her head was in her hands, bowed down, and she rocked slowly back and forth. She wore a cover across her head, so he could not see her face. But as the image faded, at the very last, he thought he saw her look up. Her hands went out to him, palms upturned, and she sank to her knees. And beneath the hood where her face

should have been—he saw only emptiness.

"...ly shit, Kyle. Are you OK?"

Someone was shaking him. His head felt like it had been used as a golf ball. The left side of his skull throbbed agonizingly, and there was a salt taste in his mouth.

"Feel great," he moaned.

"Kid, you got some friends. Whatever you do, don't ever bring any of your enemies around here."

A coolness spread across the side of his head, and the throbbing began to fade. He felt something cold trickle down his neck and under his shirt. With an effort he got an eye open and squinted up at Holly.

"What happened?"

"I guess we overwound the Jackal's spring. She stiffed us both with Command, then clocked you on the skull with a boot. Roundhouse kick at close range. You're lucky not to have a concussion."

"Who says I don't?"

"You're coherent. That's a pretty good sign." She soaked his head again with a wet cloth she was holding. It felt good. "I caught some of what you said to her. Mind link. What did you see?"

The thought of Gillian's mental turmoil and anguish brought Kyle fully awake. He sat up, ignoring the pain that surged through his skull.

"Where is she, Holly?"

Holly pointed across the lab to an open door leading into darkness. "My office. It's my last refuge against dangerous visitors."

Kyle tried to get to his feet, but Holly held him down. "She's OK," she said. "Just out of it for a while. The room seals completely, and I still keep a supply of ether." She looked apologetic. "Sorry, Kyle. I couldn't think of any other way to slow her down without killing her."

Kyle didn't ask how she'd maneuvered Gillian into the office. Or why she'd had to. "Thanks, Holly. Thanks for stopping her."

"Thanks nothing. If I hadn't taken her down, she'd probably have killed me." Holly turned her head to show Kyle a swollen left ear. "This was a near miss. One of many."

"She's on the edge. Something is gnawing at her, eating her up inside." He looked hard into Holly's eyes, very dark in the weak orange light. "Something about my mother." He swept a hand

across his forehead to push the hair out of his eyes. "And something about me."

"Yeah, and I don't exactly calm her down either. So she's screwed up. Who the hell isn't in this screwed up world? Doesn't give her the right to—"

"Holly. What do you know about my mother?"

"I'm under an oath. I can't reveal what I read from other's minds except to the paying—"

"Holly. What do you know about—"

Holly held up her hand for silence. She crossed to the nearest stainless table and hauled herself painfully up onto it. There were other battle wounds from the fight with Gillian, it seemed. She sat facing him, legs dangling, back slouched. Slowly she raised her hands to her forehead.

"It's in here, Kyle. What happened. What I saw. Consider this your trial by fire. But know up front that it won't be me you sense. If it's too intense for you, drop back out."

She ran her long-fingered hands up across her forehead, smoothed back the now straggly hair. "I'll have my walls up full, but—well, from what I saw earlier, I don't know if it'll be enough. Make a special effort. Keep yourself under control."

"But I don't know if I—"

"I'm trusting you with it. I've got damned good Mental walls, defenses that have never been breached when they're fully active. But you have a kind of raw Mental power, just below the surface, untrained and untamed. I can't tell you what to expect. Just use what you have. And I'll try to get us both through it alive."

"Why are you risking yourself? Can't you just tell me what you know, in words? Or at least let me practice, learn to control my power before I try this?"

"I'm a bit crazy in the head too, Kyle. You know. You saw it. My life's one great big fucking isolation. A Mental gift, they call it. More like a refined form of torture. And the more I use my skills, the more isolated I become. Makes you kind of nuts." She smiled tiredly, as though the weariness of life itself sat on her shoulders. "I like to live on the edge just like the Jackal there. When I get the chance. It's the only thing that keeps me sane."

Kyle shook his head slowly. Holly's sadness was almost tangible across the space between them, her loneliness an ache that wracked his body as it did hers. What had brought so much misery to the world? Was it the Council? Or was it just people themselves?

"You want to know what happened, Kyle? Come on, you don't have all night. I get customers at the weirdest hours. Do it."

Kyle reached out to her mind. It was like a fortress, dark, towering, impenetrable. But outside the walls, there was a tiny space in which small figures moved. Seven, eight, now nine shadowy shapes closed in on one, alone in the center of a tightening ring. The light was dim, but slowly the faces grew clearer, the shapes more distinct. Six men, three women. None recognizable to Kyle—

but what he could see of them, he memorized. The shape in the middle, he knew. Alone against her attackers, Cyndi stood her ground. There was no physical contact. Kyle could not sense the psychic energy that filled the circle, could only read on his mother's face the growing horror of what she felt. Then the pain buckled her legs, her hands went to her head as she crouched there, and Kyle heard the anguished cry of her agony as her mental barriers crumbled, succumbing to the awesome power pitted against them. As the scream faded, his mother's lifeless body fell forward onto the roadway, her contorted face turned to the side, her eyes wide and staring. Kyle's view swung abruptly, and it was over. Over. His mother had died, before his eyes.

No response came, yet a fear began to grow in him. He pulled his contact back, quickly, so that when the rush of savage response took him, there would be no link for it to cross. Yet one was forged. His psychic will force leapt outwards, found once more the mind that had caused the pain. Like a whirlwind, Kyle's unconscious mind attacked the Mental walls of its assailant, tearing vast rents which could not be healed. There were counter-attacks, but they became ever weaker. The mind would succumb. It would be subservient, obedient to his will. He would draw forth all that it could give, and leave it empty. It was his for the taking. Now. Take it.

`No.'

A feeble whisper entered into his consciousness. There was no stopping his will now. He began to crush...

`No. Stop.'

A whimper, distinct, close. A part of Kyle's mind became his own again, and he could see, really see, responding to the threat of an outside danger.

Two shapes lay on the stainless slab, one a severed corpse, the other a pale, wretched creature with wide staring eyes, as dead as the other. Beside the table, arms outstretched to the limp staring creature, arms about it, holding it, pulling it tight to her breast. Gillian's tear-filled eyes turned to Kyle as she held Holly's lifeless body in her arms.

"No," she cried.

"Aaaaah...." Kyle screamed, screamed again, venting the torture and anguish he felt. And as he screamed he began once more to sense his body. The tightness in his throat, his head faintly throbbing, his fingers aching from their claw-like grip on the chair. Then he realized that the image before him had changed. His cries became gasps, whimpers of shock, relief, confusion. He vaulted out of his chair and stumbled to the table, tears blurring his sight. Holly sat slouched on the table edge as she had done before Kyle's probing—she looked drained. Kyle threw his arms about her waist, and with his face against her stomach he sobbed.

"Sorry, Kyle," Holly said softly. She rested a hand gently on the back of his head. "I figured it would be a terrible shock for you. But I thought you knew what had happened."

"Was—wasn't that." Kyle could hardly get words out. His whole body shook, and he held the woman still closer. "It was me. Couldn't con—control. Broke. Smashed. Crushed—" The vision was still with him, haunting his thoughts. "Help me, Holly. I need help. Thank the Deity you're still alive."

"Still alive?"

"I saw it. In my mind. Lashed out at you, and tore away your defense. Then—" Kyle made a great effort to hold back the sobs that threatened as the vision rose in him once again. "I annihilated your mind. I felt it happen. I saw you on the table, beside the half-man. Only you were dead."

"Kyle." Holly slid down from the table and put strong arms around his shoulders. "Shit, you got some nerve hanging onto a corpse like this, if I'm really dead. Listen, you blacked out for a second or two, after you probed me. I felt you pull back, and you never once lost control. You did great, Kyle. It was some kind of weird reaction to the probing—that's all. Seeing your mother like that, I'm not surprised you came unglued. We're just lucky it wasn't worse."

"But Gillian. She was there, beside you, trying to help you." He looked in the direction of Holly's office, but it was just as it had been before. Then he lifted his head from Holly's shoulder where it had been resting, and straightened himself. He was still shaking. "Holly, I—"

"You need a D-damned drink. That's what you need." Holly headed for her office. As she passed inside the lighting sprang to life, and Kyle could see Gillian stretched out on a black couch along one side of the room. Holly disappeared for a moment, then came back with a bottle. No glasses, just the bottle. She pulled the stopper, and held it out.

"Have a shot," she said. "It'll help."

Kyle took the bottle and poured a good measure down his throat. Fire spread across his chest and up into his mouth, slowly burning its way down into his belly. It took his mind off the vision, at least for the moment.

After a few good breaths, he took another drink. Then he passed the bottle back and waited for the flames in his abdomen to die down. "Better," he said hoarsely.

Holly swallowed a few ounces herself before she answered. "Not the best stuff, but it does the job."

For the first time Kyle noticed the bottle's label: SURGICAL ALCOHOL, it read. He smiled weakly.

"Thanks Holly," he said. "And not just for the bottle. That was like—well, like a waking nightmare. I watched my mother get murdered, slowly, in agony. Then it was as if my own brain reacted, tore across the space to you, and destroyed your mind. Like I was one of the murd—"

He stopped abruptly, and saw by the look in Holly's eyes that she understood why.

"Like you were one of the murderers yourself," she said. "That has to be it. I had at least two

people brought in here by the AF for probing on this matter. One I read clearly—the one that watched the whole murder, but wasn't involved. But the other. The other was a real scary headcase, tough as nails. The AF officer wanted me to put the finger on him for doing the job, but I couldn't. I couldn't crack his defense, though I thought I'd read something. Looks like you picked up on it."

"I was inside the head of one of the men who murdered her?" Kyle was incredulous. "Then it wasn't you that I killed. It was—" He put a hand to his forehead; he felt sick, and faint. "—it was my mother."

"Shit, Kyle. You've had one hell of a night up here." Holly led him back to the chair. "But now maybe you can understand a bit of why I hate the work I have to do. What you felt was worse because you knew the victim—or think you did. It's not the first time I've seen visions like that."

Kyle waited a moment for the wave of nausea to pass before he spoke. "But the way it ended. Holly, I opened my eyes, and I saw you. I heard Gillian speaking to me, saw her holding your body in her arms."

"You blacked out, remember? Your mind inserted its own logical ending to the murder it had just experienced. Although why it put Gillian there weeping over me, that's a real puzzler."

"She's got a lot of compassion inside her, Holly. Deep down. She was hurt by my mother's death almost more than me. They were close, but I still don't understand it. And she's got her own private pain that she keeps hidden. Sometimes, it prompts an outburst like we saw earlier. But she's not as cold as she seems."

"Neither am I, Kyle. Neither am I."

"I need your help, Holly. This Mental power scares me more than a whole army of AF. Can you help me understand it? I need to learn how to control it; how to use it. We're going to track down those animals that killed her, Holly. Gillian and I. And we'll find out why."

"Ever since I read you, Kyle, I knew I would help you. Maybe the motives are selfish—you can help me too, you know. With a mind like yours to work with me in here, I could really earn my pay. And maybe also earn a way out of this hole." She grinned down at him, the smile transforming her features. Her eyes twinkled in the orange light. "We could have some fun in this place for a change, Kyle. Wouldn't that be a D-damned switch?"

Kyle smiled back in spite of himself. He could see himself enjoying working with this crazy prober. And she was probably his only real hope of learning to understand his own powers.

There was a muffled groan from the office. Both of them turned to see Gillian slowly sitting up, her head in her hands.

"Maybe now she'll take the news a little better," Kyle said. They both laughed.

CHAPTER 11: Pupil

Kyle looked away in disgust as Holly raised the cover of the cooler wagon and hefted the woman's remains onto a table.

"Shit, Holly," he said hoarsely. "I didn't think it would be this bad."

"I warned you. Isn't my fault if you don't listen."

Kyle felt a tug at his sleeve.

"Get over here and help me," Holly said. "That's what you're here for, remember?"

He turned very slowly, trying to will his stomach into stability. Unlike the severed torso of the last corpse he'd seen Holly work on, this body was not so neat and clean. The entire frame was there, but it was in pieces. One arm still lay on the wagon, stiff and white with frost. The chest and abdomen had been pierced by hundreds of small punctures, so that it was dotted with dark frozen patches of blood. The legs were twisted and misshapen, giving the impression of a mangled doll. Half of the face was missing, leaving the cheekbone and forehead bare and whitish through the smear of reddish-black...

"What in hell happened to her?" Kyle's voice was a choked whisper. He leaned against the table for support, and felt his gut heave despite his effort to control it.

Holly slid a stool in behind him and pushed him gently down onto it. Her thin white surgical gloves left smudges of red on his grey smock. She looked unearthly as she stood there in front of him, her dark goggles making her eyes appear as black pits in her face.

Kyle felt light-headed, as though reality had suddenly stepped out and left him in some weird psychedelic dream. He fumbled his own goggles off his face, and found the new purple-blue vision still less real than the other.

"Get a grip, Kyle." Holly was shaking him, her delicately-drawn features intense and close.

"This is the easiest kind, once you get over the shock. They don't fight back—at least, not any more."

Kyle grasped her tightly by the shoulders and focussed on her face.

'Keep your eyes on me, and don't look anywhere else—not yet.'

Holly pulled the goggles back down over his eyes, and the colors suddenly returned to their normal shades. He forced himself to relax. A cool trickle ran down the bridge of his nose and dripped across his lips.

"That's better. Don't look yet if it's so bad for you." Holly shook her head. "A shit-hot doctor you'll never make, Kyle."

"Never said I would."

"Right. And neither did I." She chuckled. "So, you want to know what happened to this woman here. She's mangled pretty bad. I'd say probably stabbed to death by some weird asshole with a thing against women, then thrown off a tall building." She glanced over her shoulder briefly, and turned back. "Then again, maybe she wouldn't have completely lost the arm if it had been like that. Maybe—"

"Holly, please." Kyle risked a brief glance himself. The sight made him want to weep. "What really did happen to her?"

Holly turned Kyle's head so he faced her, and held it that way as she spoke. "If they knew, Kyle, they wouldn't have brought her to me. That's what we're here for. To find out."

Kyle looked up at her for a long moment. "I don't have to look at her, do I?"

"Deity's eyes, Kyle." Holly gave an exasperated snort. She shook her head slowly as she turned away and walked over to the instrument cabinet beside the occupied table. "You've got worse ahead of you than the sight of some poor bitch that got herself stiffed. It's cold and its cruel, but shit, its my fucking job. If you're here to learn something about what you can do with your mind, then let's get to work. Otherwise, you're out of here."

"Sorry, Holly. I didn't mean it as an insult."

"And I didn't take it as one. But I said I'd help you, and I can't get very far without taking you inside someone's head." She pointed at the mangled lump on the table. "Believe me, I can teach you things much better when there's no resistance. And that thing there will offer none."

"I'm willing to try. Just don't give me any sudden shocks—I don't know what might happen if I freak out again."

"Let's do it."

Holly pulled another stool close to the table and perched there, legs tucked up under her. She indicated a spot beside her. "Get closer. Long range is fine when you know what you're doing."

Kyle pulled his stool in, forcing himself to look at their intended interrogation victim. It wasn't

so bad now that he'd consciously identified the body as merely a task to tackle, rather than the remains of a person who had once lived and breathed. He looked at Holly. "What now?"

"Easier for both of us if we keep contact," she said. Her bare hand gripped his wrist, warm against the clammy coolness of his skin. "Remember how you scanned the scene in my head last time." The grip tightened on his wrist as Kyle recoiled. "It won't be the same, trust me. Reach out to my mind, and you'll find me there. I'll forge the link to her, and I'll lead you through to find what we need. Let me guide you, Kyle. So long as you don't allow your mind to wander off, you'll be fine. Concentration and focus. Remember that."

Kyle nodded. He felt trapped, an unwilling participant in an activity he neither wanted nor relished. Yet he knew he must learn. He looked steadily across at Holly, and slowly let his mind reach out to her.

The sensation was strange. He could still see her sitting there on the stool beside him, visually, in the real world, yet he also stood in a sunlit garden, blinking at the brightness, breathing in the fragrances of rose and lavender. Kneeling amongst the beautiful colored flowers was Holly, smiling happily as she looked about her. She wore a plain yellow and white knee-length dress, close-fitting and sheer.

Kyle struggled with the conflicting images, the real and the imagined, but quickly found he could separate the two scenes in his head. Suddenly, he understood what Holly had done. He smiled at her as she knelt there among the flowers, and she smiled back.

'Figured it out, did you Kyle?' She gestured around her, pointed at two small blue and red birds that flew past, warbling as they went. 'How do you like my other-world?'

Kyle walked over and helped her to her feet. 'Nice trick, Holly.' He stood for a moment in surprise at his own voice. It sounded deeper than he remembered it. He laughed. 'This is fantastic. I feel like I could face almost anything in here.'

'Keep that thought,' she said. 'But for now, let me get you used to this place. I chose this setting to make the transition easier, and to help you relax. Come walk with me. I'll show you what you can do.'

She took him by the arm and led him through an archway of red and pink roses, fragrant with blossom, then across a small green lawn to the edge of a trickling stream. She pointed into the water. 'Look there. A fish.'

Kyle looked where she pointed. At first he saw nothing. Then a sudden movement caught his eye, and he picked out a tiny golden fish swimming just beneath the surface.

'What kind of fish is it, Kyle?' Holly pulled him down closer to the water. 'The merwoks are blue and have a three-pronged tail and a small dorsal fin. But the andrils are red with a big round nose and little feet on the end of their fins. They run along the bottom.'

As Holly spoke, Kyle realized that the form of the fish seemed to change to match her words, turning first blue and dainty, then red and ridiculous. He laughed at the fat fish-shape as it waddled away across the bottom of the stream.

‘Try it, Kyle. This is my world here, but you're linked to me. And I've let you in of my own free will. If you want something to be, it is.’

Kyle tried it. He noticed that there was no bridge across the stream, although it was narrow enough for them to easily step to the other side. He imagined one in front of them, plain wood, wide and graceful, arcing up gently over the water. It appeared. He gave it handrails and painted it brown. Then red. Green. He withered it, made it rickety and broken with age; restored it, wrought it anew of shining stainless, built a massive superstructure above it; then allowed it to slowly fade away.

‘Holly, this is D-damned amazing.’ Kyle looked down at his own clothes, the same coveralls he wore in the real world. They took new shape as he watched, and he was dressed in a pair of dark green leather pants, with a gray cotton shirt and low-cut white walking shoes. He looked up at Holly again. ‘Can I do this by myself, without you? I mean in my own mind?’

‘Easy,’ she replied. ‘But take this one step at a time. For now, you're here. Get used to the feel of it. It's real, but not real. You can shape things to your liking, but within certain limits.’ She favored him with a sidelong glance. ‘And don't get any crude ideas. You can imagine what you like, but what you see is what you imagine. Not what's really there.’

Kyle laughed again. He hadn't even thought of that, but now that she had mentioned it....

Holly found a comfortable spot beside the stream, with a small outcropping of turf to cushion her head. She lay back and watched as Kyle investigated the world she had created. He was amazed at the level of detail that could be conjured up. When he pulled a blade of grass up from the ground, small lumps of earth came with it. If he peered closer, he could see tiny creatures moving about in the soil. Yet if he willed it, he could make them disappear. He tested this new concept on other things. The arbor faded from sight, and a bird bath appeared in its place. The grass about him grew long and shaggy, and then stiff and tall, like corn stalks, shutting off his view of the stream and Holly. He reversed the transformation, and smiled at Holly's quizzical expression.

‘Just testing my bounds,’ he called.

‘You have the limits I set for you. For the present, I like the garden, so don't try to get rid of it. Let's not get into a contest of wills in your first lesson.’ She grinned broadly. ‘Let me know when you're ready. I'm going to take a nap.’

‘What about time, Holly?’ Kyle said. ‘How long can we take in here? What happens to—to us—while we're doing this?’

‘Take as long as you want, Kyle. Things happen much faster in the mind than in the flesh. My guess is, your whole first lesson should last less than five minutes—real time.’

‘And what about sleep, and injury? What do they really represent, if they happen in here?’

‘Sleep gives your conscious brain a break. Subconsciously, you're still active or you wouldn't still be here. That's if you're inside someone else's head, like now. Injuries will weaken your link, eventually break it. I've never seen any real damage come from a trip like this, not if the prober is prepared. Same goes for the host mind. Usually.’

She returned Kyle's quick look. ‘That was a different thing, Kyle. The attackers forced themselves into your mother's mind. It would be like you breaking down the walls you saw when I showed you that scene—not like the first time you probed me. Shit, you caught me by surprise that time. I had no chance to put up any defense.’

‘Maybe she didn't get a chance either.’

‘I don't think so. From what I saw, she resisted them as long as she could. But every Mental wall has a weakness, Kyle. The defending mind has to control the wall from some location, has to be tied into it. If that point can be found, a reasonably strong attack can break through.’ She paused for a moment, and watched a pair of gentle orange and red butterflies flutter over her head. ‘I don't think that's how it happened though. For her, I think it was just exhaustion. They beat on her long enough that she couldn't keep up her defense. Nobody can keep a wall up forever.’

‘I'm going to learn how to do it, Holly. And you're going to teach me.’

Holly looked up at him. ‘I said I would—I will. And it sounds like you're ready to try your first real probing job. Let's move out.’

She rose from her place on the bank, and strode confidently towards him. As she approached, her clothing flickered strangely, as though tiny sparks of electricity were running erratically up and down her body. When it settled, she wore her customary coveralls, as she did in her lab. Only the dark goggles were missing. ‘Work is work, Kyle. I feel stronger when I wear the uniform.’

Kyle nodded. He didn't believe her. It was hard to imagine anything so small as one's own apparel in this internalized world having any effect on events. There was another reason. Superstition, perhaps? But, derived from what? He took Holly's proffered arm and followed her through the flowers, towards a shiny polished steel gate that had appeared on one side of the garden. Through the gate he saw only darkness. A sudden chill crept up his spine.

‘Holly—you haven't told me what to expect,’ he said.

Holly was leading him steadily closer to the gate, and still there was only blackness beyond. Kyle pulled at her arm, and she stopped.

‘At least give me some idea so I'll know what to do.’

‘I told you before we started,’ she said, turning to face him. ‘Let me lead you. Keep a hand on my arm. And focus on what we're trying to do. That's all you need to know for now. Don't try to interact with what you see. Stay an observer only, and let me do all the work. I'm the teacher,

remember?'

'But what will we find in there? You must have some idea. I need to be prepared.'

'This is a dead mind, Kyle. The only things left now will be the strongest mental impressions that woman ever experienced. Usually, death leaves a strong impression. And it stands out clearly, being the most recent. So we look for the strongest, clearest image, and that should be our target.'

'But how is anything left in there? Hasn't she been dead for a while?'

'Miracle of modern science. Cool the body, and the internal energy patterns stored in the brain that represent memory and active thought dissipate more slowly. Cool the body enough, and you can keep images alive for years. You just have to get to the body soon enough after it's dead, get it cooled quick. Longest I've ever seen it work is twenty four hours after death—then only scraps and fragments were left.' She nodded her head in the direction of the gate. 'This one was iced, they guess, within three hours of her end. Should be pretty lively in there. So stay behind me, and let me do the work.'

She turned and started through the gate. Kyle kept his grip on her arm, his fingers already aching from the tension. Or so he felt them to be. For how could any of this seem real enough to follow the normal rules of expectation? Kyle realized he had answered his own question. Expectation. His mind placed an expected interpretation, learned from physical experience, on anything he encountered. He filed that.

'Behind me, Kyle.' Holly pushed back on the arm Kyle was holding, forcing him behind her. He repositioned his grip onto her shoulder, and peered about him.

Everything was dark, eerily so. They were walking in empty, black space, yet he did not feel himself floating. If anything, he felt heavier, as if the darkness were dense and weighed them down.

'What are we seeing?' Kyle whispered the words in Holly's ear, yet they seemed to boom loud all around him. He expected to see shapes materialize within the shadows, and leap out from all directions. 'Holly, what's happening?'

'It's the transition region. Most of this brain will be like this. Only the strong images are left. Remember?'

'Right.'

They walked. Holly's path followed no discernible pattern. Occasionally, Kyle glimpsed hazy colors and drifting shapes in the distance, but Holly steered neatly around them. In one, he made out the face of a man, dim but clear, eyes closed, face straining with effort—no, contorted with pain. Suddenly, a sensation of fulfillment flowed into him, and he recognized the scene. Not pain, after all. Yet he had felt, even at this remote distance—not the man's sensations, but....

'Holly. Shit, Holly, did you feel that?'

'Distantly. Don't get too worked up over it, Kyle. Some really hot, heavy sex this lady had in

her time.' She stopped and looked back at him. 'You felt it?'

'Felt different, but I knew what it was. Not like it is for—well, when—'

'Don't get coy on me, kid. That memory was a long way off. How in hell did you pick up the sensations, without me helping you focus? Shit, it took me years to learn to read image sensations from that range.' She looked pensive. 'How much did you see of the image?'

'A man's face. I could see the features clearly, but I thought it was twisted in pain until I felt—'

'Did you see faces or scenes clearly in any of the other images we've passed so far? The factory floor? The new apartment? Any of that?'

'I don't know what you're talking about. All I saw before this was a few colors and a bit of movement.'

'So how come you pick up on the first big sex scene, like it was right next door?'

Kyle felt embarrassed. He forgot where they were, and looked away from Holly into the darkness. Distantly, without warning, he heard a shout. There were faces pressing in on him, so close he could see the color of their eyes, smell the odor of their bodies, feel the warmth of their flesh. Screams came from all sides. He was trapped, unable to free himself from the moving mass, carried along by the panicked crowd, his own throat aching with the screams, screams added to screams. There was a massive crack behind him, and he turned to see one of the vast steel beams which supported the high ceiling drop, slowly, smoke wreathed about it, orange flames licking the gaping hole it had left, machinery following it down in a slow dance of death. The beam landed with a resounding, sickening thud, and agonized howls of pain from the injured survivors filled his ears. The throng pressed forward, panic wilder now, chaos carrying him forward until he stumbled and fell, others falling on top of him, crushing and suffocating....

'KYLE!'

There was a sharp slap against his cheek, and the pressure on his crushed body seemed to ease. He found a face in the darkness, where his forehead was pressed against the wood of the floor.

'Shit, Kyle, break out of it.'

He saw her clearly now, a woman dressed in drab green, a loose-fitting smock. For a moment, he did not know her.

'Holly,' he said at last.

'Kid, get back here. How the fuck did you reach out like that? Look into my eyes, Kyle. Focus. Concentrate on me. Get out of there.'

He was back. He felt exhausted and weak, as though he had just swum for miles against a strong current.

'I'm sorry, Holly. I—'

'You're D-damned dangerous is what you are. How can I protect you from an image I can't even

see yet? That scene you found was too far ahead for me to sense. I had to drag you along in the direction you were looking until I could pick it up and reach you.'

'All I did was look over your shoulder, and....' Kyle realized as he said it what had happened. 'I took my mind off what I was doing. I let my concentration go. Holly, I thought I was going to be crushed.'

'Lesson number one. For you, a big fucking lesson. Keep your mind on your task.' There was anger in her face, and Kyle knew he deserved it.

'I would have got out, without your help. Wouldn't I?'

'You would have come through it. But the woman survived that one too. And this stuff isn't an exact science. What the long term effects are on someone who probes too often and too deeply into other people's traumatic experiences, nobody knows. Or maybe you can see some of the effects. Look what it's done to me.'

'If it made you like you are, it can't be all bad.' It came out, without hesitation, and without any thought. Kyle looked at Holly in surprise.

'Lesson number two, Kyle. In here, it's hard to control subconscious thoughts. Your subconscious mind plays a big part in what goes on—it responds automatically to some situations. Usually, that's good.' She smiled at him, a wily grin. 'Thanks for the compliment. Nice to know I'm appreciated.'

Kyle nodded. 'I'll try to keep my thoughts in check. And keep my focus.'

'It's going to be a tough job training you, Kyle. I'd like to demonstrate first, and let you try things second. But unless you can keep yourself in line, I'm going to be pulling you out of the fire all the time. Literally. You're hard to keep up with.'

'I think I know. I'll be good for the rest of the lesson.' He turned her round slowly and resumed his place behind her, his hands on her shoulders. 'Lead on.'

Holly moved. Kyle looked straight ahead, kept his eyes and mind focussed on her. He saw no more long-range images.

'We found it.'

Holly turned to look back at him, and held his gaze. 'I scanned it. There's a bridge, or a walkway, some elevated path. A few people walking. A flash of light, a weapon firing I guess. Then she's hit. She falls from the walkway. Last image is the start of the fall. We know what happened when she hit the ground.'

'Do you want me to look?'

'That's part of what you're here for, Kyle. Remember, this is the woman's death. It doesn't come more intense than this. I'm going to watch your back, sort of shield you from the shock wave when the pain hits her. Up close, it might knock you off balance again. And anyway, I need to take a

closer look myself. We want to try and figure out who killed her.'

Kyle didn't wait for further prompting. He looked in the direction Holly indicated, but kept one eye always on her. He found that it was easy to do. Whatever monitoring Holly was doing, it had an effect on his individual exposure to the scene.

He was there. Walking on a skywalk, between two buildings. The one he was approaching was a factory, very big, at least thirty floors. The walkway was three or four floors above ground level, open to the air, with chest-high railings along the edges. He passed several people going the other way, some of whom nodded greeting. Five meters now to the end of the walkway. A man was coming towards him. He wore a uniform, like but unlike the AF. Blue, but lighter in shade. Kyle wondered at it. Suddenly the man's expression became agitated. He looked wildly about him, and then seemed to see Kyle for the first time. With a tremendous leap, he surged forward to a position directly beside Kyle. At the same time, Kyle caught a glimpse of a winking light below and to the right, just out of the corner of his eye.

'Prepare, Kyle. Prepare!'

Kyle was ready when the blow came, but the intensity of the pain was agonizing. Like a thousand white-hot needles piercing his chest at once. For an instant, it was there. Then it suddenly receded, as if muffled.

'The assassin, Kyle. Look for the killer as you fall. I'll block the pain.'

There was a slow, agonizing moment of imbalance, as his body teetered on the brink of the walkway. The railing had been shattered by the blast. Below, people walked on the street, oblivious to the scene above their heads. Then he began to fall. He felt the fear of falling to his death, but stayed objective. It was not his death, but another's. As the doomed body tumbled in space he searched the ground through those dead eyes, looking for a face, one face that was turned towards him. And he found it, at last. Memorized it. Then the scene went black.

'We're out of here, kid. Let's move.'

Holly led him, pulling him along, and they were back in her garden. It seemed to happen in a second, as though they had never gone further than a step beyond the dark gate. When he turned to her, she was fading, as was the garden around her. He felt a stiffness in his body, and a sensation of mild pain in his left wrist. Then he was sitting on his stool, back in Holly's lab, with her freshly-made fingermarks on his arm. Holly looked at him and smiled.

"So how did it feel, Kyle? Your first proper voyeuristic journey? Took in one hell of a lot in a single five minute session, if you ask me."

"Five minutes?" Kyle was incredulous. It had seemed like forever. "How much time did we actually spend in the woman's mind?"

"I figure maybe thirty seconds or so. Give or take. On an unresisting subject, I can usually do a

scan in a few seconds. I slowed the pace for you—and because of you, too. You have a D-damned dangerous habit of drifting off."

"Not on purpose." Kyle sighed, and took a long look at Holly. She didn't look the least bit drained after their ordeal. If anything she seemed more rested and relaxed than when they'd started. He shook his head and sighed again. With time maybe he could be so cool about this stuff. He smiled at her. "How did we do?"

"I'd say pretty good. I got the guy on the walkway down. We'll probably find his face in the AF records somewhere. What about the assassin?"

Kyle raised a hand to his temple and pointed. "In here. I think. At the last second, before she blacked out. The only face looking up. I've got it set in stone."

"Good. Looks like an interesting case. Too bad she happened to be on the walkway at the wrong time. A victim of circumstance."

"What do you mean? The volley was meant for that guy in blue?"

"Had to be. Didn't you recognize the uniform? Reese Syndicate. Top executive, by the rank insignia. Maybe even an operative. A likely target for assassination if I ever saw one."

Kyle frowned. "Who would want to kill a corporate executive?"

"Any other corporation that might feel threatened? Who cares. It just fits. Nobody would be after this woman. All the scenes I scanned in her mind were as harmless and common as they come." Holly got up from her stool. "Listen Kyle. You did great, for the first probe. I guess I was a bit careless not watching you more closely, after what I saw on my first visit to your mind. You're a bit out of my league when it comes to power. But you have to learn to keep that in check—that's **your** job."

She hauled the slightly-softening body off the slab towards the cooler wagon. "Give me a hand here," she said.

Kyle pulled on the thin, insulated gloves she had given him earlier, and helped to move the corpse back onto the wagon. Then Holly closed the lid and cycled the lock. There was a hissing sound, and the wagon began to hum slightly as the cooling system took over its task.

"Enough for you on the first night. You better get back, or the Jackal will start thinking I've turned you in." Holly smiled at him, but Kyle sensed there was more to the comment than she had put into words.

"She let me come, Holly. Isn't that sign enough that she trusts you?"

"Like shit she does. I know her. It'll take a lot more than just your convincing to really make her trust me."

"Why?"

Holly turned steely eyes on him. She held his gaze until he looked away. "Ask her, Kyle.

Maybe she'll tell you." She peeled off her gloves and threw them down on the recently vacated table. "Now go home and get some rest. You'll need it for tomorrow night's work—and by the end of the week, I'm going to have you doing headcases."

CHAPTER 12: A Spark in the Ashes

The sighing hum of the decrepit elevator signalled its arrival. Kyle pulled himself clumsily up from the couch, then ducked into the alcove beside the door. He held his breath and waited.

There was a soft creak from the wooden floorboards in the hall, then the scrape of a pass card as it slid against the access slot. Kyle heard the secondary locks click into place—a false card. An indicator lamp in the alcove told Kyle that Gillian's backup security system had snapped on, setting up an intricate grid of infrared lasers that criss-crossed the entry just outside the door. No shriek of pain came. Instead, there was a hissing sound, as of escaping gas, followed by a faint crack like breaking bone. Kyle could smell something. Not good.

He moved quickly out of the alcove and turned right, almost tripping over the bookshelf against the wall. Through the door into the kitchen, over to the window. He eased open the latch, and swung the big single pane of glass inward against the wall. Outside air flooded into the room, and the smell faded.

From the entry door he could hear new sounds, metallic clicking, hollow, in short staccato bursts. Then the familiar 'thunk' of the door latch as the access system cycled. Still no cries of pain, no footsteps. Kyle felt the tingle of fear run down his spine, and he tucked himself into the corner behind the refrigeration unit, out of sight.

'Think, Kyle. Think. What did Gillian teach you? Balance. That was the key. If you keep yours and throw off your opponent....'

A breath of air, feather light, touched his face. A soft 'thud' came from his left, and he saw the shaft of a dart protruding from the frame of the open window. His breath was coming in noisy, rapid gasps.

'Shit. I'm not doing anything right.'

He could sense the panic there, ready to take over.

'Focus on your target. Put your mind in command, not your emotions. Then let your body react.'

He visualized the intruder, moving stealthily through the kitchen, coming towards him. He could almost see him, hugging the wall, soundless, poised. Nearly there, ready to spring. Kyle readied himself, set his feet, braced an arm against the wall behind him. Now.

He launched himself cleanly, swinging down with his right arm and sending a small knife spinning from the black-gloved hand that held it. The leap brought him up hard against the cooking unit, and he swung clumsily about, using it as a brace. A black-clad leg arced up towards him and caught him a glancing blow across the face. He staggered, and a fist struck his temple, sending a shower of stars out across the room. His legs buckled.

'No! I won't let it happen again.'

He willed his body rigid, and his feet stayed under him. The room stopped spinning for a moment, and he reacted to the next blow. His left arm took the main force of the kick, deflecting it wide of his head. With his right arm he grasped at the retreating leg, but it moved like lightning. The black figure darted in closer and levelled two brutal punches at Kyle's neck and face. Kyle partially deflected them, taking more damage to the shoulders and the side of his head.

'In close now. Block and punch. Balance.'

Kyle swung his head right, blocked the blow from his opponent's left arm, and scored a feeble shoulder hit with his right. He kept his balance, tried to draw his arm back quickly from the punch. But his assailant grasped the arm and twisted, spun, rolled forward. Kyle flew up and over, his arm acting as a lever as he was thrown across the room.

He landed properly, on his side, his left arm and leg slapping the plastic floor together to break the impact of the fall. Then he rolled to the left, ignoring the pain, and turned. His right arm moved up to block, too slow. The kick came in, a smooth graceful arc, a streak of black against the dull white of the kitchen walls. Across his shoulder, touching his jaw, moving his head sideways....

But the full impact never came. The deadly sweep stopped there, the leather-clad foot rough against his jaw, Kyle's neck braced for the killing snap that would spin it through its final twist. For a long moment neither combatant moved.

"Better." The black form lowered its leg, and Kyle watched as Gillian pulled the hood from her head. "Much better."

It took Kyle a few seconds to find his voice.

"What—what in hell do you think you're trying to do?" Kyle groaned with pain as he rubbed his bruised body. "You almost killed me. You crazy bitch, you almost killed me."

"Cut the crap, Kyle," Gillian said. "You know D-damned well I wouldn't have killed you. That

last kick wasn't the only chance I had to knock your head off. You'd have been dead with the first one if I'd been out for blood."

"Some consolation."

"I'm going to give you some skills to help you defend yourself. If you don't like the way I teach, complain to the AF." She smiled at him. "Consider this your first test."

"Great." He groaned again as he rubbed his right temple with an aching arm. "If this is my first test, what happens in the final exam?"

Gillian had stripped off the black body suit, and now wore her regulation lab coveralls, gray with blue trim, zippered down the sides. Her job value and rating in green and red lettering, respectively, on her left lapel. V80, R80. She stowed the black suit in a leg pocket of her coverall, and walked to the refrigeration unit. "What's for dinner, Kyle?"

Kyle snorted and stalked out. He went into the living area, and noticed that the entry door had been carefully closed and locked. Whatever Gillian had done getting in, she didn't seem to have damaged anything. He crossed to the window side of the room, and went out the door into the hall. The late afternoon sun shed a yellowish-orange light across the passage, almost hard on the eyes. It made him think of Holly.

"Shit, Gillian," he muttered. "You've got one nasty way of asserting yourself."

He walked past the picture on the wall, the one he could never look at. It had been taken eight years ago, Gillian had told him. In the early days at the Snow, when things had been happier and easier. Kyle thought both Gillian and Cyndi looked so bright and relaxed, so happy together. It made him hurt too much to look at it.

He took the second door on the left, his room for the past nine days. Already it had taken on a sense of home, an air of refuge. But there was nothing here that was his except the clothes he wore. He threw himself on the bed. Suzanne style.

Now her face was in his mind, her smile. Her laughter rang in his ears, his arm tingled at the touch of her hand. He thumped his fists on the bed and against the wall. Then he just lay there, nursing his aches, rubbing gently at his bruised arms. Thinking of Suzanne.

"What's the deal, Kyle?"

Gillian stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the golden light streaming through the windows behind her. It was like a visitation, like the stories he'd heard at the Deity Temple of angels appearing to pass on the Deity's message to His flock.

"Leave me alone. Just leave me alone."

"I pulled out some mock tuna sandwiches and a beer for you. You better eat. Tonight's your big night with Crypto, remember?"

"I feel like shit," Kyle said. "You think you can bully me into believing you faked that break-in

just to help train me?" He sat up and glared at her. "Gillian, you're still pissed with me for this whole thing with Holly, and you can't bring yourself to admit it."

"Training with her is a stupid risk, Kyle," Gillian replied. "She's publicly available. The AF are always in and out of the place. And she's on the edge. Almost cracked when we first went to see her, and probably even worse now she's got the burden of you on her mind, too. You're going to get yourself caught again, this time by someone who won't be easy on you." She paused, shifted her weight onto one foot as she leaned against the door frame. "And I might not be able to get you back again."

"What do you really care? We don't even know who's trying to find me. If we at least knew that, maybe we'd be able to do something about it."

"We don't know yet. It won't be long, though. Those images I digitized from your mind last week have been through most of the Snow records. If there's no match, we'll access the AF special security files. Somewhere, they'll show up. Then we'll have somewhere to start."

Kyle folded his arms across his chest and studied the wall.

Why in hell am I so screwed up? Why can't I just focus on the job at hand, and do it?

He lay back on the bed again, not looking at Gillian.

"OK, Kyle, give me a break already."

Kyle heard Gillian move into the room, and sit down on the bed.

"You did well this afternoon," she said. "Not too many pupils could have done so well after only a week of training."

She hesitated. Kyle could sense the wave of suppressed pride and, yes, even affection. It made him turn and look at her.

"I'm proud of you," she said at last.

She got to her feet and turned to leave, but Kyle grabbed her arm. He held it firmly, pulling her round to face him again.

"That's all I needed, Gillian," he said. "To know that someone gives a shit about me. That's all."

Slowly, gently, she pulled her arm free of his grasp. "Yeah, well—now you know." Her voice was flat, defeated. Before Kyle could reply, she had disappeared down the hallway. The late afternoon glow seemed to fade with her footsteps.

Kyle felt a new vigor flowing through him, as if he had just had a spiritual injection which restored both faith and purpose. He crossed to the half-closet that contained his meagre collection of clothing and pulled out the coveralls Holly had supplied for him. Standard issue, V30 R35. A promotion from his delivery job. And tonight was his big trial, as Gillian had said. Two tests in one day. He dressed quickly and headed to the kitchen.

"Listen, Kyle. I don't want you trying this without me. Crypto could screw up if things get tricky."

Kyle looked out the window of the speeder as he guided it along the secondary hoverway above Lees Street. He smiled. "I can't believe you're nervous, Gillian. Holly's got everything under control. All I have to do is read the surface thoughts. No special details, nothing deep. I've done it enough times on all kinds of people, even you." He glanced briefly at her, saw the set expression on her face. "Holly says this guy tonight is just a simple headcase. No real power, just weak Command and a bit of Presence. It'll be easy."

He dropped the speeder down to street level and turned right at Governor's Court. The alley that led to the covered parking area loomed on his left, and he swung into it. The steering column almost slipped from his hands, and he wiped the sweat from them on his coverall.

'Sure. It'll be easy.'

He pulled into the darkened lot and set the speeder down beside an old Chevrolet ground car that must have been there since the ban of 2017. It seemed to have grown into the earth. He looked at Gillian.

"Holly can look after me. If I get into trouble, she can handle it."

"Bullshit. Maybe she can look after herself, but not you as well. Remember, the AF use special escort sometimes for headcases."

"She's got that covered. The escort are required to wait in the entry chamber while the examination is done. If they do get wind of something, she'll seal the place and knock them out. She's had practice mixing up people's recent memories. Once they're unconscious, she'll wipe out the memory of the incident."

"She told you all this?" Gillian sounded incredulous.

"Not all of it. Some I read from her during one of our sessions." Kyle freed the catch on his crash belt and let it snap back into its housing. He reached for the door cycle switch.

"Wait." Gillian used mild Command, and held his arm. "What the hell am I arguing with you for? Crypto's domain or not, I'm staying for this session. I don't give a shit what either of you says—I don't trust her. And you still need watching."

"You know Gillian," Kyle said, "you're beginning to sound like my DT guardians. Like a D-damned mother hen. My mother never worried about me being able to look after myself. What's got into you?"

"Your mother kept you secret. Hidden away, so nobody knew who you were. Seems like she did a pretty good job, up until a few weeks ago. Now look where she is." Gillian glared at him.

"Whatever you think, Kyle, you're a D-damned neophyte. You may have a lot of power and potential, but right now it's not good for shit. And I'm responsible for you—like it or not."

Kyle sat looking at her for a moment before he answered. "OK. I'll talk to Holly. But—"

"The hell with the butts." Gillian flipped off her belt and hit her door cycle switch. "Come on, let's go."

They left the speeder sealed, with perimeter defenses activated. Gillian insisted. Kyle led the way up into the old building, two down from the one housing Holly's lab. Holly had shown him this route, a hidden approach to the lab that came out in her office. This way, he would never encounter any clients he did not want to meet.

Five minutes later, Kyle tapped the recessed button that controlled the escape hatch into Holly's office. The door slid silently back, opening onto darkness.

"Wait here," he whispered.

"Fat fucking chance."

Kyle sighed in exasperation. He allowed Gillian to put a hand on his shoulder, and they moved through the blackness together. Holly had installed a light-tight perimeter round the back part of her office, the area behind the gas screen she had shut on Gillian. It was her last defense against pursuit. In total darkness, nobody following her could see where her escape hole was.

They emerged quietly from the rear office, into the familiar purplish glow of the lab lights. There were voices. Gillian pulled Kyle quickly to the wall beside the door leading to the lab. She peered cautiously out into the room beyond.

"What's going—"

Kyle's whisper was cut short as Gillian clamped a hand across his mouth. Her eyes locked on his, intense, compelling. Kyle nodded slightly, signifying understanding. Gillian removed her hand slowly, then spoke softly directly into his ear.

"Next time you don't trust me, I'll let you walk into the trap by yourself." She gestured to the door. "Your friend Crypto's got herself some real nice company, Kyle. Keep low, and don't make a sound."

Kyle moved past her to the door and carefully edged one eye around the door frame. The lab seemed bright compared to the relative darkness of the office. At first he saw only the now-familiar shapes of the twelve examination tables, the cabinets, the instrument racks. Only two of the tables were occupied, both with full-size bodies. Then he noticed that the main entry doors were open. Not just temporarily, but jammed that way. The same went for the rear entrance, the one he and Gillian had used on their first visit. Even the storage room door was ajar.

Voices came from just outside the storage room. Two figures crouched in the shadows, not quite hidden from Kyle's viewing angle. A man and a woman. The woman was tall and solid,

wearing AF colors, and carrying her gun at the ready. The man—the man was Ice-Eyes.

Kyle stifled the gasp that sprang to his lips. Feverishly, he searched the room more carefully again, noticing the AF guards standing against the wall near the main entrance, more by the rear. He scanned the room a third time. Where was she? Where was Holly?

Then a dreadful thought crossed his mind, and he stared hard at the body lying on the table near Ice-Eyes and his companion. A slim figure. Tousled blond hair. The light reflected brightly from a wavering line of blackish liquid that streamed down the side of the table. A hand clamped over his mouth from behind and propelled him backward. Gillian's voice hissed in his ear.

"We're getting the fuck out of here. Now."

The Command washed over him, but he shut it out. Rage flared within him.

"No fucking way," he whispered. "Not without her. And this time, Ice-Eyes is a dead man."

CHAPTER 13: Reason

Kyle wrenched himself free of Gillian's grasp and strode towards the door. In his mind he saw only his enemy, Ice-Eyes lying half-dead on the floor, fear and pain on the hated face, Kyle's brutal kicks pounding his chest and head; grunts and moans of agony, distorted pleas for mercy issuing from the crushed and misshapen mouth.

Almost to the door now, Kyle's body quivered with barely-suppressed emotion, a spontaneous battle cry rising in his throat, demanding release....

"Stop!"

The word was a single sibilant syllable that wrapped itself about him like a clinging web. All his senses shut down. For a moment, abject panic seized him. Yet he saw in that instant the nature of his own folly. Ice-Eyes trap. The bait to draw him out, to throw him into a fury which would divert his Mental energy, leave him open to attack. He had been caught.

His mind raced wildly inside its isolated cocoon, seeking a way out. Holly had shown him what he could do. It was just like the Mental wall, black and impenetrable, apparently unbreachable, yet always with a weakness. The skill was to find that weakness, the tie-in point to the controlling mind. He let his inner thoughts rove across the surface of his mental cell, as fast as he dared, scanning as he had been taught.

The vastness, the infinite convoluted curvature disoriented him. He was up against a skilled mind. A knot of fear grew steadily in his gut, but he shut it out of his thoughts. He couldn't give in, had to break out in time. It was there, it had to be. A wrinkle, a tiny blemish, a vague—there! Shifting, weaving skilfully across the surface, changing form as it went.

He tried to follow it, to keep up, to focus his stifled psychic force on the elusive target. Too fast it moved, never fixed, never weak enough in any one place to allow penetration. He withdrew and

watched, cowering within himself, hope fading as fear grew. And he waited.

Suddenly, the pattern changed. A great rent appeared where the barrier had been solid. Kyle marshalled his will and sprang for the gap, desperate now, not knowing what would be beyond. And as he did so the wall fell away, dissolving as abruptly as it had come. He saw blackness.

"Where am I?" he said quietly.

He flailed his arms wildly about him, seeking a target. So he could still move. He was not tied down, or held by some invisible field. Anger, fear, and frustration fought within him. "A cell? You put me in a cell again, you slimy piece of shit?"

"Cut the drama, Kyle. At least let me catch my breath in peace."

"Gillian? How—"

"You're safe, at least for the moment. But only if you keep the D-damned noise down. So sit still and shut up. You think it's easy to keep you in line?"

Realization slowly dawned on Kyle. "It was you. The trap. I thought Ice-Eyes had nailed—"

"Damned well would have if I hadn't got you first. And you know how much effort it takes to keep up a Wall, lug your body about, and search for the exit in the pitch black—and still try to keep quiet?"

"How long was I out for?"

"Ten minutes, maybe longer. And you kept tracking me through the Wall the whole fucking time. That bitch of a Crypto's been teaching you—"

"Holly!"

He saw her again in his mind as she lay on the cold slab of stainless. "Gillian, where is she? You didn't just leave her?"

"I thought you'd at least have figured that far, Kyle. Ice-Eyes' trap was real. If I hadn't pulled you out of there by force, he'd have you by now. My guess is he'd do a job on your brain this time that'd leave you ready for one of Crypto's tables. No, he wouldn't kill you. Just leave you heavily tenderized, ready for whoever's really after you. Now make yourself useful and let's figure a way out of this mess."

Kyle fumbled in his coverall pockets for the small pen flash Holly had given him. He switched the setting to normal light, and shone the beam about him. Gillian sat with her back to the corridor wall, her head resting against the warped, crumbling plasterboard. He aimed the light directly into her eyes as he crossed to stand over her.

"Gillian, I don't understand you," he said. "You're either so screwed up you can't think straight, or you're really coming unhinged. On one side you work for the Snow, trying to subvert the Council, supporting individual rights and freedoms, and on the other you turn your back on a woman who needs your help. You keep me alive because you feel an obligation to my mother. Well

fuck that! I can do just fine without you, and if I get myself killed trying to do what I think is right, at least I made the effort. I'm not going to walk away from Holly, after what she's done to help me. And I can D-damned well do without your kind of help."

He turned and started back down the corridor, heading for Holly's lab.

"I'm not going to try and stop you again, Kyle." Gillian sounded tired and deflated. "But you're a complete fool if you go back in there. If we're lucky, and we do things right, they won't find us here. And if you insist, I'll help you try getting Crypto out when Ice-Eyes leaves."

Kyle stopped where he was. "What do you care whether she gets out or not? She's AF trained. She's a spy, right? Why would you ever risk yourself to help the likes of her?" Kyle fired the words at her with all the spite he could muster. "She's not worth the effort, is she Gillian?"

"I know her better than you think," she said. Gillian looked haggard in the weak light of Kyle's flash. "I trained with her, Kyle. A long time back, when we were kids. The AF trained us both. But nothing comes free, especially for a woman. Crypto, Holly, she had money, parents. Her father was an AF Commander somewhere in the Africas. She got what she wanted, and it was easy." She looked at Kyle for a long moment. "It wasn't like that for me."

"So you're pissed off because she didn't have to work for what she got? Because she had an easier time than you?"

"I was eight years old when I got into the AF combat school, Kyle. I'd been living on the streets. The AF made a sweep of the DT district and pulled me in with all the rest of the garbage. Most of them were sent to regular work centers where they got food, a place to sleep, and training in low-V jobs. A few of the men and boys were kept as fighter stock, useful for enforcement squads. But some of us were kept for a different reason. They didn't keep me because they thought I could learn to fight, Kyle."

He saw it in her eyes. There was no need to probe across the space between them—he knew what he would find. Yet the images flowed almost against his will. Eight years old. Frightened and alone, ridiculed, used. Given a place to sleep, but never able to sleep. A toy for the growing AF soldiers to play with. Kyle felt it wash over him like a wave of torment, a nightmare existence with no hope of an end.

"I didn't—"

"I wasn't the only one. There were others like me, but mostly older. The worst part was that I couldn't escape it. On the street I had always been hungry, almost frozen to death in the winter. There I had at least shelter and food. But up here," she touched her forehead, "I was dying. I needed something to grasp hold of, to keep me sane. I turned introspective, built a Mental shell around myself. And I got good at shutting out what was going on. Then it slowly dawned on me that I was consciously controlling my Will force. That gave me hope. I talked one of the instructors into

letting me train. Convinced is maybe a better word. At first I bribed him physically, but then as I learned the control I needed, my Presence was enough. Physical training, learning to fight, those became the outlet for my frustration. And I was good."

"Gillian." Kyle was sorry he had breached the dam that had kept all these memories back, but he knew it was too late to stop the flood. "I didn't mean to—"

"Holly was in the classes too, Kyle. Had her own private room, complete freedom to do what she wanted. She was the same age as me, ten when we both started training. And she always used to get pissed off when I did better than her. A nasty temper she had. But the instructors treated her like she was made of glass, delicate and gentle. And the other students were the same. They followed orders. Only when she sparred with me did she take it in the mouth. Literally. And I got full payment for my misplaced aggression—in the usual way. She never knew."

"But how can you expect her to understand—"

"She didn't know about her Mental gift, then. Not at first. But I was such a thorn in her side that she tried to wish me dead one day. It was funny, that. I felt her thought reach me, of course. But she discovered she could read my response, my contemptuous mirth, without ever a word being spoken. She was shaken by it, I think. Badly. She left me alone for days, and I wondered what she was up to. Must've spent the time practicing her new-found skill. She freaked a few people out with it, because at first she couldn't probe without letting the victim know. The average Joe can't tell when he's being probed if the practitioner is skilled." Gillian smiled weakly up at Kyle. "She alienated herself, trying out her gifts. It made her hate me all the more, because she blamed me for all her petty woes. She put more effort into training, and started getting better. Almost as good as me. But she never once managed to probe my mind beyond the very surface. She detested me for that."

"I didn't read any of this when I first met her, Gillian. All I saw was what she'd been through since the AF turned her loose. She's had a tough time too—it's made her a different person."

Gillian went on as if Kyle had never spoken. "By the time I was twelve I'd honed my Presence and Command skills, and I could beat any of the instructors in one-on-one. They were scared of me. Nobody fucked with me anymore." She smiled mirthlessly at him. "So your friend Holly stripped me of everything I'd gained. She got her father to engineer my dismissal from the AF, dishonourably, for assaulting an officer. Completely falsified. And I was back on the street again, with no record of any official training, no V rating, nothing."

She closed her eyes tight and sighed, her head back, her body rigid. "I needed to live." Her eyes opened wearily and she looked past him. "I don't remember much of the next two years. I drew on the only real skill the AF school had given me that I could market. That's when I met Cyndi. Both of us fucking for a living, Kyle. Together, we were stronger. We found the Black Snow Temple, and it gave us each a new life." She spat. "But someone took hers away. And that bitch Crypto, whatever

she's been through since she sent me out on the street again, she had it coming. I've got other things to worry about."

Kyle had never heard his mother talk about her past. He knew it had been rough, that she had been saddened by it, that the Temple had seemed like a form of salvation. His eyes were wet with tears.

"She's got good in her, Gillian. Just like you have. I've seen it, in both of you. And she can help us—she can help me. You have to set aside your past and do what's right. Learn to understand. Shit, I don't know Gillian, I just have this feeling. I don't think we can find my mother's murderers without her. We need to get her out."

Gillian stared at him, her gaze emotionless and distant. "Cyndi would have said the same D-damned thing, Kyle. I know it. You're her kid, and I sense her in you every time I'm around you." She came back into focus, and thumped her fists against the worn carpeting on the ancient floor. "Fuck it."

She got to her feet, walked over and laid a hand on Kyle's shoulder. "You know I'm not going to let anything happen to you, despite what I say. We have a job to do. And I got a feeling—I think we got a long hard road ahead of us, before we find out what happened to Cyndi. But we'll D-damned well do it together."

Kyle stared at her in wonder. "What happened to the Gillian I knew?"

"You never knew her, Kyle. Maybe I didn't either. But I think Cyndi did."

Gillian slipped the remote microphone under the door, a flat card five millimeters square and wafer-thin. She cupped her hand over her ear for a few moments, then handed Kyle a tiny ear piece.

"Listen," she said.

Kyle placed the loop of wire over his ear and gently pushed the pickup device inside. He jumped, looking wildly around, expecting to see Ice-Eyes standing beside him.

"...get one of your patrolmen to do it up nice, Captain. Make it look like she committed suicide." The chill of Ice-Eyes' voice carried through the remote, and a shiver ran down Kyle's spine.

"I don't think we should abandon the site yet, Sir." The voice was female, soft and pleasant, probably belonging to the woman Kyle had seen standing beside Ice-Eyes earlier. "He'll show up. Our Marker recorded their conversation last night, and he was scheduled to come. We should wait."

"That woman on the table there, Captain. I hear she was AF material, once. Until she disobeyed orders."

There was a brief pause. "We'll have the place set up in five minutes, sir."

"Very good. And assemble your team at the front entry, ground level. I have a new task for you."

Kyle heard the sound of Ice-Eyes' footsteps, then the Captain began to give orders. But in the background, he distantly heard Ice-Eyes talking to someone else. "When they're finished, they can be disposed of. The whole building is a death trap anyway. It was an accidental leak of explosive gas." His chill laughter echoed in Kyle's head, while louder and nearer he could hear the AF Captain organizing the scene for Holly's demise.

"Now, Kyle."

Kyle turned to see Gillian shove her earpiece into a top pocket, and toggle the door cycle switch. She scooped up her remote microphone and stowed it as she moved through the darkness of Holly's office. Kyle followed.

Gillian paused only briefly at the office door, and Kyle squinted his eyes as they adjusted to the relative brightness beyond. In the lab he saw four AF soldiers and the Captain, the latter directing the others to move Holly's body. A set of cutting tools stood point upward in their rack on the floor, and they were preparing to drop the helpless woman onto the resulting lethal array.

Gillian launched herself into the room, silent and lightning-fast, taking out two of the soldiers with the first assault. Kyle ran for the main exit doors, assuming the other voices he'd heard had come from that direction. He locked the double doors and hit the locking switch for the outer entry. Then he cycled the isolation system, making the chamber gas-tight. He turned on the ether. If they were in the antechamber, they would be out of action soon.

When he looked again in Gillian's direction, she was in one-on-one with the AF Captain, and not having to work hard at it. Kyle noticed that his forearms ached, but he had no time to think about it. He saw one of the AF soldiers slowly rising to his feet, reaching for his stun pistol, and he sprang at him. The soldier leapt aside, but Kyle's foot caught the edge of the weapon and it spun noisily across the floor, out of reach. The man was unsteady on his feet, probably still dazed. Kyle held his stance low and balanced, waiting for his opponent to attack. When the punch came it was wild and awkward, easy to divert, and Kyle was able to pull the soldier entirely off balance and throw him against the side of a stainless table. He did not get up.

Kyle took one more glance around to make sure there were no other immediate combat-ready soldiers, then ran to find Holly. Her head lay in a pool of blood, and she was deathly pale. He knelt down beside her and felt for a pulse at her throat. For a moment he felt nothing. Then, as he forced a disciplined calm on himself, a faint flutter ran across his fingers. His heart pounded in his chest as hope and worry suddenly replaced the fury of the past moments. He looked up as Gillian suddenly appeared beside him.

"She's alive," he said.

CHAPTER 14: Fool

Gillian crouched beside Kyle and examined Holly. When she looked up her expression was grim.

"She's got a fractured skull, maybe a broken neck." She took a deep breath and rubbed a bloodied hand across her face, leaving a garish streak down her cheek. Kyle could sense her indecision.

"We'll get her out." His voice sounded as shaky and uncertain as he felt. "I took care of the others, out in the antechamber. We have time—"

"What others?"

"The ones Ice-Eyes gave those last orders to. Told them to blow the place up. Something about a leak of explosive g—"

"Ether. I know how Crypto's system works. Ether to knock out anyone she doesn't want around. Explosive fucking gas. And you turned it on in the antechamber, didn't you?"

Kyle stared at her as if she'd just pronounced his death sentence. He looked down at Holly, lying still and helpless. Then he shook himself free of the clinging shroud of panic, and dashed towards the antechamber doors.

"Kyle, it's too late. Grezman will have set a timer or something, probably due to go off any second."

He halted abruptly and spun about in time to see Gillian getting to her feet, gently supporting Holly's head and upper body as she lifted her. Panic surged in him once more. "Gillian, we'll kill her—"

"She's dead anyway if we don't get her out now. Let's move." She trotted gingerly towards Holly's office, her movements smooth and fluid, her burden steady in her arms. Kyle was at her

heels before he realized it, and knew he had succumbed once more to Gillian's Command. He hit the lights as he entered, so they could see clearly to find the escape exit. Before Gillian reached it, he had the door open. She went through it sideways, glancing at Kyle as she passed.

"Close it. Then go ahead and scout the corridors. They'll be waiting for us."

He followed her through and cycled the door, then sprinted past Gillian in the dimness, his adrenaline rush driving him, his senses tingling. The wood floor creaked ominously under his weight as he ran, his feet thudding softly on the threadbare carpet.

At the first turn he paused, straining his ears for any sound. The gentle pad of Gillian's cat-like tread approached from behind. Nothing else. He peered around the edge of the wall, and saw only an empty passage. Then he was moving again, suppressed energy surging through his muscles. He had gone ten meters down the corridor when the explosion came.

The blast threw him into a wall and he fell spinning to the floor. His right arm struck at an awkward angle, and he twisted away from the pain. His face hit the carpet, hard. The world receded to a black mist, then came roaring back with a rush as his nose exploded with agony. No, not just his nose: his back felt as if a hundred tiny knives had suddenly struck, all together, sharp points of pain that made him thrash and squirm on the floor. He screamed in torment, rolled onto one side, clawing at his back with one hand and clutching his face with the other. There was blood streaming from his smashed nose, but his groping fingers could feel nothing across his back. At last, reason overcame sensation. Gillian. It was her pain.

He turned his head to look back the way he had come. Sections of the ceiling had collapsed, and clouds of plaster dust filled the air. There was no sign of Gillian. She had not made it round the corner.

Kyle heaved himself to his feet. His head spun. The floor and ceiling seemed intent on changing places every other second. He leaned against the wall, and slowly stumbled toward the cross-corridor leading to Holly's lab. As he neared the corner he could see scattered heaps of rubble in the other passage, some of it smouldering and smoking, much of it blackened and charred. And, amid the rubble, his eyes gradually focussed on something else.

"Gillian!" he shouted. "Holly." Despair welled up in him as he struggled to move forward. "What have I done?"

Tears blurred his vision. The salt taste in his mouth seemed to drive him into action. He fell to his hands and knees and scrabbled frantically at the debris, numb now to all but this one task, to free the two women. He uncovered first an arm, then a head—Holly. The beautiful face was caked with dust and dried blood, the hair strung in tangled knots about it. His thoughts now clear, Kyle surged across into her mind. A spark of life still glimmered there. A small enclave of personality, of self, feebly glowing.

He found new strength in that discovery. Tearing off his shirt, he pillowed Holly's head gently with it. Then with renewed vigor he began pulling at the smouldering wood, the chunks of plaster, further and further up the corridor, until at last he felt another arm. Desperately he burrowed through to Gillian's head, opening a space around her shoulders so that he could turn her face upwards.

He forged a Mental link, searching for any sign that she still lived. Immediately he hit her Wall, strong and powerful, fully active. Incredulous, he withdrew. There was no time to wonder how. Renewed tears flowed from Kyle's eyes, and he sobbed. But this time, with relief. Yet his situation was almost hopeless. Ice-Eyes would be searching these passages for them, he was sure. Looking for the bodies. Unless....

With sudden conviction, Kyle raced back along the gutted corridor to the smouldering shell that had once been Holly's lab. Much of the flooring and ceiling had been blasted or burned away, and the heat was intense. He picked his way carefully into the lab, and made out the charred skeletal remains of the AF soldiers they had defeated. He could go no further. From where he stood he could see the vault door in the probe storage area, still intact and sealed. But most of the floor across the intervening space was nothing more than blackened rafters. Several of the stainless tables had fallen through onto the floor below, and lay half-buried in the rubble remains. Kyle turned and retraced his steps. He couldn't fake their deaths, not even enough to give them a little more time. What chance did any of them have?

As he advanced along the corridor to Gillian and Holly, the forgotten ache across his shoulders began to return. Through the gloom he could see Gillian struggling to free herself from her tomb. She was moving weakly, with painful effort, and Kyle's back contorted in agony with every twist she made.

"Gillian, don't," he called. "Let me help you." He ran to her side and threw his arms round her. His fingers were sticky wet as they met and locked behind her. Carefully he pulled her forward and out, suppressing a cry as the movement drove needles into his upper back. He slid down beside her, and saw the strength and defiance in her grey eyes.

"I'm sorry, Gillian," he said.

For a moment, she did not reply. Then a faint smile crossed her face. "Don't be," she croaked. She coughed harshly, the dust and smoke from the explosion almost choking her. "You did your best." She leaned a shoulder against the wall, and her eyes flickered shut.

"I **will** get us out, Gillian," Kyle said. "He hasn't beaten us yet."

Gillian's eyes opened briefly again, and the smile was back—for a moment. Then she slumped against the wall. Only unconscious, Kyle's mind probe told him. Gently, he pushed a straggling lock of hair back from her eyes. Then he hurried over to where Holly lay.

With cautious haste Kyle removed the remaining rubble covering her body. His Mental check sensed life within her still, faint but clear. He was preparing to lift her when he heard whispered words from around the corner, in the passage where he had fallen. So they were searching. Already. Not close enough to see him yet, but he could not expect to cross the intersection unseen.

A door slammed, and footsteps came down the hall, close now. Kyle sensed a prickling inside his head, as if another mind were....

"Someone here." The voice was deep and throaty, the words no more than a sigh. Kyle raised his Wall, and took up a position at the corner, ready to attack. He felt the probe again, stronger now, more insistent. There were no more footsteps. Thoughts began to creep into his mind. Submissive thoughts.

'Give up now. It's the only way to save the women. It's your fault. Save them. Give up now.'

Cautious footsteps, the sound of cracking plasterboard. Kyle shook his head to clear it. Anger welled up within him, and he stabbed out with his mind to meet the probing will head-on. A Wall was there, powerful, prepared. Kyle began his work, weaving across the surface, searching.

A face appeared round the corner. Not an AF uniform, a grey coverall with red insignia. Kyle blocked a punch, spun and landed a savage smashing fist to the side of the man's head. Staggering, the other came in again, swinging wildly. As Kyle raised his arms to block, he felt a surge of attacking energy enter his mind, driving towards his consciousness, a stabbing Mental attack. With a grunt of effort, Kyle diverted all his psychic force to blocking, and shut out the thrust. Yet the diversion left him physically vulnerable, and he took a punch in the chest, then another to the side of the head. He wavered, almost fell, his mind confused. His Wall had been breached. How could he maintain two battles at once, and hope to win?

The answer came. He was trapped, cornered, with no way out. And his mind responded as he had sensed it do once before. His psychic Will Force seared a glowing path across the space to the attacking mind, slicing through the other's Wall as if it did not exist. The enemy's consciousness lay bare and unprotected, and Kyle watched in horror as his own Will crushed it out of existence.

A vicious kick rattled his skull against the wall, and Kyle fell to his knees, his vision blurred. There was a streak of grey against the blackness, and his lower jaw snapped up with a muted clack. His face hit something dark and hard, and a warm salty taste filled his mouth. Somebody far away muttered some words. Then there was a bumping, jarring sensation, and he felt himself moving.

Still he clung to the edge of consciousness, concentrating on the sensations, focussing his fleeting thoughts. The vestiges of reason remained. Kyle felt his Will Force building for another assault. There was little strength there, yet he nurtured it. It surged forth, seeking the target mind. Kyle was too groggy to follow its course. A moment later he felt his body drop abruptly to the ground.

He awoke to a light, seemingly bright in his eyes. There were voices. It took him several seconds to decipher the gibberish and make it intelligible.

"...to Ashton there." The voice was harsh and gravelly, the words garbled. "Son of a bitch must've blasted him good. Look at his fucking eyes. Died in terror. And we didn't even find Grigg. Shit, Becky, I don't like this one D-damned bit."

"Keep your filthy mouth shut and do the lugging." This voice was pleasant, articulate, commanding. Scary. "Get that kid up off the floor and bring him along. He's starting to come round."

"How the Hell can you tell that? Hasn't moved a fucking eyelid."

"Shut up and do as you're told." Command. Strong Command. Kyle was suddenly awake, fully aware, his danger tangible. He sensed his mind being scanned.

"Just relax, Kyle. Terry will carry you. We're going to take you to a doctor." The woman used Command like Gillian, soft and persuasive, the kind of attack that slips through the best defense. "Do you know, you're lucky to be alive. Those brutes that attacked you almost finished the job. If it hadn't been for me and Terry—well, let's not worry about that. You're safe now. Just take it easy."

Kyle patterned his Wall slowly, hoping she wouldn't notice it too soon. He opened his eyes and squinted at his new captors. The woman was older, perhaps forty, slight and feeble-looking, her shoulder-length brown hair graying at the temples. She wore a conservative brown body suit, loose-cut, knee-length. Her face was narrow and bird-like, her mouth small and peevish. But her eyes belied her appearance. They did not mirror the motherly smile her features portrayed, but glowed with intensity and power. She gave Kyle the creeps. All he could see as he looked up at Terry was a great bush of black beard and a thick neck protruding from his brown coveralls.

"Who are you?" Kyle tried to sound dazed. He didn't really think it would fool Becky for an instant, but he knew it was important to keep up appearances.

"My name is Becky Rebaro, Kyle. I'm an investigator with the World Council Security Agency. We've been keeping an eye on Holly Masters and her laboratory for some time now. And we've been expecting trouble. Several criminals Ms. Masters helped to convict have recently escaped from AF Enforcement. We've been waiting for the right moment to capture them."

Bullshit. Kyle couldn't restrain the thought. "Then why wait until Holly was attacked before doing something? What the hell use is it to move in after they've done the damage?"

"We needed to catch them in the act to obtain convictions. These people are going to be

executed for their crimes this time, Kyle. They will pay."

"But what about Holly—is she still alive? And the other woman that was with me, what happened to her?" He genuinely wanted to know, but it was also a stall tactic. Could he block Becky? He would need to try, or both Holly and Gillian were dead for sure.

"I'm afraid that Ms. Masters did not survive the attack. These criminals were very resourceful. They had full AF uniforms and identification, and were able to bluff their way into the lab before...."

Kyle lashed out. He had been waiting, trying to keep his preparation hidden, and it had worked. The psychic force he mustered was still weak, but strong enough to have the desired effect. Friend Terry uttered only a groan of shock as he collapsed onto the floor.

"Don't move, Kyle."

This time, the Command was not subtle. It struck like a physical blow, pinning him as he lay on top of the unmoving Terry. His mind probed outwards, and found what it had expected: a Wall built like a fortress. He had no hope of defeating her in Mental combat, unless....

The lesson he had learned in his earlier lost battle could be applied here. But to apply it, he needed to be able to move.

"Why—are you—doing this?" His mouth struggled to form words, working against the physical paralysis that had seized his body.

Becky ignored him. She moved to Terry's head and shook it cruelly. The big man groaned, but did not move. Becky bent over Kyle, standing almost nose to nose with him.

"You little shit!" she said. There was a venom in the words that Kyle found more in keeping with his impression of the woman. "Now how am I supposed to get you out of here?"

She stood, and Kyle saw that she wore knee-high brown leather boots with pointed toes. She planted a vicious kick in Kyle's ribs. Her face was red with anger, and Kyle sensed her lack of Mental focus. He seized the opportunity and sent a violent surge of psychic force outwards, all he could muster.

Becky blocked. Her concentration on the Command wavered, enough for Kyle to react. He swept an arm out and caught her by the leg, hauling her off her feet. She toppled wildly, managing to get one hand under her to protect herself as she landed. But the action had the desired effect. She was too stunned to control him, and Kyle rolled over and smashed a fist into her temple before she could recover. He lay for a minute, panting. He needed a rest. Then he thought of Holly and Gillian.

With huge effort he heaved himself to his feet and looked about him. He was almost at the staircase that led down to the main entrance of the building next to Holly's. At his best staggering pace, he tracked back along the corridors, finally reaching the still prostrate body of his earlier victim, Ashton. Not a pretty sight. Kyle looked away as he passed, now able to muster a proper

walk.

He took the stairs up, and three corridors later arrived at the scene of devastation. Holly and Gillian were still as he had left them. He scanned Mentally, and found the same signs of life he had sensed earlier. Yet even without training, he knew that Holly was near death. He had no choice now. Get her to help fast, or let her die.

He lifted Holly gently from her nest in the rubble, and headed for the private parking lot. He walked slowly and carefully, concern for Holly's condition moderating his pace. Twice he paused to rest, listening for any sign of pursuit. When he at last reached the hidden doorway to the garage, it was closed and not monitored. He yanked it open and peered into the darkness beyond. Faint patches of yellow light dappled the walls, ancient incandescents like ghosts of a distant past. There was no-one in sight.

Kyle lurched across the last ten meters to Gillian's speeder, entered the latch code to open the door, and softly lowered the limp body into the rear seat. Then he cycled the door again and retraced his steps at a muted run.

This time he quickly hefted Gillian onto his shoulder, blocking out the agony it caused him, and made the fastest pace he could towards the garage. Once he heard footsteps, but managed to reach the stairs and pad silently downwards without sensing any probe.

Five cautious minutes later, he dropped his burden in the passenger side of the speeder, and jumped into the driver's seat. When he hit the auto-pilot, he felt a sudden rush of exhaustion flow over him, as if he had been drained of energy in a single instant. Yet he was not so tired that he did not smile as the speeder moved toward the lot exit—music filled the cab, unbidden.

'...where angels fear to tread, a fool must try instead.

Don't listen to your heart, the key's inside your head.

And so it goes, in a world of woes....'

CHAPTER 15 : Connection

The massive cracked boards of the lot door slid silently aside as the speeder approached, and the blackness of the alley seemed to flood into the dim garage. Kyle left the lights off, trusting to the auto guidance systems. The speeder rose slowly to doorway level, and Kyle felt almost weightless as he lay back in the seat and let the music carry him. Deity knew he needed a rest. Even a short one. Just to be able to close his eyes and have peace, his mind free of—

"Shit," he moaned.

A dazzling light stabbed in at the speeder windshield. Kyle felt frantically across the dash controls, searching for the glass filter dial. He spun it, and the light was gone, cut to a ghostly yellow glimmer. A soft blue glow suffused the cab's periphery, and the weapons panel slid into view. The defense systems had self-activated, as Gillian had told him they would.

The speeder slammed into an emergency climb, pinning Kyle to the conforming contours of the pilot seat. Fine for him. He forced his body to move, rolling slowly to his right, and crawling through the access to the rear compartment. Holly lay in an awkward heap, one leg across the two seats, the other bent back and half under her body. Her head lolled to one side, as though her neck had been—

"NO!"

Kyle clung to the footholds in the floor as the speeder banked sharp right, then swerved left. There was a loud 'zap' as of massive electrical discharge. Then level flight again.

Holly had been thrown forwards, then back against the soft cushioned wall panels. Kyle hauled himself over to her and gently pulled her down, straightening her legs out across the seats. He released the crash lock and lowered the restraint net onto her, sandwiching her body between the cushioning and the restraining web. Then he probed her—and found what he dreaded.

There was no resistance. Her personality, her memories, like a hall of visions, lay open to him. Only once before had he seen a mind like that—and then Holly had been with him, leading the way. He hugged her for a long moment in stunned silence before the full implications registered. Then the tears came, uncontrollable waves of grief, the loss more immediate than Cyndi's, as if he himself had committed the act.

A sudden shock wave rocked the speeder, and the lighting flickered. It forced Kyle back to reality. For a moment longer he stared down at Holly's limp body, then he stroked her pale cheek, the cold touch stirring other emotions within him. Ice-Eyes' features crystallized in his mind, as real as in life, the chill of the gaze now sparking hatred, not fear.

Kyle pulled himself into the front seat. He felt fragile and alone, but resolute. His tears flowed unchecked, his uniform clinging to cool skin where the drops fell. He fumbled with the crash web on Gillian and locked it down. She moaned softly as the web tightened, and Kyle felt his own back respond to her pain. Only then did he notice how stiff and sore his neck was. Too little, too late.

"What do I do, Gillian?" Kyle whispered the words, voicing his indecision. "I don't know where to take you—where to take us. If Ice-Eyes doesn't kill us now, he can find us where we hide." He sighed, then wriggled back into his own seat. He had just pulled the harness down when the lights winked a dive warning. The speeder plummeted vertically, in free fall. The crash web pressed against Kyle's chest and shoulders, and his breath came in gasps. Long agonizing seconds later, the hum of the jets returned, and Kyle caught a glimpse out the window of street lights and people before all became lost in a blur of motion. They were racing at—he glanced at the speed readout, blinked in disbelief—four hundred and twenty five kph, along a city street. One that was busy at two in the morning. Night club strip, the Blackbar Way.

"You let the speeder do what it has to, Kyle."

Gillian's voice was strained, forced through her pain. Kyle turned to look at her as she lay in her restraint net. There was only a head and shoulders, ghostly in the flickering light. He smiled weakly at her.

"Gillian. Thank the Deity I at least got you out of there alive."

Gillian's face remained expressionless, unless there was a slight waver in the set line of her mouth. "More or less," she said. "Get me to my lab, Kyle. Once the speeder shakes off our pursuit."

"How can you be sure—"

"I told you this speeder was custom, remember? I designed it. But I didn't build all of it. It'll get us away. Trust me."

There was a sudden upward thrust as the speeder soared back into the blackness of the night sky. They moved through a long slow right turn, then began an erratic series of zig-zag manoeuvres. Kyle waited for their flight pattern to stabilize, one hand firmly locked on the support handle above

his head. When the speeder at last levelled off, he could still see three winking red dots on the tracking display, further back, but closing.

"It has a mind of its own, I'll say that." Kyle looked again at Gillian. "Listen, you're in no condition to be going to your lab. I have to get you to a medic, fast. And Holly—"

"That's why we have to go to the lab. It's now or never, for her. We may not be able to save her—but we can at least save what she was."

"What—you mean you might be able to save her?" For a moment, hope soared in Kyle. Then he saw Gillian shake her head.

"If she's dead Kyle, I can't bring her back. Maybe your mother could have. She was that close to a way—so close. She figured the last step in the brainwave transfer, didn't she? Maybe she did the same with the healing drug she was working on. But she's not here to help us now."

Kyle stared at her for a long moment before he answered. "Yes she is, Gillian." He tapped his forehead. "She's in here, somewhere. Or at least, a part of her is. Whatever she was able to pass on to me." In his excitement, he reached out and grabbed Gillian's shoulder, instantly regretting it. "You said it," he gasped. "She figured out the transfer. But if she had a way to help someone who was dead, wouldn't she have told you?"

Gillian smiled. "Not if she wasn't sure it was safe. See, I get reckless now and again. She might think I'd do something crazy, like volunteer for testing. Which, I admit, I might have done."

"Then Gillian, get us the hell to your lab, and let's figure out what's inside my head. If there's a chance to save Holly, I—one death is enough on my conscience."

"Cut that crap, Kyle. We don't know what this is all about yet, but it isn't your fault. So stop blaming yourself and do something useful." She leaned slowly forward, groaning as she did so, and hit the autopilot override. "Fly this thing."

The speeder lurched sideways, then began a slow roll to the left. Kyle grabbed the control stick in panic. "Gillian, are you craz—"

"Up. Take it up," she said.

Kyle hauled hard backwards, and the speeder responded. The sky just below them lit up as an energy weapon discharged, and the speeder vibrated alarmingly.

"Close enough, Kyle. Now when I say so, bank left and hit the air brakes, full."

Gillian was craning her neck to see out the side window. Kyle swung the stick from side to side in the hope of throwing off the pursuers' aim. He had no time now for the weapons controls, or the positional display, the altitude indicator, nothing but keeping the speeder flying. How in Deity's name did anyone ever fly and do all that other stuff manually?

"Now!"

Clumsily, Kyle obeyed instructions. He yanked the stick over full left, and stomped his feet on

both brake pedals. The roar of the thrusters struggling into reverse filled the cab. Then they were dropping like a rock, the blackness around them almost complete. Kyle realized that Gillian had killed the lights. They were running dead silent, and dark.

"What the hell are we doing? We're going to crash."

"Not yet, Kyle. You did your job. We got to over six thousand meters before you stopped us." She indicated the altimeter. The numbers were flashing past, but it still registered four thousand meters.

"But they'll just track us down here, won't they? What good will this do us?"

"Keep your hands on the stick, and fly. I'll shake off Grezman's watchdogs."

Gillian scanned the control panel from her stiff-backed position, only the twinkle of her eyes revealing her attentiveness. Then suddenly, her hand stabbed out at the panel, and Kyle felt the weight of a medium-sized wall safe crushing down on his chest. Amazingly, and abruptly, the pressure was gone. The speeder was motionless, suspended a bare hundred meters above the dimly-lit streetscape below. Yet he had not touched the thrust controls.

"Gillian—"

"Steer towards that cluster of lights down there." Gillian's voice was husky, and Kyle knew she had taken the deceleration even harder than he had. "It's an old factory, used for warehousing out-of-date AF junk now. Follow the road that goes past it."

Kyle did as he was told. "Gillian, I need lights. I can't see where I'm going."

"OK." She pulled a switch on the combat control panel, and slid forward a lever. Everything outside the speeder took on an eerie blue-green shade, outlines only, like a dim liquid crystal display. The lights of the streets showed as orange-red orbs.

Kyle steered along the street, grateful for normal driving pace. There was no sign of pursuit. "I think we've lost them," he said. "How did you do that?"

"We just dropped off their screens. Like we vaporized. It works a bit like the distorter, changing the scattering patterns of radiation coming back off the speeder. Only with this, it scrambles them so completely that they appear random, and the tracking system can't figure out what it's looking at."

"So that's why no lights?"

Gillian pointed out the front window. "See that big dark building ahead? Through the T-intersection?"

"Yes. Looks like it should be torn down."

"Drop right to street level, and aim for the wall to the left of the door. No, further. Not at the door, beside it. Keep going...."

For the second time since he had met Gillian, Kyle appeared to have gone through a solid brick

wall. Gillian hit the standard speeder headlamps, and he could see in normal light again.

The speeder was in a tunnel, rough-hewn, six to eight meters in diameter. It dove into the earth, and as it went it became more solid, the walls of smooth 'crete, with steel-beamed arches at periodic intervals. A vast open space suddenly appeared on their right, an expanse of tiled flooring dotted with support columns. Their tunnel continued ahead. The place had an eerie, haunted air. It was deserted, and layered with dust.

"Where are we, Gillian?" Kyle whispered. It seemed the only way to talk in this strange unearthly passage. "Will this—take us to the lab?"

"Ten minutes. Maybe a little less." Gillian pointed ahead. "Take the left-hand fork here. And watch out for pedestrians."

Kyle slowed the speeder down to forty K's, and swung it left at the junction. As they passed it he thought he saw the gleam of metal along the tunnel floor, caught in the glare of the headlamps.

"The subway system! That's what this place is, isn't it?"

"Used to be, a long time ago. The whole system was abandoned within ten years of the first commercially available speeder. Now it sits here and collects dust. Most people don't even know it exists."

Kyle slowed the speeder to a crawl as he caught the faint glimmer of light up ahead. It was another cavernous station, but this time not empty. Several people crouched in strategic positions behind columns, their weapons tracking the speeder as it passed. Kyle thought he could see movement on the far side of the platform, shadowy shapes drifting about in the dim light. Just before they re-entered the tunnel, he saw one of the guards move out from cover and wave.

"Friends of yours, Gillian?" he asked.

"I use the tunnels now and then. Some of them recognize my speeder."

Kyle gave her a sidelong glance, his eyebrows raised in question. Gillian sighed wearily.

"OK, it's more than that. Like I said, most people don't even know this place is here. But there's a lot that don't fit into the Council's system. Some because they choose not to fit, and some who don't have a choice. For a long time, that was me. When I lived on the street, before I found the Snow, that..." she gestured back towards the station they had just left, "was my home."

"I'm sorry, Gillian."

"What for? Let's just get to the lab. There's no more camps on this line—get us moving."

They sped along for five minutes at two hundred K's, a long straight stretch leading into blackness. Kyle began to think about what he would have to do when he got to the 'lab', and tried to shut the thoughts out of his mind. It was a feeble chance they had, at best.

"Next right fork, Kyle. Slow it down once you pass the first station on that line, and look for a side tunnel on the right. That's where we're going."

"Gillian, how do we know they won't be waiting for us at the lab?"

"We don't. But I think we'll be OK for a while. The place is Council Research. It has its own security systems, and I can clear almost everything. And for the moment, I think our friend Grezman is working on his own. Using AF people like toys, but not acting officially on AF business. We'll see what we see."

Kyle thought of Becky Rebaro, and friend Terry. Certainly not AF, but Council Security? He said nothing.

He pulled the speeder to a stop and shut down in a small dark clearing at the end of a four hundred meter long rough-cut tunnel. Perhaps a branch line that had never been finished. He released his restraints, and watched as Gillian tugged off her own harness. She eased herself forward to open a compartment under the front dash, and pulled out a stun gun and a small 'Ready Light. Both she and Kyle groaned slightly at the pain of the movement.

"We have to get Crypto back in action, Kyle, even if it's just to help you figure out how to control that Empathy of yours." She smiled, an eerie grin in the dash glow. "Come on."

Kyle forced himself to accept the pain he felt as Gillian climbed stiffly out of the speeder. He collapsed the driver's seat, and was surprised to find the rear compartment sealed off. A sheet of hard plastic or some similar material blocked all access. It was slightly cold to the touch.

"Gillian. Something's happened to the back of the speeder."

Gillian reached slowly in from behind Kyle and did something on the control panel. With a hiss, the panel in front of Kyle slid aside, and a blast of chill air hit him in the face. He shivered, and turned an agonized gaze back on Gillian.

"Crypto taught you that herself, Kyle. She's dead. A dead body keeps better on ice."

Kyle nodded grimly. There was a sudden foul taste in his mouth, and he felt sick. He turned back to his task, releasing the crash couch and carefully lifting Holly's cold body from its cushioned grave. As he backed out of the speeder, Gillian touched his shoulder gently.

"Here, Kyle." She handed him a thick padded blanket. "Put this over your shoulder, and carry her there." She helped him settle his burden, then moved off through the darkness, the beam from her tiny light bobbing erratically over the rough ground. The blackness seemed to swallow them, and Kyle felt strangely buoyant. It reminded him again of his probing mission with Holly—and he tightened his hold on her as he walked. There was no such thing as fate. And if there was, he would change it.

The wavering light found a small black door set into the wall, and Gillian opened it with a pass key. There was a faint light in the tiny space beyond, and Kyle recognized the contours of a tube elevator: single source, single destination, normally single passenger.

"You go first, Gillian. Leave me the light. I don't think I could stand being in total darkness

down here."

Gillian handed Kyle the 'Ready Light and the pass key. "It's about a two minute round trip. The door won't open again until the elevator's back." She stepped into the tube, and closed the door behind her. Kyle kept the light trained on the door while he waited, not daring to look behind him. The blackness was too ominous.

At last there was a soft hissing sound from the door, and it opened to his key. He squeezed inside, the closeness of Holly's cold, limp body almost unbearable.

"We're going to bring you back, Holly," he said to the darkness. It helped stabilize his nerves, enough to let him close the door. There was a firm upward thrust, then smooth motion, ending abruptly. A door opened and Gillian stood facing him. He noticed that she now wore a starched white labcoat over her blood-stained coveralls.

They were in a small grey-walled room, filled with racks. There was a strong chemical odor, like roses mixed with bleach. "We're in Medical Research storage. I've checked the corridors as far as Cyndi's lab. We leave Crypto there, and I'll take you to Electronics." She moved to a door at the end of the room, and Kyle followed. "Watch my hands. I'll let you know which side of the corridors to keep to, so you can avoid the security cameras. I'm walking down the middle—you stay to the side I tell you. Got it?"

Kyle nodded.

"Let's go."

Gillian opened the door wide. It led into a broad pale pink corridor, with blue-grey doors at ten meter intervals. The air was scented with a strong spice odor, perhaps nutmeg or cinammon, things Kyle had smelled once at a bakery on his delivery job. Yet he could still detect the chemical smell of the room behind, masked but present.

Gillian moved off to the right, and indicated the right wall. Kyle slid along it, looking in vain for evidence of cameras or other monitoring systems. Whatever he was avoiding, it was well hidden. Three cross corridors later, Gillian stopped at a blue door marked 'Curatives Development.' She scanned a pass across the access panel, and there was a click as the latch released.

Kyle followed her through into a large open laboratory, completely unlike that Holly had used. The room had several long waist-high benches, all with neat rows of containers on low shelves sitting above them. Glass-doored cabinets lined the walls. The benches were equipped with sinks and various large waste disposal bins. Gillian headed towards a door at the back of the room labelled 'Sample Preparation.'

The second room was small and dark, and held a series of stainless doors. Gillian opened one, and a sudden chill filled the chamber. She slid a rack out from behind the open door, long and narrow—like a drawer made to hold a body.

"This should be good enough. We won't be long, if this works. And anyway, it's almost four o'clock. We only have about two hours before the morning shift arrives."

Kyle lowered Holly's body gently into the drawer, being careful not to look at her face. Her head wanted to flop sideways.

"Gillian, we have to do something about her neck. It's no good bringing her back if her neck is still broken like this. She won't survive."

"We'll put a brace on it. Then I hope we can use some of Cyndi's nerve regeneratives to help heal the nerve damage. Who knows, Kyle. This is one big experiment. We can only try."

They left Holly in the cooler and Gillian led the way back through the corridors to a bank of standard elevators. She made Kyle lie flat on the floor as they descended. They exited onto a floor with soft pastel green walls, and the same spicy smell as before, this time with no underlying odors that Kyle could detect. Two corridors later, they went into a room marked 'Defensives.' Gillian closed the door behind them, and flicked a switch on the wall.

"OK, we're clear for a while. I've activated the automatic feed from the cameras, and security'll get a blank room tape." She pointed over at a crude cot against one wall of the room. "Sit over there," she said.

Kyle was appalled by the mess. He had to clamber over and around a variety of metal boxes to reach the cot. There was a huge rack of instruments beside it, with tiny lights that winked on and off periodically. He sat and looked up inquiringly.

Gillian was leaning against the back of a chair, head bowed, her face pale and drawn. She wavered dangerously on her feet. Kyle leapt up and put an arm around her shoulders, ignoring her groan of pain.

"Shit, Gillian," he said, lowering her onto the cot. "I'm sorry. You need some help. I've been too focussed on Holly to pay attention."

Gillian shot him a steely glance. Her teeth were clenched, and her breath came in short gasps. She dropped her head between her knees, and Kyle was relieved to see some of the color return to her face.

"I can manage, Kyle. Just a little longer. Once we get the information we need, you can give me a dose of Cyndi's famous healing elixir. Cell restorative. Then I'll leave you to try what you can with Holly."

She sat up again, and rose slowly to her feet. Kyle looked at her anxiously.

"Lie down on the damned cot," she said. "You'll need all your strength when we get back to Holly."

Grudgingly, Kyle complied. He watched Gillian open a small cabinet in the wall and pull out two glass vials with rubber lids.

"I'm going to inject this stuff into you, 'though I don't know if you need it," she said. "Cyndi developed it. It sharpens the electrical impulses in the brain, and makes them easier to pick up." She took a sealed bubble-pak from a drawer, and tore it open to reveal a small syringe. Carefully she filled it from one of the vials, and adjusted the dose. Then she applied a sterile pad to his arm. Kyle felt only a slight chill when she injected the liquid.

"Gillian. Be selective in what you look for. We don't have time for much searching, and—there's some things I know that might—"

"I'll key to Cyndi's personality patterns. She and I both went through this process several times, and the system has our individual patterns stored. We'll search the data together. Just lie there and relax for a few minutes. Let me do the work for a while." She placed two small flat metal contacts on Kyle's temples, and sat heavily on a stool in front of the instrument panel.

Kyle tried to relax, but his thoughts kept drifting back to the same thing: would they be able to use the information they gathered? And would it work, if they could? And—would Gillian be able to keep going long enough to get them through this?

"OK, Kyle. Let's see what we got."

Kyle had felt nothing. "You mean, that's all there is to it?"

"Wasn't so simple to figure it out, you know. Or so simple to do, at first. But we've got it down pretty well now. Let's take a look at what Cyndi implanted in you." She turned to a display panel on the instrument bank. "Keywords. Healing. Restorative. Death. Regeneration."

Kyle stood beside her and watched the display. Screens of information scrolled past, and Gillian paused it occasionally to look more closely at something. "She did some experiments behind my back, Kyle, that's for sure. Looks like she actually tested the restoration process on rats. Should be some detail on the meth—there!" She halted the data flow, and pointed at the screen.

"Print from line thirty," she said. She let the screen scroll slowly, and then halted it again. Then she turned the system off, scooped up the three sheets of paper which had appeared below the monitor and held them up.

"This is what we wanted, Kyle. Your mother had it all worked out. But it looks like this'll be the first time anyone ever tried it with a human being." Her eyes sparkled with excitement, sharp contrast to the exhausted droop of her shoulders. "Let's see if Cyndi really did discover how to perform a miracle."

CHAPTER 16: Revelation

"That's—about it for me."

Gillian sank to the floor, her back propped against the wall. In the garish brightness of the overhead lights, her face was bloodless gray.

Kyle sensed panic rising in him as he looked first at Gillian, then at Holly's body laid out on the table in front of him. For a moment, he imagined her moving, her eyes slowly opening as if from a long deep sleep. And the answer came, as though Holly had spoken the words: Gillian. You have to help the living first. He touched Holly's cold cheek, gently, and swallowed hard.

"No way, Gillian," he said hoarsely.

He moved quickly to Gillian's side and placed his hands firmly on her shoulders. "You won't quit on me now, and we both know it." He waited for her eyes to open, and frowned down at her. "Where does Cyndi keep the restoratives?"

Gillian's soft chuckle sent a shiver of pain down Kyle's back. "Not a quitter either, are you Kyle?" she said. The wince was a mockery of a smile. "Cabinet H7, east wall. Has a Rackham sens—"

"Save your strength." Kyle reached down and extracted Gillian's sensory decoder card from its hidden pocket. "I'll handle it."

He hurried over to the indicated cabinet, built into the wall of Cyndi's lab. The doors were virtually invisible—a section of plain wall with letters on it. Just to the left of the lettering he saw a series of five slight indentations. Five-stage locks were tougher, because the first three needed to be exactly correct before the last two became active. But all the practice he had done during school hours, instead of attending history classes, made the task simple. The cabinet doors slid aside in less than a minute.

There were six shelves, each clearly marked with incomprehensible chemical names. Opaque plastic vials with rubber seals sat in neat rows, labelled with similar symbolic gibberish.

"Gillian," he called.

A slight cough came from the other side of the lab. Then a weak voice he hardly recognized called out. "MXHB. Point five percent." Another cough. "Kyle. Make it fast. You're losing me."

Kyle scanned the shelves and snatched at a vial, almost dropping it in his haste. He remembered seeing a supply of syringes and small cups above the main sink at the window end of the lab. As he made his way over, he studied the label of the vial for any indication as to dosage, or how the drug should be administered.

"How much, Gillian? How much can I give you?" This time there was no answer.

He picked a syringe labelled 'one cc', and selected a needle about half the diameter of a dart tip, a couple of centimeters long. He took a deep breath before tearing open the sterilized packages and attaching needle to syringe. He had to stop twice to steady his hands. Now, the needle goes through the rubber and into the liquid, and you draw the plunger up slowly. He remembered watching his mother do this, but could not conjure up the image in his mind. His fingers seemed two sizes too big, and they fumbled with the tiny objects in his hands. He felt strangely clumsy, yet his movements were as precise and definite as if he had done this a hundred times. The syringe was charged; he walked back towards Gillian, the syringe inverted, small brown drops running down the needle from the tip, his finger on the plunger as the needle slipped easily beneath the skin of her unmoving arm, a small alcohol pad wiping the tiny wound, the empty syringe placed carefully on the floor beside her unconscious body.

Kyle sat beside Gillian and tried to sort out his thoughts. It had been like an experience inside another mind, like his probing mission with Holly, as though he had not been in control, but merely observing another person's actions. In the moment of crisis, with Holly dead and Gillian slipping away, his unconscious had tapped into the wealth of his mother's experience stored inside his head, and played back the necessary actions. As if he had known how to do it himself from long practice, confident and assured.

"If I can do it in a crisis—"

The thought came so suddenly and so powerfully that he spoke the words aloud. He could sense the connection he had made, and now he needed only to feel his way there consciously, to take hold of the now fading link and maintain it. He had read through the procedure Gillian had printed out, and he knew what it consisted of. But the understanding, the feeling for dosage and timing, the awareness of the chemical processes induced. Without these, the chances of success were....

"Mother."

Kyle drew a long slow breath and held it. He sat in frozen fascination. Fear and awe, inspiration

and intimidation battled within him.

He saw clearly in two worlds, as in his deep probe with Holly. Before him was the lab, Gillian to his left, chemical benches stretching the length of the room, the outline of Holly's form strapped to the examination table. He smelled the chemical-tainted odor of the room, felt the chill of the plastic tiling beneath him, the harshness of the wall at his back.

But inside his mind, he had followed a trail. And before him now stood a wall such as he had met when probing Holly's mind, a vast unbreachable barrier which locked all beyond it from external view.

`Took you long enough, Kyle. I was beginning to think you'd never get in touch with your own mind.'

`You've been there all the time, haven't you?'

There was no image of his mother, only the voice, the Presence, the sense of her being. She was there.

`I—only just discovered that I could probe—that there was anything inside my own head that wasn't me.'

A sense of warmth flowed from the Presence that was Cyndi, a feeling he had not known for weeks. Renewed vigor seemed to fill his physical body, and his spirit lifted.

`You've had a D-damned tough ride, Kyle. And we were both lucky that Gyl took you to Holly. If she hadn't shown you the way, helped you to see what your mind probe can do, you would never have reached me in time.'

`Can we—'

`We can try. I don't know what else to say. She deserves every bit of help we can give her. But I may be a little clumsy. Your body doesn't respond quite like mine.'

Kyle followed the urge he felt and let his consciousness drift to the background as Cyndi's will again took control of his body. There was a vast sense of relief, as though the burden of responsibility he had carried for so long had suddenly lifted. He watched in quiet fascination as he opened cabinets, collected an array of vials and instruments, and arranged them neatly on a rolling tray beside Holly.

`Keep up, Kyle. Watch what you're about to do. This could be the start of something pretty big, if it works. And if not—well, Holly would have been the first to say that we couldn't make her any worse.'

`Just let me know what you're doing. I'll try to follow.'

`Good enough. Now about Holly—how long since her body functions stopped?'

Kyle glanced at the wall clock, the movement under his own volition. `Two or three hours. But Gillian had her body cooled within a few minutes of...'

`It's OK, Kyle. This is Holly's domain more than mine, but I figure we have a great chance of recovering everything in her head. The rest, though—I'll try.'

Kyle watched himself straighten Holly's neck, realigning the vertebrae and apply a locking brace to hold it firmly in the correct position. Then he checked her head for signs of serious injury—there were several external contusions, but apparently no fracture. He knew that and he didn't, both at the same time.

`Her head's in good shape,' Cyndi told him. `Maybe some concussion, but the brain restoration should correct that. We need to start massive nerve regeneration in the neck, though, if we want the damage in her spinal cord to heal. I'm injecting a local nerve cell regenerative.'

Kyle saw himself insert the needle directly at the site of the neck injury, between the vertebrae. He watched in awe as the neck began to visibly change shape under the action of the drug. `OK. Her body needs warming up, or we're wasting our time. We give her a thermal boost.'

Kyle's hand reached up to the wall panel above Holly, and pressed two buttons. The first activated a lighting system above the examination table, and the second started a similar glow from the table itself.

`I didn't design this stuff. Gyl even needed some help. The wavelengths are selectively absorbed by the muscle cells in the body, but the pumping rate is low enough that the heat can be dissipated in adjacent cells. It'll cook her slowly. When she's at body temperature, the thermal sensor will shut it off. Should take about five minutes.'

Kyle glanced at the digital timer on the wall, and told it to reset. Then he took a syringe with a ten centimeter long needle, and filled it from a large vial. He carefully pulled the coveralls back to expose Holly's bare chest.

`I shouldn't—'

`She won't be embarrassed to know you saw her bare-chested. If anyone's embarrassed, it's me.'

Kyle cleaned the skin just below Holly's left breast with a swab, and inserted the long needle directly down between the ribs. He injected the syringe contents, and told the timer to start.

`It's a cardiac cell-specific regenerative. Takes about five to ten minutes to have full effect, if I gave her the right dose. And since I've never tried it on a person, I can't be sure. If it does its job, we can work on getting the heart going again.'

Over the next three minutes he made several small injections in various parts of Holly's body. At the end of the last one the heat lamps shut off.

`Now we've started the tissue regeneration in the major organs, and some of the blood cells should be functional. We've started restoration of inter-vertebral cartilage and support muscles in the neck. With any luck it'll knit itself back together within a few hours.' Cyndi sighed. `The brain's next Kyle, and it's the biggest question mark. Regeneration dosage depends on what's left alive, if

anything, and the total number of cells in the living brain. There's complexed oxygen in the mixture to keep the cells alive until we get her breathing again.'

The needle went in below and behind the ears, on both sides. Holly still looked as limp and lifeless as she had done, but a faint color had returned to her cheeks.

'This is creepy,' Kyle sent. 'I remember reading about Frankenstein and his monster—'

'There's no monsters this time, Kyle. Only Holly. And if she has something still left of her personality inside that head, we might actually be able to get her back. This is where the real work begins.'

Another needle went into the heart, this time a stimulant to invoke involuntary muscle contractions. Then Kyle began external cardiac compression, trying to force the heart to kick-start. He performed full cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, doing mouth-to-mouth breathing coupled with heart compression. And suddenly, there was something. A faint flutter of a pulse, a shaky, shallow breath.

'Synaptic stimulant. Get the nerves working.'

Another needle went into Holly's neck and upper spine, and within seconds her body began to twitch. Kyle pulled a breathing mask from the wall and placed it over her mouth and nose.

'Oxygen-rich. Should help get the level up in the blood. She won't have a full complement of living haemoglobin for a while, so we need to supercharge the cells that are alive.'

'Mother. How did you work this all out? You're not even medically trained.'

'I'm a fast learner. I saw enough suffering around me when I was growing up. It was my life's work, Kyle.'

Holly had begun to breathe, erratically, but more deeply. Her heartbeat was irregular and still feeble. Color slowly suffused her skin.

Kyle felt suddenly weak at the knees. His vision was becoming blurred. He leaned against the table for support.

'You're running down, Kyle. There's nothing more you can do for her right now. Sit down before you fall down.'

But he couldn't. He would not let Cyndi's suggestion take effect, not this time, when he knew he could be witnessing the rebirth of a friend, one he had thought to be dead forever. He wiped the tears clumsily from his eyes as he watched, as her breathing stabilized, and her heartbeat became strong and regular. Cautiously he reached out a hand, his own hand now, one under his control, and touched her cheek. There was warmth there, where before the iciness of her skin had pierced his very soul. He put his arms gently around her, and lay his head on her chest. If only her mind had survived, she would—she could—

A firm hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him up. He was too weary to resist.

"You did it, Kyle. You brought her back."

Kyle turned to look at Gillian, now much more the woman he knew. She looked strong and healthy, although her shoulders still drooped slightly. Joy filled him at last, a joy that he had thought never to feel again. He laughed out loud, and threw his arms around Gillian, hope brimming over in him.

"Not quite, Gillian. She's not back yet. But at least we can hope." He laughed again, and pulled away to hold Gillian at arm's length. "It wasn't me that did it, either. Not really me. It was Cyndi." He touched a weary hand to his forehead. "My mother's in here. Not just fragments, but all of her. And Gillian I think, at last, that I'm beginning to understand."

'Beginning is right, Kyle.' His mother in his mind, and Gillian standing there before him. 'But now that you've got me here too, maybe we can get you through this after all.'

CHAPTER 17: Rebirth

Kyle felt a soft touch on his shoulder and he opened his eyes. Gillian stood over him. He was sitting slouched in a chair beside Holly, his left hand still gripping Holly's right with fierce intensity. His wrist muscles ached.

"Sorry Kyle." Gillian was apologetic, but firm. "We're on a fast ticket out of here, or we'll be needing a few more miracles on short notice."

She pointed toward the windows, and Kyle saw daylight outside. He realized he could not remember getting into the chair. "I've been asleep?"

"For about an hour. I needed to do some fast track-covering, so nobody can figure out what we've been up to. You two looked pretty comfortable. But it's after six now and this whole place'll be swarming within the hour."

Kyle moaned and stretched. He tried to work the cramp out of his hand, opening and closing the fist, but it remained stiff and sore. All his fingers ached. He heaved himself slowly to his feet.

"My hands feel like they've been pounding stone," he said.

"The price of performing medical miracles with hands that aren't your own." The ghost of a smile touched Gillian's face, and was gone. "We move."

She scooped Holly up from the recovery table and carried her to an old-style stretcher. It sported large omni-directional wheels and a rack below the bed for stowing belongings. "You ride underneath, Kyle. I'm going to be sloppy with the bedding, and it should be enough to keep you out of sight."

Kyle settled himself as comfortably as he could on the lower shelf as Gillian made the final adjustments to Holly's appearance. He recognized the soft hum of a distorter being activated.

"I thought carts like these went out with ground cars," he said.

Gillian snorted. "Budget problems."

The cart moved slowly and quietly towards the door, and Gillian cut the lights in the lab. It seemed dim in the room with only filtered daylight from the windows for illumination.

"Last word, Kyle. Keep quiet—and I mean quiet—and don't show yourself unless I say."

The door slid open and they were out in the corridor, gliding silently over the sectioned plastic gridwork of the floor. Maybe the cart wasn't as low-tech as it looked.

"Let's see some ID, please." A man's voice, calm and unconcerned, with no hint of anticipated trouble. They'd gone no more than fifteen meters, and around only one corner. Kyle heard the 'zip' of an overall pocket. He kept his mind quiet, as Gillian had Commanded him to do. There was a soft 'beep', probably an ID confirmation.

"Thanks," Gillian said.

"Where you taking the old bird?"

For a moment, Gillian was strangely silent. Kyle wondered at the pause.

His psychic wall went up before he felt anything coming. He was too worn out, physically and mentally exhausted. The prober would see the wall, classify it, and know in an instant he was dealing with more than one mind. He sensed the invading presence scanning his defense, wanted to cry out to Gillian to react, before the prober responded to his discovery. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the probe withdrew.

"You got some kind of special defenses, Ms. Gekyll," the man said. "Never seen that one before. Maybe you could teach me it some time."

"Surely. Drop by my lab when you get off duty."

There was a lewd chuckle from the man. "You got it. And my advice is, you get rid of that old carcass you're carting round before it infects someone."

"I'll be sure and do that." Gillian could be naturally charming when she wanted to. No Command or Presence, just a playful innocence in the voice which invited male interest. Kyle heard the soft squeak of rubber on plastic. The sound receded down the hall, and the cart began to move again. Five minutes later, a hand reached through the sheets and tapped him on the head. He scrambled clumsily out from beneath the covering, and recognized the corridor outside the storage room where they'd first arrived. Gillian used a pass key to cycle the lock and Kyle instantly caught the chemical odor of the room beyond. She held the door open for him. He spun the cart end-on to the door and slid it inside the room. Gillian closed the door behind them, and they were in pitch darkness.

"Lights three," she ordered.

The room lighting flickered into life. Gillian slid aside a large chemical storage rack on the left, revealing a blank wall. She ran her palm across the space at eye level, until a tiny panel snapped

open just behind the sliding rack. The pass key she inserted was the same one he'd used when they arrived.

"You take the ride first this time," she said. "Can you carry Holly?"

Kyle felt weak and a little lightheaded. He doubted if he could lug her more than a couple of meters, despite her light frame. "I can manage," he said.

"I don't believe you." Again, the faint smile. "But all you have to do is get her out of the elevator at the bottom. You can wait for me there."

There was a hiss as the elevator door opened behind her. She reached to the back of a shelf, retrieved her Ready Light, and hung it by its loop from the belt on Kyle's uniform. Then she helped him into the tube and bundled Holly in beside him. "See you at the bottom," she said. In an instant, they were dropping down into blackness.

It seemed like a long fall, almost dream-like, a feeling of weightlessness in a dark void; reminding him of something, somewhere. Abruptly, the motion stopped. Yet apart from the faint hiss of pressure equalization, the darkness remained unyielding.

Kyle fumbled at his waist, this time the panic not nearly so intense, Holly's warm living body providing comfort rather than evoking dread as it had done on his last visit here. He shuddered involuntarily at the memory.

At last his groping hand found the switch and shone the light groundward, trying to avoid the eerie sense of suffocation he felt when the searching beam was swallowed by the dark. He slid out of the tube and pulled Holly's limp arm up over his shoulder. With a grunt of effort, he hauled her free of the elevator and eased her to the ground against the dirt wall beside the door. He was both thankful and apprehensive when the door sighed shut.

The elevator did not return. Kyle's sense of time was distorted in the lightless world of the tunnel, yet he knew that even his growing fear could not stretch two minutes into ten. A chill crept down his spine, and a tightness seized his throat.

Kyle rose from his crouch beside Holly and began to scan the darkness with the Ready Light. He did not want to decide what to do. Yet he knew he must; there could be no delay. If something had gone wrong, the next person to step off the elevator might not be Gillian. He was in no condition to fight; he could not possibly carry Holly as far as the hover. But he would not let anyone take her, not after the miracle that had just been performed.

Kyle crouched and half-carried, half-dragged Holly along the wall until she was out of lamp range of the doorway. Then he set out into the blackness by himself, not looking back, the light's beam weaving across the dark ground as he tried to hold the lamp steady in his hand. He imagined he saw vague shapes moving in the distance, off to the sides, away from the light. Scenes of activity never close enough to be distinct, like shifting visions in a dark fog. Suddenly he saw a figure

ahead, caught in the light of the lamp, moving away from him. He recognized the form, the shape, the clothing.

"Gillian—"

The word caught in his throat, and the figure ahead stumbled on. Stumbled, its movements increasingly erratic, yet always just ahead. Kyle spurred himself forwards, desperate now. The figure fell once, twice to its knees, staggering onwards as if fleeing from a pursuer that held over it the power of life and death.

He could not gain on it. The figure moved with an unnatural strength that propelled it up and away, just beyond reach. Once he thought he saw the face look back, chalk white and drawn, haunted, a vision of mortal terror. He cried out in shock, a wild uncontrolled scream that could not be contained, his very soul pleading for mercy. Then his body pitched forward and the lamp went out. A cold blackness closed in about his throat, and he was swallowed up by the waiting darkness.

"Kyle!"

There was a blinding light. He could not open his eyes, and he was pinned down. His body shook violently. The taste of fear flooded into his mouth again, a sour metallic tang in his throat. He twisted and thrashed, struggling to get free. The voice continued, loud, insistent.

"Kyle!"

Suddenly the light was gone, replaced by abject blackness, the darkness of the void. Yet out of the terrible night soothing words came, and the gentle touch of a hand.

"It's Gillian, Kyle. Gillian. You're safe now. We made it. You're safe."

He clung, to words or to touch, to both. As if they were the only hope of survival in a sea of torment. And slowly reason returned, reason that brought peace to his heart without understanding.

"Safe?" he whispered.

"Let me help you up, Kyle. Let me help you." His reason told him that Command was being used, he should resist. Yet he felt no compulsion to do so. He allowed himself to be pulled upright, leaned heavily on the support as his head swam and a wave of nausea swept over him. There was a light again, but this time dull and feeble, distant. He could not open his eyes. Not yet. He feared what he might see.

The click of metal on metal. He was lowered down onto something soft and yielding. Then familiar music flowed about him. Gillian's music. His mother's music. He was grateful for the comfort, let himself sink into it, drifting down into a sleep of peace. The hand, he remembered. Still there, on his face. He was safe.

Kyle awoke to the smell of perfume, the softness of a real bed, the faint strains of gentle music. His body felt at peace, warm and relaxed, without pain or ache of any kind. It was too good to be true. He opened his eyes and looked around.

He was in a room he recognized. Rena had not remodelled since the last time he had been here—how long ago? Years, it seemed. Dim pinkish light filtering through the small window told him it was evening, but of which day? How long had he—

"Not two weeks since I sent you away, and you're back here in worse shape than the last time you came in. What do you kids do with yourselves these days to get into such a mess?"

Rena was all concern and mock reprimands, bustling around the bed taking his pulse and generally checking for signs of life. She eyed him speculatively.

"I don't suppose you're hungry or anything?"

Kyle felt like there was a hollow pit where his stomach should be. "Not even a bit," he said. "I don't think I'll ever have an appetite again."

"That's what I thought. After all, a few days without food never hurt anyone."

"Days?" Kyle asked. "A few days?"

"Well, three to be exact. If you would get some sleep regularly instead of saving it up for one big hibernation every couple of weeks maybe you'd feel better. Now about those visitors, did you say—"

"Gillian! Holly. Where are they?"

"Give me a chance to finish what I'm saying. Patience just doesn't exist in the young any more. You'd think everything had to happen in an instant." She looked at the ceiling. "Now where was I?"

"OK, enough of the dramatics, Rena. I'll be out of this bed in a second if you don't tell me—"

"Your friend Gillian brought you in here about noon three days ago. She and Raj have been in conference pretty well solid since then, except when I've forced her to take occasional rest. She's a D-damned strong-willed bitch that one."

Kyle threw off the covers and slipped his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Far enough, Kyle," Rena ordered. She put a hand firmly on his shoulder and held him in place. "Your other friend, Holly. She has been an—interesting patient. She got out of bed yesterday, but she's still weak and a little confused. Otherwise she's doing remarkably well for a woman who was dead four days ago."

Kyle would have leaped up and hugged her if he hadn't stumbled getting out of bed. He grinned sheepishly. "I need to see her, Rena. I have to see her."

Rena looked at him appraisingly, then helped him to his feet. She offered him her arm. "You're still weak, Kyle.

Exhaustion, concussion, several severe bruises, and psychic shock. But I don't imagine I can keep you here until you've satisfied your curiosity."

She led him out of the room into the common area. There were half a dozen people sitting at tables, some with drinks, most in animated conversation. A sudden silence fell as he entered. "How much do they know?" he whispered.

"Enough about Holly to make you the center of attention."

Rena smiled at him and took him across the room to a closed door on the far side. She knocked and walked in without waiting for an answer.

Two women looked up as they entered. On the bed sat Gillian, dressed in a fresh grey coverall. Her eyes twinkled with customary strength, but her face was hollowed with exhaustion. In the bed sat Holly. Holly, as he remembered her, smiling and impish, her gaze warm with familiarity.

"It's good to see you, Kyle," she said.

Kyle stood rigid for a moment, rooted to the spot. Emotions vied within him. In the end, it was simple joy that bubbled forth. He pulled free of Rena and ran forward, leaping onto the bed and flinging his arms around Holly's shoulders. The salt taste of tears was in his mouth and his body shook with sobbing. For a minute or more he could find no words. At last he pulled back to look at her.

"Next time—next time you need our help, Holly," he said, "ask for it. A little sooner would have been easier."

She favored him with her characteristic glare. "Next time, Kyle, there won't be a next time." She nodded her head towards Gillian. "Between the three of us, we'll make sure of that."

CHAPTER 18: Cause

Gillian leaned back in the chair, arms folded behind her head. "She talked a lot while she was recovering. It was as if her mind was replaying everything it had ever experienced, in fast forward. Reviewing it, sorting it, editing it."

Kyle frowned at her.

Gillian shrugged. "This was the first time anyone had ever been brought back, Kyle. She had to be monitored." Suddenly she sat forward and glared at him. "I'm a D-damned scientist. I was doing my job."

"Take it easy, Gillian," Kyle said. "I'm not accusing you of doing anything wrong."

For a long moment Gillian held Kyle's gaze. Then she brought her hands up and rubbed them across her face. Her hollowed eyes seemed to have receded still deeper into their sockets when she again looked at him. "I only caught snatches of thought, disordered glimpses of events. But I heard enough to make me want to talk to Holly yesterday when she finally woke up." She looked over at Holly, and Kyle sensed the compassion and understanding in that glance. "For the first time, I really needed to talk to her."

"I wouldn't have told her anything if she hadn't known most of it already," Holly said. "When I first came round, I was pretty dazed. I don't remember much about what I said. But sooner or later she'd have found out the real reason she was dismissed from the AF."

Gillian eased herself upright and walked slowly over to the window. She peered out through the grimy glass, twisting the rotation control rod for the blinds as she did so. The blinds remained stubbornly immobile.

"I killed an AF officer," she said quietly. Kyle felt the suppressed fury bubbling inside her. "One of the combatives training team. After practice one day, when everyone else had left. I beat

the living shit out of him, beat him until there was no breath left in his body, until I could barely stand myself. And the AF hushed it up." She spun abruptly to look at him, and waved an arm in Holly's direction. "It was Holly who found me with him, and they forced her to keep quiet."

Kyle turned to Holly, and she shook her head slowly. "It was scary," she said. "He was a mass of bruised and broken bones, lying in a bloody heap at her feet. And she was just standing there over him, her fists still clenched, blood spattered across her face and clothes, staring blankly down at her work. It was like something snapped inside her, and her mind just came unhooked." She shuddered at the memory. "They made me probe him to find out what had happened. My first probing of a dead mind." Her voice dropped to a whisper, so that Kyle had to strain to hear. "I was by myself. There was no-one to help me or guide me. I was almost swept away." She closed her eyes tight and was silent for a long moment. "When I came out of it, they made me tell them everything I'd learned. Then they ordered me to take an oath of silence."

"She didn't break that oath," Gillian said. "It was the few images I got from her unconscious ramblings that revived my own memories of it."

Kyle looked at Gillian quizzically. "But I thought the penalty for murder of an AF officer, even by another AF, was execution?"

"Holly told them I'd acted in self-defence. That he had attacked me with the intent to kill." Gillian looked again at the woman in the bed. "She saved my life. Despite our enmity and the constant abuse I threw at her, she saved my life."

"I saw what he'd done to you, Gyl. I couldn't let you die for a scum like that. He used you physically, abused you mentally, treated you like a piece of shit, and tried to hide behind his rank. Then when you told him you were pregnant—I wouldn't have been able to take that either."

"But would you have gone off the fucking deep end like I did? I went totally crazy. I tried to erase my mistakes by killing the responsible party. Only, it wasn't just him who was responsible."

Kyle felt a cold fear growing inside him. He looked uneasily at Holly, but she was too wrapped up in her own thoughts to notice. "They expelled you from the AF for that, didn't they Gillian? What did you do?"

Gillian stared at Kyle blankly. "I don't remember."

Now Holly was looking at Kyle, comprehension on her face. She nodded almost imperceptibly. "I didn't remember until you asked. That was in 2098, Kyle. Thirteen years ago. I've checked the AF records. You have to know what you're looking for—"

"Holly, don't," Kyle said.

"Tell me, Holly. What is it?" Gillian's voice was cold and hard, her Command back in action. Holly was still too weak to put up any resistance.

"DNA records. Your pattern. Matches that of a girl, born in early 2099. The surname was given

as Berti. Not registered in the main bank. She was born in East Hill Psychological Institute, and scheduled for summary termination. There's no record of any such execution. But there was a file on an escapee named Berti, who went wild—severely injured three Institute security guards before disappearing. She was twelve years old at the time...."

"...and she'd be twenty-five now." Gillian stared at Holly as if she had suddenly turned into a ghost and walked through the wall.

Kyle jumped to his feet, stumbled, then wobbled across to Gillian's side. He led her to the end of the bed and sat her down. Her eyes glistened.

"Gillian. You didn't know."

"I had a child. I had a daughter, and I didn't—I wouldn't acknowledge her existence." The tears flowed freely down her cheeks, and the potency of her anguish beat on Kyle like the naked flames of a furnace. Guilt and pain welled up in her and gushed out into the room like volcanic effluent. Kyle's mental wall went up in defence lest his Empathy allow his own heart to suffer the cathartic agony Gillian was feeling. He held his arm about her shoulders as she sobbed, her body shaking uncontrollably. Raj and Rena appeared at the door, but Holly shook her head in response to Rena's questioning look and they retreated without a word.

Kyle remembered the first time he'd glimpsed Gillian's inner thoughts, the turmoil he'd seen inside her head. Suddenly the dark pit that had frightened him so much in that experience had been opened, and some light now flowed into it. Gillian was changing before his eyes, as the answers to so many of her unexplained inner feelings were suddenly clear.

Kyle held her until she fell into a deep sleep, the sleep of physical and mental exhaustion. As he lay her down at the foot of Holly's bed, he noticed how damp his own face had become. His wall had not totally protected him.

Holly had remained silent and watched. "I'm sorry, Kyle," she said now. "I'm not in full control yet. And I didn't realize she was so fragile."

"She's not. But it's not every day you find out what's been gnawing away at you for the past decade, and realize why you've been on an emotional guilt trip for most of the life you remember."

"You've got me without any armor right now too," she said. "I haven't been able to raise a wall since I woke up. And I can't see a thing Mentally. I feel blind."

"It'll probably come back. But even if it doesn't, I'm happy enough to have you back just the way you are now."

"Cut out the sappy shit, Kyle. Even if it makes me feel good. Deity knows I'm lucky to be here at all. But it's still hard to get used to being only a part of myself."

"Try not to worry about it. Only time's going to tell us what comes back, and what doesn't. But most of you is here, Holly. And we need to help each other. How did you know about the DNA

match? I know you picked something up from me when you probed me—but all I had were suspicions."

"I haven't even checked that out fully. But I read from you how important you thought it was to find out if Gillian had any children—and at the time, I just followed it up out of interest. After all, I already had some secrets I was holding onto about her."

"And I didn't see them. I couldn't believe it when I walked in here and actually saw you two sitting together, acting like friends."

"I always admired her, even when we were at school together. She was so strong. And she never gave me any break. Always riding me, showing me how much better she was, and rubbing my nose in it. I resented her for that. But I always thought she knew what had happened when she got thrown out of the AF school. I didn't know her mind had become a complete blank."

"What about her daughter, Holly? How can we find out for sure?"

"I imagine the Snow would have a recent DNA signature from everyone in the place. If we could get access to their database, we could probably get a definite answer."

"We'd better. Because she's going to want to know, when she wakes up. And knowing Gillian, she won't stop until she's got what she wants."

Kyle heaved himself off the bed and walked shakily over to where Holly sat propped against two pillows. He spoke softly, for her ears only. "I'm glad to have you back, Holly. I've got one D-damned big job to do, if I want to find whoever killed my mother. But we've all got a stake in this now. You, me, and Gillian."

"I'll back you up, Kyle. For what it's worth."

"You'll be more help than you know, even if you just sit in that bed and do nothing but talk. Which, of course, you're not going to do." He smiled at her, and turned to go out of the room. Just as he reached the door, she called to him.

"Thanks, Kyle. For my life. And thank your mother for me, too. I was glad to be her first real human guinea-pig."

Kyle nodded in silence. Then he went out into Raj's common room to deal with the first part of his self-imposed mission: getting his team together, united in cause, once and for all.

CHAPTER 19: The Jackal

"What's 'n 't for us, kid?"

"Same as ever, Raj. More headaches, hard work, and people to fix up. More AF after you, and probably a bigger price on your head. You know they'll probably kill you if they find out you're sheltering us, don't you?"

"Never 'curred t' me. Should've dumped you back on t' street again like last time. Must be get'n soft in my old age." The big man grinned hugely at Kyle and flexed his massive biceps contemplatively. "Rep'tation, you say?"

"I think I can guarantee you'll blow apart all your previous public mischief records with this one, Raj. Whoever engineered Cyndi's murder and tried to take me in is a bigger fish than even you've tackled."

"Shit, kid. How'd you know what I've tackled? 've been inside AF seven times, get'n trained in 'bout everything they do. Files 're a bit out of date, but I know the works. Got three contacts in local Snow, 'n one just dried up. I c'n pull all the strings you need. Just want convincing. 'f the target's big enough, I'm in."

"I can't pretend to be in charge of anything, Raj. But if you can help us get started, dig up enough information to go on, you'll be interested in taking charge yourself. Of course, Gillian may object to that."

"You got t' reason for her in on this? What's so big she'd stoop to 't? She's one tough lady."

Kyle looked at him steadily. The small shielded chamber Raj had chosen for their conversation seemed crowded. It would have held two people comfortably; with Raj there Kyle made three. But Kyle was not going to be intimidated.

"She feels partly responsible for my mother's death. That's why she came to help me in the first place. She knows whoever killed Cyndi is after me. We don't know why, though I'm beginning to guess. But there's more. She could have a direct personal stake in this just about as strong as mine. That's why I need to get access to Snow records. If what I think is true, you're going to have a tough time keeping Gillian from taking over this job."

"S'at so? Y' got me intrest'd. I'll run the checks you asked for. 'f Jackal's all fired up about this, 's good enough for me." He clapped Kyle on the back, just hard enough to wind him without knocking him over. "Now you, kid, get t' bed again. Rena's been chewin' my ear off ever since y' got up. I'll let y' know."

Raj cycled the door seal, and the stillness of the small conversation chamber was suddenly broken by the sounds of merriment from the adjoining cafeteria. At least forty people were squeezed into the place, and it was both hot and cramped. Raj had told him the party was in celebration of their victory in a body billiards tournament. Kyle had never seen the game played, but he knew a little about it. Eight per side on a six by ten meter pitch. Each team designated one player as a 'ball', and the object was to smash the opponent's 'ball' through their own net. Body armor was minimal. Needless to say, many of those in this packed room looked in rough shape. But the booze was flowing freely and the atmosphere was jovial. The noise, of course, was deafening.

Kyle threaded his way along the edge of the crowd and out into the common room. Four sober-looking faces followed his movements through the room. No-one spoke, and Kyle was too exhausted to socialize. He was glad to know that some of Raj's people were on the alert. Without so much as a glance behind him, he entered his room and collapsed gratefully on the bed.

He awoke to the smell of cooked eggs and buttered toast. Until his arrival at the Snow he had never experienced the smell, taste, or texture of fully-hydrated food. The dehydrated stuff was usually flavorless and odorless, and sat in the belly like a lump of stone. But water for re-hydration had been too expensive for his DT family to afford. The perils of his recent life had brought with them some measure of luxury.

Rena was standing over him, her customary frown requesting a response to her customary question. A laden breakfast tray sat on the small table beside the bed. Kyle smiled at her.

"Much better, Rena," he said. "I assume I've slept forever as usual?" It was then he noticed Raj's massive bulk looming in the background, standing just inside the door. He looked questioningly from Rena to Raj, and back.

"I've given Raj strict instructions not to disturb you until you've finished your meal. It appears

he has something for you, but it will have to wait." Rena glared at Raj, and the big man sat heavily in a chair near the door. As Rena turned back to Kyle, he caught a wink from Raj. So be it. He tucked into his breakfast, wolfing it down as quickly as he could, the entire meal accompanied by Rena's clucking and tutting. She checked all his bandages while he ate and then left, carrying the tray of empty dishes.

Raj waved a file at Kyle, and heaved himself to his feet. Kyle made a move to get out of bed, but Raj motioned him back. He opened the file and stood looking down at Kyle, his expression serious.

"OK, Kyle. I did the check." He dropped a transparent sheet of paper on the bed. It carried a pattern of numbers and lines which Kyle could not decipher—yet he knew what it was just the same. "That one's Gillian's." Raj waved another similar sheet in the air, then dropped it on top of the first. "You didn't give me a name, but I found it pretty quick. She's been missing for over two weeks. How come Gillian didn't start the search for her daughter sooner?"

Kyle looked up at Raj, trying to keep the excitement and fear out of his voice. His heart was racing. "It's simple, Raj. Until last night, she didn't know she had a daughter." He paused to let it sink in, and when he saw Raj's head bob in understanding, he continued. "And until you ran this check, I only suspected who she was."

He picked up the top sheet from the bed, and looked at the name printed out across the bottom of the page. 'Suzanne Barry'. "Wherever Suzanne is, that's where I need to go. They're the ones that killed my mother. And now they want me, too. I know it. Suzanne was just more bait, to them. I want to get her back alive. And you know what Gillian's reaction to this is going to be."

Raj nodded. "The Jackal out for blood, I figure." He threw the remainder of the file down on the bed and pointed at it. "There's a bit more in there you may find of interest. Take a look. You might want to let Gillian see it." He winked at Kyle. "I want to be there when you show her. And then, you'll need me to keep her under control during the hunt."

Kyle grinned at him. "So what happened to the street talk, Raj? You sound strange without it."

"Hafta know t' talk a lot'v ways 'n my racket," he said. He looked at Kyle appraisingly. "You feeling up to this, kid?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me that," Kyle said. His feet were already on the carpet, and he was soon pulling on a set of grey coveralls. "We're not going to get along if you can't show me some respect."

"Fuck you. You're just a kid, an' that's what I'll call you." He bent down so that his face was inches from Kyle's. "And you'll like it."

Kyle turned his head away, wrinkling his nose as he did so. "You ought to eat more carefully," he said. "It's a wonder anyone takes orders from you when you smell like you just rolled out of

bed."

Raj rubbed his bristly chin with one huge hand and shook his head. "Arrogant little shit, rn't you?"

"I'll take you on in the combatives room any time, Raj."

Raj threw back his big head and laughed, almost helpless in his mirth, till the tears rolled down his cheeks. Kyle stood by quietly, arms folded, a slight smile on his face. Without speaking a word, he sent a message to Raj to sit down—a silent compulsion he was sure would have felled a horse of equal size. The laughter stopped abruptly, and Raj's shrewd gaze locked on his.

"I heard you were good, kid. No need to prove it." He strode smoothly across to Kyle and put a hand on his shoulder. "Just because I look big'n stupid, doesn't mean I am. I know what you're up to." He tapped his forehead with his free hand. "I got no mental walls, as you psychic types call 'em, not that I know of. But I got some built-in resistance that keeps everything out. Nobody's ever been able to affect me, or read me. 'cept Rena. How'd you think I got to where I am, without being taken by AF and put away?"

He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder in the direction of the common room. "Your other friend Crypto," he said, "that Holly—she tackled me a couple 'f times. I got a big kick out of the stories she gave 'em about me. Always stuck up for me, she did. But she never read me. Saved my ass on more'n a few occasions."

"OK, Raj, I'm impressed," Kyle said. "But I wanted to be sure." He smiled at Raj's quizzical look. "Holly told me about you a long time ago, while she was training me. Said you were a pretty special case. If you're going to be in with us, immunity to mental attacks will make a big difference. I hope my psychic Will Force is a good enough test. Because you may have to fight off much worse."

"Don't try to scare me with any of that Will Force crap, kid. Just don't joke about takin' me on in a fight—unless maybe you got the Jackal to back you up."

"I won't need her backup. It'll never happen."

Raj clapped him on the back again, but this time Kyle was alert enough to react, twisting himself to the side and taking the blow on the shoulder blade. He gave the big man a disparaging glance.

"Hey, what can I say? Y're learning." Raj laughed softly as he turned toward the door. He opened it, and waved Kyle through. "Come on, kid. You got some business to take care of."

The common room was almost deserted. One middle-aged woman in work overalls sat on the plastifoam couch reading an electronic book. She nursed an injured arm in a crude cloth sling. The open page of the book glowed soft pink on her lap. She didn't look up as Kyle led the way to the door of Holly's room.

"Gillian still in here?" he asked Raj.

"Rena made up a cot for her. She's been out since your little episode last night. Holly too."

The door in front of them suddenly swung wide. Kyle saw Holly asleep in the bed. A portable cot sat against the right side wall, empty. The blankets looked untouched.

Kyle was bowled over as Raj shoved him clear, taking up a defensive stance to the side of the doorway. One thing was certain, the big man could move. As he scrambled to his feet, Kyle heard a voice coming from somewhere inside the room.

"Someone say I was asleep?"

Raj slowly relaxed, a grin spreading across his face. "Wsn't me, Jackal," he pronounced. "Y' must've 'magin'd 't."

There was sudden movement in the doorway, and when Kyle sorted things out, Gillian had a choke hold on Raj, her small body supported deftly by the locked arms around the big man's neck. Before Raj could react, she had dropped to the ground, rolled backward, and regained her feet right beside Kyle.

Raj turned slowly, swallowing hard. He gave Gillian a penetrating glance, and waved the woman with the damaged arm back to her seat.

"You got nerve pull'n that kind 'f shit here, Jackal," he growled.

Gillian tossed her head defiantly, her face impassive. "I'm dangerous, remember?" She reached a hand down and pulled Kyle to his feet, her eyes riveted on Raj the whole time. Raj appeared ready to speak, but Gillian motioned him to silence. "Until we get things clear, if you have anything to say, you say it in there." She indicated Holly's room, raising Kyle's arm slightly in the air as she did so. "To both of us."

Raj nodded, and moved warily through the doorway. Kyle noticed that the book the injured woman had been reading had fallen on its face on the floor in front of her, its pink pages flipping soundlessly as it lay. The woman made no move to pick it up. She stood and watched warily as Gillian led Kyle into Holly's room. Just as the door closed, Kyle saw her race off along the corridor towards the guard area.

CHAPTER 20: Target

"OK, Gillian. You've made your point," Kyle said.

He wasn't sure how to react to her outburst, whether it had been a purposeful threat or simply a warning, or perhaps even an indication that the events of the previous night had unbalanced her. He allowed Gillian to manoeuvre him behind her, so that she stood poised between Raj and himself.

"You gone crazed 'n us, Jackal?" Raj said. He stood carefully, his hands loose at his sides, his body visibly relaxed. It was the most non-threatening pose possible, yet Kyle knew he too was unsure of Gillian's condition.

"No chance," Gillian said. "Maybe once, but never again. You and your people've been just a little too accommodating, Raj. I didn't live on the street for all those years without learning a few things. I've been blinded by responsibility, but my eyes are open again. And this whole thing stinks." She spat at Raj's feet. "All that shit about working in and out of the AF, training, keeping them off your ass. You strung me along nicely, didn't you?"

There was a soft creak from outside the door, and Gillian shoved Kyle back to the wall beside Holly's bed, leaping aside as Raj sprang at her. When Kyle looked again, the two were locked together, Raj struggling to twist Gillian up and over onto her back. At the door of the room stood a handful of Raj's guards carrying stun pistols. They were reluctant to fire, having no clear target. Gillian writhed and twisted her body this way and that, forcing her heavier adversary to constantly readjust his balance. Then with a lunge Raj rolled up and forwards, carrying Gillian with him in a head-over-heels dive. Kyle watched as Raj tried to flip out of the roll and land on top of Gillian, but she was there ahead of him, levering herself against his weight and pivoting out from beneath him to crouch warily at the side of the bed, hidden from the view of the guards in the doorway.

Raj did not pursue her. Instead he backed slowly towards the door, waving his people inside.

Kyle heard a muttered command, and guessed what would happen. He looked wildly at Gillian, saw the sincerity in her gaze, and risked a quick scan of her thoughts. She was completely lucid.

'Take control Kyle. Now.' He read it, as if she had said the words.

"Don't fuck with us, Raj," Gillian said. "You don't have the balls to take us in a fight. Your only chance was to lull us into a sense of security and let the big guns take us out." She glared at him from her hiding place. The armed guards were working their way across the room to get a clear view of Gillian's side of the bed. Raj was almost at the door, a good four meters from Gillian.

Kyle waited for the first of the guards to reach Gillian's line of sight. He sent a controlled, stunning psychic blast out into the room, hoping that he had judged the level correctly. It drained him more than he had expected, and he had to shake his head to clear it.

When he looked again Gillian was assailing Raj, who had stumbled over the slumped body of one of his guards. Within seconds she had him at her mercy. All six guards, including the one still outside the door, had fallen to the ground, and looked groggy.

Kyle scooped up a stun pistol and used it, carefully targetting each of the guards in turn. He could see that Raj was already unconscious, so he trained the pistol on the door and went to check on Holly. She was holding her head, still stunned from the force of Kyle's blast. She had been right. No Wall.

"I'm sorry, Holly. It was the only way."

"Don't apologize," she muttered. "I knew it was coming. Just couldn't do anything about it."

"Kyle. Help me get man mountain tied up. We'll be having more company any second." Gillian crept to the door and pulled the guard from outside into the room before closing it. There was no lock, but at least they might have a brief warning of any approach.

Kyle pulled the blankets off Holly's bed and rolled them into tight cylinders. They were thin enough to be tied together, and he knotted them in a thick wad. Holly kept watch over Raj as Kyle tied his arms to his body. Gillian monitored the door.

"He's waking up," Holly said.

Raj groaned and tried to swing his arms out, but they were held firm against his sides. Kyle finished his job, and helped haul the man to his knees. "What's it all about, Raj?" he said.

"Fuck you, kid," Raj retorted. The customary calm was gone from his voice, and he sounded vindictive.

"Company," Gillian called. She had backed against the wall to the side of the door, ready for anyone who might come through. "Keep that walking hillside in front of you. He's our shield. And let's hope they don't have anything like your mind as a weapon, Kyle." She grinned tightly at him.

"Raj." The voice from outside the room was tentative, uncertain. Kyle recognized Rena's gentle tone. He could not believe she would have willingly helped anyone who might hurt him. He looked

questioningly at Gillian, read the message in her thoughts.

'Go ahead, Kyle. Raj can put us in contact with the group that killed Cyndi. We just need to convince him to do it on our terms.'

"Rena. It's me, Kyle. We need your help."

He nodded to Gillian, and she let the door swing wide. Rena stood directly in front of the doorway, completely exposed to any fire from within. There were several guards around her, some not in combat coveralls. Kyle kept Raj in front of him, and Holly crouched behind the big man's back out of sight from the door. The pistol Kyle held was trained on the doorway.

"What are you—"

"Just come in and close the door," Kyle ordered.

With a glance at the people around her, Rena complied. She moved into the room, and closed the door carefully behind her. "What's happening here, Raj? Kyle? Have you all gone crazy?"

"Rena, when was the last time you used your Verity Force on Raj?" Kyle asked.

"Not in a long time, of course. I've known Raj for too many years to not trust him." Rena's concerned gaze moved from Kyle, to Raj, and back again. "What's going on?"

"Your friend Raj has been getting his protection and anonymity from less than honorable sources, Rena." Rena spun quickly to look at Gillian, who still stood against the wall beside the door. "You really think he's been able to keep this little operation quiet all this time without some powerful help? Sorry, lady. Not even the mighty Raj could do that."

Raj glared at her but said nothing.

Rena looked long and hard at Raj. When she finally answered, she sounded shaken. "I'm sorry, Raj. I never thought you would...."

"He's deceived you for years, Rena," Gillian said. "Probably did it in good faith at first. Knew your little group had been discovered and did what he had to do to protect you. But I don't think Raj is so honorable any more. Are you, Raj?"

Raj snarled wildly and threw himself backwards, knocking over Kyle and Holly. There was a soft crackling noise, and when Kyle scrambled to his knees he saw Raj lying in a heap on the floor at Rena's feet. Gillian held a stun pistol steady in her hand. Kyle could not recall seeing her pick one up.

Rena looked down at Raj, then turned to face Gillian. Gillian did not raise the pistol in Rena's direction.

"Whatever he did, he did for the group," she said. "He's helped you all when you needed help. How can you threaten him and turn against him, even if you know he's made some unscrupulous deals to keep us out of AF hands?"

"Simple, Rena," Gillian replied. "Some of those deals had to do with us. He was setting us up."

Going to con us into thinking he was helping, then send us straight into a trap."

"How do you know all this? You can't read other people's thoughts. Nobody can read Raj's thoughts—I know."

"I didn't know any of it, just did what I've learned to do. I checked his records. The Snow never heard of him, and neither did the AF. That spooked me. And all those chats he had with me, trying to convince me how big a con artist he was, how he'd always been one step ahead of the AF, and they'd never been able to pin anything on him. There should have been some record of all that. Unless he had a contact on the inside. Or friends in very high places."

Gillian looked at Holly, who was now standing beside Kyle at the end of the bed. "I woke Holly, and asked her about it. She remembered Raj—had to try and probe him a couple of times, and got nowhere. The first time she made up a story based on the facts she already had, and got him off. The second time she wasn't so sure."

"That's right," Holly said. "He was in for murdering an AF investigator who'd been looking into a theft at Reese Syndicate. You know, right across the street from here. The charges were trumped up, but something didn't quite hang together. I'd already probed the dead guy, and I'd seen several people at the scene of his death. There was the murderer—a woman, dressed in AF uniform. Two civilians, both men. In the background, at least one figure I couldn't quite make out. And Raj. From what I could tell, he watched the whole thing."

"But that wasn't what gave us the clue we wanted," Gillian said. "It was when Holly described the two civilians. Her detail wasn't too good, but I knew what to ask. One of them had the kind of face you don't forget. What do you call him, Kyle? Ice-Eyes?"

Kyle drew a sharp breath in, but said nothing.

Rena looked confused. "I know I don't have any choice but to believe what you're telling me. But how do you think you're going to get out of here now, after threatening and capturing a leader these people trust?"

"We're not getting out, Rena," Gillian answered. "At least, not yet. Raj has made some kind of deal with whoever is trying to get Kyle. He knows how we're supposed to be shipped into the trap that's been laid for us. So, in essence, he can lead us to where we need to go. Only, instead of going in with our heads in the sand, we're going to be ready. And Raj will show us the way."

"If he really made this deal, he won't lead you there. I know Raj well enough for that. He has a knack for staying out of trouble."

"I think this is a big enough deal that Raj will willingly do what we want. The terms of the agreement are probably clear: we walk into the trap, or the AF come down on all of you. The stakes are high. He'll jump at the chance to make it look like everything is working as planned. That way, he'll at least be living up to part of his responsibility as leader of this little band."

Rena knelt down beside Raj and, with Kyle's help, untangled his legs. She got a pillow from the bed and propped his shaggy head up on it. "He was only trying to help us, you know," she said quietly. "He's really a good man. Nobody can be perfect."

Kyle bent down beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. "I want you to know I'm grateful for all you've done for us, Rena. All of us. And until an hour ago, I would never have believed Raj'd do anything to harm me, either. But judging by the way he reacted to Gillian, I think she's right. He meant to sacrifice us for the sake of your group. He was put in a corner. We're not as important to him as you and the rest of your band are. He probably had no choice."

Rena took Kyle's arm and squeezed it. "You're a good kid, Kyle. Dangerous, maybe. Trouble seems to follow you around." She gestured around the room. "You keep strange and notorious company. But I'll do what I can to convince Raj to help. To really help, now. He'll listen to me—at least, he always has before."

"He'll listen to all of us, Rena," said Gillian from her post beside the door. "And he'll help us. Because now, he truly has no choice." She shot a sudden knowing glance at Kyle. "We have to walk into this trap together. Raj, to save you people. Kyle, to find the murderer of his mother. Holly, to avenge her own death. And me," Gillian turned her harsh gaze on Rena, "and me to find my daughter Suzanne and bring her back."

CHAPTER 21: Healer

The hollow knock sounded loud in the stillness. Rena moved quickly to the door and put a hand on the latch control. She glanced at Gillian briefly, then pushed down on the manual release.

A man in faded green coveralls burst through the door. Kyle noticed a small red star on the man's collar—only a few of the people in Raj's group sported the symbol. Rank insignia, perhaps. The newcomer looked wildly around until he spotted Raj sitting sullenly on a chair by the window.

"Raj." The man stood at attention, his body tense. "Urgent call, sir. Request that you come at once."

Raj sat back in his chair and stretched, almost as if he hadn't heard. He folded his thick arms behind his head and eyed the messenger calmly. "Tak't easy, Baker. 's a direct call?"

Baker nodded. Raj's attitude had not reduced his agitation. Gillian she strode over and transfixed him with her compelling gaze. Kyle saw him visibly relax.

"Tell me, Baker," she said, "direct calls are rather dangerous, aren't they?"

"Yes—sir." The last word came after a long pause, as though it had been dragged from him.

"Not an average call then, is it?"

"AF scramble, private channel," he muttered. Kyle watched Raj for a reaction, but there was none.

"Leave Jim alone." Rena moved between Gillian and Baker. She glared accusingly at her. "He's stressed enough without you forcing him to give you information. Why don't you just let Raj handle it?" She looked over Gillian's shoulder back towards the window. "Well, Raj. Do something."

Raj drew his outstretched legs back under him and rose slowly. "'s not so big 'deal. Only t' pow'r check'n in wit't trait'r." He grinned down at Baker, who was now looking wobbly on his feet. "Alw's nerv's 'bout this, n't y' Baker?"

Baker swallowed painfully. "Sir—"

Raj pushed past the two women and clapped Baker hard on the back. "We'll take care of it," he said. He looked back at Gillian, then over at Kyle sitting with Holly on the bed. "Can I go now?"

Gillian moved up beside him and spun him back to face her. She smiled grimly as she spoke. "You know the score, Raj. We're all in this shit together now. If you screw us, you screw yourself too. So do it right."

Raj gave her a cold stare. "You got no faith," he said. Then he turned back towards the door and pushed Baker in front of him out into the lounge.

Gillian waved to Kyle and Holly. "Let's go," she said. "Like the man said—I got no faith."

"You should, though," said Rena. She caught up with Gillian as she moved through the door. "He agreed to do what he could. And he meant it—you had me there to check that, remember?"

"Yeah. I remember a lot of things." Gillian did not wait for Kyle, but walked on ahead with Rena at her side.

Holly took Kyle's arm and led him out of the room. They followed Gillian at a short distance, just out of earshot. The lounge had an air of tension about it, like the feeling you got just before a major ozone front came through. Dry, tingling with electricity. Kyle's throat tightened, and he found it hard to swallow. Nine pairs of eyes tracked them as they crossed the room, and he felt the sharpness of their attention on his back like tiny darts prickling his skin. This place was not safe for them any more.

Holly waited until they were alone in the corridor leading to Raj's command center before she spoke. "Something stinks, Kyle."

The words were whispered and Kyle had to strain to hear them. Holly looked ready to continue, but there was a long pause. Her expression was dreamy and distant, as though she had lost her train of thought. Kyle's brow furrowed with concern.

"Holly?"

Her eyes came slowly back into focus. "He's too D-damned smug, Kyle. And the worst thing is, he knows we know it. He's just mocking us."

Kyle stopped her just outside the command center door. Raj and Baker were at work with the com gear, Gillian and Rena intent on the activities. Three or four of Raj's people blocked the corridor back to the lounge, but kept their distance. Obviously Kyle now commanded some respect here too. Or perhaps fear. He looked into Holly's eyes, but did not speak. Not in words.

'Don't say anything, Holly. I want to know if you can understand me.'

Holly nodded slowly, but there was no other reply. Inside his head, Kyle felt no sensation of contact from her at all.

'You've lost it all, haven't you?'

Again, the faint nod. This time Kyle bridged the gap between them and read her surface feelings, her unspoken thoughts. He linked directly to her mind, as he had done before with Gillian. Their thoughts flashed back and forth like instant speech.

`It's fucking scary. Like I've always known how to see, and suddenly my eyes have been poked out. I feel helpless. You saw what happened when you lashed out at the guards.'

`When we leave here, we're going to need you. You're not so helpless physically, Holly. Most of your strength is back, and you can match Gillian in a fight anytime.' Kyle shifted his gaze so he could watch Gillian. `There's no stopping Gillian now she's got a personal stake in this. And it looks like she's already got a plan in mind.'

There was a pause, and Kyle could sense the conflicting emotions racing around in Holly's mind. Her conscious thought process was in good shape, although Kyle could not shake the memory of that strange lapse a few moments earlier. But her Mental skills were entirely gone. He felt her indecision, her worry, her lack of confidence. She needed his help, or she would not be able to help them or herself. Holly seemed to reach a decision.

`I know what you're going up against, Kyle. Not exactly, but well enough. There's no room for anyone who can't protect themselves from mental invasion. I've seen what you can do. I used to be able to block almost anything, but even at my best I couldn't shut you out. Gillian has about the best Wall I've ever met. Raj is virtually immune.' She reached a hand up and turned Kyle's face towards her. `But right now, I couldn't shut out a pebble. My mind is like a wet fucking paper bag. One stone dropped in, and it'll tear open so D-damned wide not even your mother's miracles could patch it up. Now think about it—do you really think I'll be any use to you?'

The outburst was stronger than he'd expected. Kyle leaned back against the door frame to support himself as the logic in Holly's argument registered. She was right. How could she possibly help them if they met with any Mental adepts? Unless she herself could at least block an attack on her mind.

`OK, Holly. Your point.' Kyle nodded his head in the direction of the command center and they moved inside the room, closing the door behind them. Gillian looked up briefly as they took seats on the contoured plastifoam bench opposite the com panel. Two guards who had been watching them now turned most of their attention to the com activities. They had a few minutes while Gillian monitored Raj's conversation.

Kyle turned to Holly again, and found her looking expectantly at him. She knew. She wanted him to do it. No, not wanted. She needed him to find out, to free her from the anguish of not knowing. Kyle felt the weight of responsibility fall heavily on his shoulders, and the fear of his own inexperience mingled with that of the unknown. Yet he knew what he had to do.

`Don't try it, Kyle. Deity only knows what you'll find. You'd be on your own, totally isolated.

And you don't have the experience. Even I would have been scared to—'

'Bullshit. You were never scared to try anything. And you know I don't have any choice. Look at me, Holly. I'm trying to figure out what my life has turned into. I feel like a freak. The only thing that keeps me going is knowing I've got friends I can turn to. I need all the support, all the advice, all the confidence I can get. And I can tell you this for certain. Now that we have you back, I can't go into this without you.'

It was true. Now that he thought about it, he felt as though a part of himself had died with Holly, and had come back to tenuous life along with her. He didn't understand it, but there it was. He did need her. One way or another, they both had to know.

'Kyle, your mother was strong. Ask her to help. Focus inside your own consciousness, and stay centered. Never lose your self-awareness. It's your lifeline in there, and—Deity knows, you're probably going to need it.'

Kyle squeezed her arm, then took her hand in his. 'I'll be talking to you in a couple of minutes. Don't go away.'

He withdrew from her surface consciousness, and searched within himself for Cyndi's Presence. At his call, she was suddenly there.

'You miss me that much, Kyle?'

Kyle could not structure a suitable reply. She had pierced his protective shell, struck right at the heart of his sense of frailty. He did miss her. So often in the past, she had been there when his simple life had developed slight wrinkles, which at the time had seemed insurmountable obstacles to him. Now that his life and the lives of others were constantly on the line, he realized just how much he'd relied upon her reassurance and strength. And how large a part her physical presence had played.

'Looks to me like you've taken on more than you can handle with these two, Kyle—Gillian was always a lot wilder than me, kind of my opposite number. That's why we got along so well. But she's not exactly the mother role model. I guess Holly helps offset that. Some kind of compensation. But let's face it, I'm not in a position to advise. Being dead.'

He had to smile at that. 'Not exactly gone, though. But you have to help me with this. I've only done it properly once, and then with Holly to guide me. If you can get me started...'

'Holly was an expert. I have only dabbled, and mostly with the aid of electronics. I might be able to help you center, to focus on yourself. But once you leave the confines of your own mind, you are truly going to be on your own. Do you feel that strongly about her?'

Kyle could not imagine his mother saying such a thing to him. She had always been so supportive whenever it came to helping others, especially those who were close to him. 'You don't have to be jealous—I'll always need you. But I need Holly, too. And she needs me. I have to risk it.'

There was a slight pause. Perhaps an entire millisecond passed before Cyndi's reply came. 'Not jealous, Kyle. In my present condition, I'm rather detached emotionally. At least, I thought I was. But I didn't know how much I wanted you to stick your neck out for her. Your sense of morality and devotion to those you care about is just what I hoped it would be. I'm proud of you. Now let's get you primed for this, so you have a good chance of coming back in one piece.'

Kyle could not answer. Instead, he pulled back into himself and began to create his own peaceful world, as he had seen Holly do before his first probing journey. Outwardly, he kept his gaze on Holly as she sat stiffly on the plastifoam, apparently intent on Gillian and Raj. Inwardly, a lush green garden began to form, with bubbling waterfalls and tiny clear streams, thick soft grass that was cool and gentle against his bare feet, brightly colored birds flitting gracefully from branch to branch of the spreading oaks and maples surrounding his sunny glade. The chattering of the birds was like music, and he sank down gratefully on the grass, content to listen and relax, soothed by the peacefulness of his inner world. When at last he opened his eyes, his mother stood before him, dressed in a flowing green robe that seemed to float and drift about her, stirred by the gentle breezes. Her face was calm and reassuring, and Kyle felt peace and confidence flow from her as though it filled the very air around him.

'I never knew I could do it, mother. It's wonderful.'

'You had a good teacher. This place has more than just your hand in it. And none of mine. Look about you, and remember. Remember yourself. Keep your mind on your task, and don't forget your purpose. Remember Holly as she was, and as you want her to be again. That will keep you centered.' She looked around once more at the natural garden that surrounded her. 'I'll be waiting for you when you get back.' Then she turned and moved off into the trees, her dress shimmering slightly as it blended with the green of the leaves.

Kyle stood, his toes relishing the cool springiness of the grass. He drank in the sights and sounds around him, the smell of clean air and the scent of flowers that existed only here. Much of this was Holly, as she had been. Resolve grew in him. He would give her back what had been hers. She needed to know she would recover, that her Mental abilities were not gone forever. He would find them for her again. And as he thought of her, of helping her, and of the fear that assailed her, he glimpsed the connection he had forged to her mind.

Through the peaceful serenity of the garden it loomed dark and menacing. He realized that it reminded him of the dread arch he had passed with Holly when she had led him in probing the dead woman's brain. A tremor of doubt ran through him, as he thought of that door. Why did it not look different? He had expected a less ominous portal, in the case of a living subject. Yet even from here, he sensed the cold emptiness creeping towards him, like black fingers crawling over the unstained ground of his refuge. He felt a chill that he could not shake, and the doorway moved

steadily closer as he stood rooted, his terror growing. It was as if the forging of the link had opened a floodgate of darkness which was now filling his world, shutting out all light and hope, like dark icy water swirling slowly upwards to drown him in its frigid grasp.

'Forward, Kyle. Go on, or be lost. You cannot escape it now.'

He could not see her, but he sensed Cyndi's Presence. It compelled him into action. With an effort he stumbled forward, the darkness surrounding him now. A feeble light arose, suffusing all about him with a faint greenish hue. There was only forward, no backward, up, or down. He caught glimpses of vague shapes in the distance, unresolved scenes that he could not bring into focus. About him the blackness was total. It pressed in on him, threatening to smother him. The green glow faded away and, almost, he stopped. But he knew he must not. He moved his trembling limbs forward, groping with his feet, feeling with his hands for unseen obstacles. There were none. It was as if he were sinking through the void of space, cold and lifeless, forever lost. The emptiness enveloped him like a shroud of black snow, sucking away all light and numbing his body with a trickling, creeping chill.

At last he caught clear movement ahead, a vision seen through a cottony black tunnel. A shadowy figure, outlined starkly as if by a spotlight, shambled haltingly through the darkness, matching his own pace. Kyle moved faster, sacrificing caution, trying to close on the figure. Yet he could not. It became more distinct, took on a familiar lithe form. A haunted face turned for an instant towards him, and he gasped in spite of himself.

'Holly—'

The choking blackness cut short his cry, and the figure fled in terror, staggering dangerously. It seemed to stumble across a threshold, and for an instant, bright light leaked through into the dark void. Then both light and figure were gone, swallowed up as by an invisible mouth.

Kyle felt an uncontrollable terror surge within him, alone again in this impenetrable black, with no way out. For a moment, in panic, he turned, meaning only to flee to whence he had come, the hope of security far from this perilous place. He saw behind him a vast vortex of swirling black, devouring all that lived in this mind of horror. Snatches and fragments of broken images flashed across its rippling surface.

Kyle's throat ached with silent screaming as he watched the deadly mass advance on him, tearing apart the very fabric of Holly's mind, laying waste to the life of one he loved. And within him, suddenly, awoke the dreaded response he now recognized as part of himself. A defense against Mental attack, his own psychic force seemed to take shape, coalescing to form a vast red wall of transparent fire across the path of the monster. Kyle could only watch, helpless. Red met black, and the black shape recoiled. The redness spread, forming a solid barrier all round the vortex, until it was hemmed in by a virtual sphere of flame. As the reddish ball contracted there was a sudden

explosion from within. It dissipated as abruptly as it had appeared. Kyle stood staring at the remains. And a new sense of hope filled him.

Where blackness had reigned, he now saw distinct images forming. Scenes of activity: memories. He walked forward into one, and felt the thrill and excitement of physical combat, with a level of skill he had never known. His opponent was strong, powerful, well trained. He felt the agility of Holly's body as it worked against its foe, the moment of triumph at a victory well-earned. And watched as the glowering face of Gillian smirked from the crowd of onlookers.

He moved through a shimmering wall and was walking along a street, glum faces looking past him, through him, as if he wasn't there. No, not he, she. It was Holly's experience, not his. A DT worker district, Kyle thought. Holly sent a probe, quick and shallow, and read the surface thoughts of an approaching man. A sudden mental image of a nude Holly flashed before her mind, and Kyle was shocked, even as Holly had been. She dropped the man to the street with one solid kick. Perhaps those DT's were not so detached from life as he had thought.

Kyle moved on. And on. Holly's memories seemed to take on new detail as he advanced. At last, there was a scene in her lab, with Ice-Eyes. Torture, psychic attack, just as his mother had felt when she had been killed. Weakness, mental anguish. It was terrible to witness, but Kyle endured it, knowing that Holly too had survived. It served only to strengthen his resolve. He would see Holly, and Cyndi, avenged.

And as he moved forward again he saw what he had come to find. A region of patterns and shapes, like shifting and swirling fog, which formed ever-changing structures. He recognized a rudimentary Wall, glimpsed the seeds of a garden that must be Holly's own haven within herself. Her Mental power was growing. He stepped into the garden, faint and misty, featureless. From his own inner thoughts he let the images flow, watched as they were reshaped and colored by Holly's eager mind. The garden of her inner self began its rebirth. And faintly, very faintly, he heard her voice. Far back in the garden, deep within the mists. She was Mentally aware once more. She would recover, now.

`Thank you, Kyle.'

It was all he heard, and all he needed. Without a second thought he ceded to Holly her domain, so that she might make it once again truly her own. He let the current of her natural Mental forces carry him back, into his own sanctuary, a flourishing green haven.

`You've discovered your power, Kyle. I wonder if you truly understand what you just did?' Cyndi emerged from the forest, her feet lightly dancing across the soft grass. She stood facing him, hands on her hips, her face contemplative.

`How could you know? How can you guess what went on?' Kyle simply could not imagine how she knew what he had endured, what he had accomplished in his probing of Holly.

`By the signs. The darkness when you entered. The brightness when you returned. Your spirit, your joy creates the strength from which these things flow. And you have conquered. You believe your mission is accomplished.'

`It was like a consumptive hole, a blackness eating away at her mind. She wouldn't have survived long without help. I think I destroyed it.'

`What you saw was only an image of reality. Inside her mind, the cells of the brain must have been dying. Where cells die, there would be only darkness and emptiness. I've seen that myself, and it's terrifying. You've seen it too. You did not expect to see it in Holly, who was alive. But I did.'

Kyle stared at her in amazement. `You knew what I would find?'

`Not all of what you found. Or how it would appear. Your mind created its own image of what it saw happening. It gave a shape to your terror. But how could we expect to do what we had done to Holly, and prevent all damage to the most sensitive cells in the body? She would have died again, in time. What you have done—if you truly have stopped it—is to heal her mind again. Something I had no idea how to do.'

She moved forward and put her arms around him, and held him to her.

`I hope,' Kyle thought. `I hope...'

Perhaps, if he had truly healed Holly, perhaps the curse of his savage mind might have a purpose.

He let the sensation of peace and security flow over him, the sounds of his own sanctuary carry him away. When he at last opened his eyes, he had drifted back into the physical world. Holly gripped his shoulders with iron fingers, her piercing gaze fixed on him. Her eyes were clear and untroubled, moist with tears she would not release. Kyle could sense the attention of all those in the room, but for this moment, Holly held him rapt.

"Thanks, Kyle," she whispered. "I'm back."

CHAPTER 22: Contact

"It's nothing like that," Holly said. "He just helped me see a way to accept my new status. It hasn't been easy."

Raj grunted and turned back to the com, muttering. Gillian held Kyle's gaze for a moment longer, and he sent a brief message by mental link. 'Holly's Wall is on the mend. Don't ask me how—I think she'll be OK.'

'I don't want to know. But at least she might be of some real use to us now.' Gillian turned abruptly back to listen in on Raj's conversation, but as Kyle shut down the link he caught a last quick thought: 'When we're done here, stick around. I've got a lot to do, but first we need to talk.'

Kyle listened for the first time to what Raj was saying. He was attempting to talk someone into allowing him to choose a new time and place for a meeting.

"They're not too cooperative," Raj said. "I got my work cut out just trying to talk this Jackal into the idea. Why does she need to be in on this, anyway?"

"Who the fuck cares?" The voice at the other end was harsh and clipped, authoritative. The snarl of a wolf lording it over his pack. "It has nothing to do with you or me, so keep your precious nose out of it. Follow orders, and don't give me any crap, 're you and your whole DT gang'll be looking at life through a whole new set of eyes."

Raj's laugh was short and derisive. "Sure, shithead. And then you got to find some other pawn to make your play. You need me, 'cos I can get this done and you can't. Tell them I'm moving the drop, or I'll do it anyway and they'll come down on you 'stead of me."

There was a murmur of conversation at the other end of the line. Raj shut off his own pickup unit and turned to his staff. He carefully avoided Gillian's gaze. "This asshole's up to his sphincter in shit already with whoever gives him the orders. Any change in plans now'll turn the heat on him,

and on us. But," he looked briefly at Kyle, then at Gillian, "we got pressure here and we gotta do some juggling. I figure we meet these guys on their ground, we got no room to manoeuvre. Meet them under our terms, and we got some control. Difference is, they'll be watching us closer'n a Hawk tails its mark. It'll be tough."

The wolf voice came back on. "Raj. You turn off your D-damned transmitter one more time and we'll have a squad over there inside ten."

Raj dutifully switched on again.

"Better," came the growl in response. "We gotta send this out. Be ready at fourteen hundred." He paused, and Raj responded with one of his customary insolent grunts. "We're watching you. Hak out."

Raj switched off and turned to Gillian. There was a self-satisfied smile on his face. "How'd I do, boss?"

A cold sneer drifted across Gillian's features, dissolving slowly as she nodded her head in the direction of the door. "Much appreciated, Raj. Now I want some time alone in here with your operator." She raised her hands in a gesture of innocence as he shook his head in protest. "Hey, don't worry. Once he's set me up, I'll send him out to you. This won't take more than a few minutes."

Raj glared at her for a second, then waved to the guards. He caught Kyle's eyes as he went out, but Kyle turned away, sending a query via Mental link to Gillian as he did so. `What?'

`Got to pick up Grezman's com line, probably from his speeder. I told Raj to change the schedule on these people, force them to go to the top for orders. We need to find out where they go.'

`Why Ice—I mean, Grezman? That wasn't him on the line to Raj.'

`No. But in the background, when Raj forced the issue of a meeting change. Did you catch any of the conversation?'

Kyle had not made out a single word, it had been so muffled and distorted. `What about it?'

`I'm sure one of the voices was Grezman. I picked up the hiss of his words even through the noise. His voice was less clear than the others, so I figure he's in his speeder. I'm counting on him being the one who's got to make the big call.'

`OK, so what am I here for?'

`To observe. We tap into his com panel and listen. This whole business centers around you anyway. Whatever goes on, it'll have a bearing on you. And Kyle—you can bet Raj'll be listening to everything we say in here. Anything important has to be via Mental link. Keep tied in.'

Kyle nodded slightly, his gaze straying casually over to Baker as he sat nervously in front of the com console. Raj had just closed the door on his way out. The atmosphere in the room was suddenly oppressive, a heightened tension dropping like a thick web as the door clicked shut.

Kyle was about to bridge a link to Holly so that he could pass on an update, when a weak contact came through from her.

`You're not leaving me out of this now, Kyle. Share the link, so I can keep it up. It's hard work at the moment.'

Kyle almost laughed out loud. In less than two minutes Holly had gone from being a complete Mental nonentity to forging a non-contact Mental bridge. At this rate, she would be back to full strength in no time. He added his own support to her contact, and satisfied himself with a Mental grin.

"You have a trapdoor into the AF com net, Baker." It was not a question. Gillian sat down beside the com officer and settled a pair of solo 'phones across her head. "I want you to open the channel for me, and give me access to the dial-up directory. I can take it from there."

"I—I don't know if Raj'll approve—"

"Raj can get fucked. He's got his agenda and I've got mine. Right now he's playing along with me, or he wouldn't have let us keep you in here. Now open the link or he'll have one sorry-looking com officer when I'm done with you."

Baker drew himself up in his chair and squared his shoulders. He took a slow, deliberate breath, and his features hardened.

"You can't threaten me, Jackal," he said. "You're not in command here. All I have to do is call out and this room's crawling with guards. I don't have to sit—"

"Make the call." Across the link, Kyle cringed at the wave of Command that swept out from Gillian's mind. For a moment, even at second-hand contact, Holly rose from her seat in an effort to comply. Her Wall was not yet strong enough to withstand such raw Mental force. Baker spun to the controls and began tapping in codes.

`Next time warn us,' Kyle sent.

Gillian glanced at him briefly, her eyes twinkling. Then she was watching Baker's access entries, recording. `Not one trapdoor to get in, four!' She seemed genuinely surprised. `They must have added some new security since I last did this from the Snow.'

`Depends on your entry locus, Gyl.' Holly's Mental laugh rippled across the three-way link. `Used to be five from my lab.'

A cryptic menu flashed on the monitor, and Baker sat back from the control panel. "Leave," Gillian Commanded.

Before Baker was out the door, Gillian had accessed a sub-menu, and requested information on Grezman.

`Lock it, Kyle.' Kyle tapped the lock toggle button on the door control, and its tiny display winked red briefly before fading out. He returned his gaze to the screen, just as a warning flashed

across it.

UNAUTHORIZED REQUEST. YOUR TERMINAL WILL BE DISCONNECTED PENDING INVESTIGATION. STAND BY....

"Shit!" Gillian reached across the panel towards the power controls. Before she got there Holly pushed her aside and touched another button on the input panel, followed by a series of numbers. The display flashed once each time a number was entered, then cleared.

DISCONNECT OVERRIDE. ACCESS CODE ACCEPTED. COM MONITOR ESTABLISHED TO ADDRESS 640.251.1.4 *BREAK* TO EXIT.

The speaker system crackled and hissed with the muffled noise of a speeder's engines. Gillian reached up on the panel and shut off the audio to the room, so that only her headphones were active. She turned to Holly, who still sat beside her at the controls. 'That was higher access security than I've ever hit before. We're D-damned lucky you knew how to reverse it, Holly. Thanks.'

Holly nodded in response. But Kyle read, without passing it to Gillian, the gratitude and pleasure that she kept to herself.

It was strange listening to an audio pickup second hand, through the filter of another person's ears. Gillian transferred her version of Grezman's com track, but Kyle couldn't help thinking it would sound quite different if he heard it himself. There was no sense of the true nature of the sound she was hearing—the tones, inflections, and distortions were lost.

'...to wait, Grezman. He's in conference.'

'This sounds pretty feeble for a normal transmission,' Gillian conveyed. 'Could be off planet.'

'...know what it's about. He'll talk to me. I'm in my AF speeder. I'll expect a call.'

'It's on your head, then. He's already in a bad mood, and you're not a favourite these days.'

'Tell me about it. Grezman out.'

'He's shut down that line,' Gillian said. 'We got the right fish here, anyway.'

'Fucking asshole.'

'Grezman seems to have the same sort of respect for the next contact as Raj has for his.' Gillian seemed amused. 'We'll see if the attitude changes when he gets through to the next level.'

'An entire hierarchy built on mutual respect, Gillian,' Holly sent. 'Neutralize the power they wield, and the whole D-damned thing collapses.'

'Just about what I was thinking. We know how the power structure works, too. Just a matter of picking out the lines of control. With any luck, we're about to get a glimpse at who's really holding

the reins.'

`How is this going to help—'

Kyle was cut off in mid-thought as Gillian uttered a strange choking cry and snatched the 'phones from her head. Her face was suddenly pale and drawn, her breath coming in quick, desperate gasps. Kyle sensed only Mental shock, no physical pain.

"Gillian." The word escaped his lips despite his effort to contain it. He was at her side in a moment, helping Holly to move her gently over to the bench. She looked more than a little dazed, but as they settled her onto the self-contouring plastifoam, her eyes slowly regained focus.

"I'm—OK," she said hoarsely. "Don't know what it was. Strongest—" she looked at Kyle, "—strongest Mental blast I've ever felt. We've got to get back on the line. Something important...."

"I'll take it," Kyle said. He looked at Holly, and she nodded. Kyle moved to the com panel and switched off the input to Gillian's 'phones. Then he gingerly placed them over his ears, and raised his Wall in readiness. He flipped the switch.

Energy surged into his mind, assaulting power the like of which he had never felt. He was prepared, but it was only just enough. Then something within him awoke, his own fury burst forth, and everything grew clear. The assault no longer held any power over him, diverted by his own psychic Will force. He opened his mind to Grezman's com track, listening for words. There were none. Silence, only the throb of the speeder engines. What was the assault protecting, then? Something important, something he could not hear.

Over the 'phones he heard Grezman groan softly, then cry out as if he had been struck. His sibilant voice was only a terrified whisper when he spoke.

`I will not fail.''

Kyle sensed Grezman squirming under the scrutiny of—what? Something more callous, even colder than Ice-Eyes himself, which considered that hated man a mere....

Kyle's head suddenly swam, as an alien Presence invaded with a personality-suppressive Will. There was no warning, no defence. One instant he was himself, in full control. The next he was a mere tool, subservient, submissive. He cowed before the aura that filled his mind.

`There are none who can escape the scrutiny of the One Deity. It is forbidden to attempt contact with Him unless audience has been granted. You will rue your insolence.'

Kyle's terror grew, as he realized that his mind was being scanned, read from the inside out, his thoughts and knowledge, memories, aspirations, his very personality sucked from him. He could do nothing but observe, within the tiny space he had been granted by the invading mind. A long moment of anguish, and suddenly it was over. The Deity withdrew, retaining only a tenuous link, allowing Kyle to resume control of his own Will. Yet even now he could not release himself from that Presence. He cowered, awaiting the judgement he knew would come.

`The time is near, my son. I've been waiting. Only the last one would know...'

CHAPTER 23: Trap

The mouth of the cave yawned wide, wide enough to engulf ten ships, its edges ridged with long lines of serrated teeth that glittered steely blue in the garish light. Closer now, spinning slowly, the view dizzying and blurred as if seen through a thin smoke. The cave righted itself and became an ominous metallic monstrosity, a superstructure of steel grids and platforms, angry red and yellow eyes winking and pulsing. Figures skittered across the surfaces, up and down staircases at impossible angles, every direction at once. A hissing sigh, then a face, oval-framed, cold eyes gloating. Words of mocking hatred.

"I have you. There can be no preparing for the doom that awaits."

Laughter, like the grate of nails on slate, a long black shape reaching out, touching....

"Kyle."

His eyes snapped open wide. The shape was there, something touching his shoulder, all a blur of unfocused color, sinister movement. Panic surged through him and he screamed his fright and fury, flailing arms outwards, trying to ward off the attack. Vices held him in place. A sudden flash of white and grey and his face stung, burned with fire, as his eyes saw and his ears heard as if for the first time.

"...your D-damned ears, Kyle. You're alright. Shit, I don't think he can—"

"I hear you," Kyle said softly. His senses had stabilized, but he was still dazed. The adrenaline rush faded slowly. He forced himself to remain calm. "Gillian, what happened?"

"You must've had a worse dose than I got," she said. "You just collapsed in the chair. Like somebody sucked all the starch out of you." Her hand gently touched his right temple. "Nasty bruise on your forehead where you hit the com panel. We figured that was why you stayed out. How do you feel now?"

"Confused. And scared."

"I mean, do you feel any different from what you did **before** you took a nose dive into the panel?"

Kyle shook his head, regretting it instantly. "Apart from a sore head, no." He looked past Gillian as Holly approached the bed with a contusion kit in hand. He grinned. "What happened to the service in this place? I thought I'd at least get a first class medic like Rena, not some flunky that only knows how to treat dead bodies."

Holly lay the kit down on the table at the side of the bed, and tore it open. Within seconds she had a compress across his brow, and the pain had subsided greatly. "I don't take abuse kindly, kid. This once, 'cause I owe you."

Kyle looked sidelong at her. "I don't get it, Holly."

"Crypto to you," she said. She closed the kit, glaring at him as she did so. There was only the barest wink as she turned away.

Kyle caught the amusement in Gillian's eyes. "What's got into her?"

"She's getting back to normal, I'd say," Gillian answered. "And she never did like being a prisoner, or taking orders from anyone but herself."

"But we're not prisoners, only unwanted guests."

"Things are a little different since we had that incident in the com room. Raj has justified keeping us locked up by saying we're endangering both his people and ourselves when we're loose. After all, you and I did nearly get ourselves killed."

'What is it, Gillian? What's happened?'

'About five minutes after you collapsed Raj broke into the room and held us at gunpoint. I guess it took him that long to figure out what you'd done, otherwise he'd have rushed us as soon as you blacked out. Holly was really pissed about giving up. She's getting her own foul spirit back, for sure.'

'Holly, you catching this?' Kyle had not included her in the link, but felt something unusual....

'I'm here. Listening. And Gillian's pissing me off right now with her crap.'

'This means less work for me, anyway. And I feel better knowing that you two are back to your proper friendly relationship. It helps keep you both alert.'

Gillian glared at Kyle, but he still saw the twinkle in her eyes. 'So here we all are,' she sent. 'Raj discussed it rational-like with us, and we agreed to come quietly. I think Rena had a hand in the negotiation terms for their side, or else we'd have had the shit beaten out of us before they put us in here. Nice lady, just a bit misguided.'

'How long ago was that? And how long are we going to be stuck here?'

'Almost an hour since you cracked your head. Raj passed on a message ten minutes ago, says

he's got the new meeting set up. We leave within the hour. He's not giving them much time to prepare, and he wants you groggy or out cold. Still trying to act as a double agent, sitting somewhere on the fence between his own interests and those of whoever he's working for. He should know by now that'll just get him a picket up the ass. But one way or the other, we'll be walking into a trap.'

Holly broke in. 'I've tried to tell her, we have to have an escape plan. Whatever this meeting involves, it won't be designed exclusively for our health.'

'So what's the problem? Now that I'm awake, we can just leave—or at least try to. If Raj isn't going to help us out, what's the point in hanging around here?'

Gillian sighed softly, and looked doubtfully at him. 'Raj is our ticket to whoever is behind all this shit, Kyle. If we escape from here, we'll just be hunted down again, and they'll take us on their terms. At least, going in with Raj, we know he's out to protect his own interests. If there's a fight, we can work one side against the other. It's bound to turn out better than if we tried to handle it alone.'

'So we just act passive? You think Raj will fall for that? He's going to know something's up.'

'Too D-damned right,' Holly put in. 'He'll get us in the back the first good excuse he finds, so we go along quiet....'

Kyle dropped out of the link. He lay stunned on the bed, suddenly unable to think of anything else but his vision, and what had come before it. Holly's thoughts had sparked memories of the encounter, the Mental force that had assailed him, the awe and fear he had experienced flooding back to paralyze him, turn him once again into a mass of quivering insignificant jelly.

He felt hands seize his shoulders and pull him upright, stared wide-eyed into Gillian's confused face. Yet he could not shake himself free of the numbing memory. The Deity.

'Kyle. What the fuck's going on?'

Holly's mental contact broke the spell, sent the fear back into its corner. He blinked his eyes, squeezed them shut for a few seconds, ran his hands up across his cheeks and folded them behind his neck. Then he nodded slowly at Holly who now stood at the end of the bed, one booted foot resting on the frame.

"Thanks," he said. "I still feel pretty shaky. Must've hit my head harder than I thought."

'And that's an understatement. What the hell was that, Kyle? You seeing ghosts or something?'

'You saw it?' He was still scrambling to get his jumbled thoughts back in logical order. 'Holly, there was this Presence. I was on the com, and I broke through some kind of screen or shield that was covering Grezman's conversation. I didn't hear anyone talking, though. Only, after a while—'

'Grezman saying he wouldn't fail, right? Yeah, I got it. Then it's like you had some freaky religious experience, down on your knees and all that shit. Maybe you hallucinated after you hit

your head. Don't let it get to you.'

'I didn't imagine it. There was something there. I've been inside enough minds now, experienced a few things. I can tell the difference between my own bizarre dreams and something real. At least, I think I can.'

'Whatever it was, it wasn't the Deity. That whole thing is just one Almighty myth, and you know it. Get a grip.'

'It was in the cab. It was talking to Grezman, but not by com. It scared the crap out of him, and he's one nasty piece of business. And it picked up my Presence....'

Suddenly, it was clear. That was the answer. Whatever had been there, Kyle's Presence had set off a few alarms. It meant either his Presence had transcended the com line, or the Deity had done so, or both. Either way, it had nothing to do with direct com transmission, because Kyle had heard nothing. Mental contact only. Directed, and over a distance. With or without the aid of com channels. If he could project his Presence across a com line....

"I think I better get some more rest, Gillian," he said aloud. He sat up and smiled.

'Something tells me, Holly, we're only just beginning to understand what Mental adepts can achieve. And whoever we're up against is about a thousand lessons ahead in the course.'

'So what about this plan of Gillian's, sitting back and waiting for Raj to lead us into a trap?'

Kyle linked Gillian back into the conversation. 'Looks like we're all agreed now, Gillian. We let Raj lead on. We watch our backs, so he can't jump us. And, we go in with our eyes open.'

The lights of the city whizzed past far below, a blur of ever-changing colors. Kyle sat with his nose pressed to the window, trying to decipher where they were going. After a couple of minutes he gave up. To him the city at night all looked the same from this altitude, a vast sea of glittering stars. He pulled back into the seat and let his crash web tighten around him.

"Figure it out yet?" Holly's voice came out of the darkness. Kyle could just discern the shapes of both women beside him in the rear of the speeder. Only the glow of the panel lights in the pilot compartment shed any real light, and Raj's bulk blocked most of that.

"We could be flying over Atlantis for all I can tell," Kyle said.

A ghostly arm detached itself from the murk and stretched towards Kyle's window. "We're just south of the city core. There's the Central Records tower, dead in the middle of the industrial maze. We should be over the south-east commercial zone any time."

"So what does that mean? Where's the meeting going to be?"

Gillian's sarcastic snarl sounded from the far side of the speeder. "I think you should ask our

pilot again. Maybe now we're on the way, he'll be a little more conversational."

"Well, Raj?" Kyle asked.

"Simple exchange, kid. You're all hot 'n this part 'f the world. So I arrange for you to transfer to another, shall we say, independent operation. We contract a mercenary planet hopper to carry you. I pass you off to them, they take you to the new place, and suddenly you disappear off the map."

"Sounds wonderful," Gillian said. "What do you really have planned?"

"Pretty much what you'd figure. I don't want to spoil the surprise, Jackal. This way, it'll look more convincing."

"Where?"

"Old mountain helicopter base, south east about thirty K."

"You realize we're being tailed already?"

For an instant, Kyle was sure he saw Raj flinch.

"Sure. What'd ya expect?"

"So lose them. Like you said, it has to look convincing."

Raj obliged. The smooth flight of the speeder suddenly gave way to an almost vertical dive, and within seconds they had dropped at least two K and flowed into the express traffic lanes.

Kyle had to admit his admiration for Raj was growing. Not just because of his piloting, and his easy confidence. But the man had manoeuvred the three of them into a position of powerlessness with such skill that he was sure even Gillian had been caught off guard. With Raj as the only other person in the speeder, and the passenger compartment sealed, they had no option but to sit back and enjoy the ride. Raj's natural Mental immunity protected him from the only form of attack they could muster. And Raj had taken great care to ensure Kyle was still groggy when they'd been transferred to the speeder.

The chase lasted less than five minutes. Gillian gave the OK before Raj slid back out of the traffic stream and up to long-range altitude.

"Nice bit of flying, Raj. You must have taken lessons at a good school. And how much is this sporty little speeder worth?"

"Picked 't up for a song, Jackal," Raj growled back.

"I don't doubt it," Holly muttered.

"Tell me, Raj," Gillian said. "What do the AF say about your little trip tonight? Don't you think they'll be tracking you all the way to the site?"

"Likely. So? T' proper people 're paid off. Nobody comes looking for you tonight."

"And what about your own people? I'm sure you have a nice little back-up party ready in support if things go wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong. I planned this myself, and not even you can fuck it up."

Kyle decided Gillian must be up to something. 'What're you doing? Making friends again?'

'Keeping him preoccupied. Fishing for useful information. Trying to piss him off, so he might make a mistake. It's better than just sitting here.'

But Raj refused to be baited into further conversation. They were already south of the city lights, entering the deeper darkness of the ridged foothills. The speeder's air speed showed at near six hundred K. Two minutes later, they started down.

A feeble moon leered green-yellow through the smoke cloud that stretched its long black fingers out from the city glow. Kyle saw a large flat clearing, with a few small buildings clustered about what looked like a collapsed tower. There were no lights, and Raj used none. He edged the speeder down close to what must once have been a repair or storage shed for copters. It was much bigger than it had looked from the air, and its huge doors stood open against the high outer wall.

Suddenly a white glow appeared from inside the shed, and a vast ship stood silhouetted briefly as the light winked and died. Kyle was momentarily dazzled. The speeder touched down with a gentle thud, and the next moment the door sighed open, flooding the cab with chill night air. A figure stood waiting at the door, a small Ready Light in its hand.

"You're late. We don't have much time. I'm already near half an hour past my scheduled departure. Won't be long before someone gets suspicious."

Kyle could make out the features now, a long thin nose like the beak of a crow, dark eyes to go with it, and a peaked cap pulled low across his forehead. The man was tall, over two meters.

"Who are you?" Kyle asked.

Raj snapped an answer from the front seat. "Commander of the ship we hired to take you to Nairobi. And he's right, we're late. Better get going while you can." He paused briefly. "And good luck."

Kyle noted that Raj did not leave the speeder himself, nor did he open his own door. Either he was just in a hurry, or something was up.

"Let's not keep the commander waiting, Kyle," Gillian said. She pushed past him and clambered out, then shook the Beak's hand. Kyle followed her lead, Holly close behind.

The Beak shepherded them urgently towards the shadowy ship hidden in the shed. "We've got to move. Space police are real fussy about sticking to schedules on international flights."

As they trotted towards the shed, they heard Raj's speeder lift off. It sailed slowly up and over their heads, disappearing above the shed. There was a sudden distant roaring sound, and as if by pre-arranged signal, a much larger ship appeared in its place.

"Shit!" shouted the Beak. "It's the fucking police. Run for the ship. These bastards shoot first."

A row of lights flared across the bottom of the oncoming ship, and the entire scene was suddenly bathed in brilliant white. Kyle stumbled forward blindly. A sharp hissing made him look

up, and he saw the yellow-white froth of flame spring up just ahead and to his left on the door of the shed. A fine tracery of similar flame began weaving its way across the ground towards him.

"This way, Kyle."

It was Holly's voice. Kyle felt a frantic tug at his arm, and let himself be led, his eyes slowly re-establishing contrast as they plunged into the relative dimness of the shed. He saw that Holly had her goggles on. And that she had led all of them to safety.

They ran for the open door of the ship ahead, following the Beak's twisting gait, trying to evade the enemy's weapons. Their own ship fired back, the echo of the blasts deafeningly loud in the enclosed space. Then they were through the door and inside, the engines whining to life as the door slid shut behind them. But before Kyle could even look around and get his breath back he felt the shock of a stunner hit him full force in the chest. He sank to the floor, his body numb and useless. Through glazed eyes he watched Holly and Gillian turn at bay. The trap had snapped shut at last.

CHAPTER 24: Lure

The chamber was small and dimly lit, an airlock entry with closed and sealed hatches at its two ends. The Beak had slipped away, but three of his crew now appeared from the shadows. Holly tackled one with a vaulting leap, but was deflected on impact and smashed into the steel bulkhead beside the ship's hatch. She rose slowly.

Gillian had been ahead of Holly, and Kyle watched as she rolled neatly towards her opponent's feet, dropping him before he could fire his stunner. He did not get up. She used her arms like coiled springs, bouncing and reeling about the room like a drunkard, eluding the third attacker's stun blast. She drew the man's fire until with a well-aimed lunge she toppled Holly's opponent. Too late. He had scored a hit on Holly's arm, and she lay unmoving. Kyle's arm went numb, and for a moment his vision swam.

With an effort, he brought his eyes back into focus. The falling man had pinned Gillian's legs. Before he could struggle free the remaining attacker fired. The man on top of Gillian went limp. She fought desperately to keep the unconscious body between herself and the only uninjured enemy, but with her legs trapped she was helpless.

"Gillian!" Kyle squeaked the word, neither his vocal nor Mental message any louder than a whisper. He saw Holly's head rise shakily in response, caught Gillian's desperate glance. The crewman fired his stunner again. This time, his aim was better.

Another wave of paralyzing chill swept over Kyle, focused on his forehead this time, tingling through his limbs and out his fingers and toes. There was a stifled cry of shock, and he was not sure if it was his. Slowly his senses stabilized as the effect of the blast subsided. He saw Gillian lying in a crumpled heap beneath the slack body that had prevented her escape. Blood trickled from her nose and eyes. Holly crouched beside the ship's hatch, a still-glowing stunner in her hand. Gillian's

assailant lay unmoving at her feet.

"It's not over, Kyle," she called.

She rose from her crouch and pressed herself flat against the wall, stunner poised. There was a sharp click of steel against steel, the door mechanism releasing. It slid partially aside. A small hissing cylinder flew through the opening and smashed into the outer hull wall. A faint odor of roses stole through the room. Kyle felt his remaining senses sag, consciousness fading away. He thought he saw Holly roll through the opening in the doorway as it slid shut again. But then, why would she do that?

Kyle's body was being shaken, firmly and insistently. A voice intruded on his quiet slumber.

"Leave me alone," he mumbled.

"Wake up kid," shouted the voice. "You've got to walk. Now!"

The urgency jarred him partly awake. His neck stung sharply, as if he were lying against the point of a knife. He shuddered and shrank away, opening his eyes.

Bright blue-white light came from behind, and the sleek grey hull of a spaceship curved into the darkness ahead of, and above him. He lay just below the forward hull, in perfect position to see the array of weapons jutting like spikes from the ship's underbelly. Flashes of red to his left drew his attention. Stunners. There was a vast dark wall in that direction, fading upwards as far as he could see. On its surface, scattered orange patches glowed and sputtered. Laser blasts. It clicked at last.

"Gillian. Holly. Where are they?"

For the first time Kyle looked closer at hand, trying to put a face to the voice that had wakened him. The shadowy form turned slowly and was bathed in bright light.

"Rex?"

"About D-damned time, kid," Rex said. "We gotta move, and fast. I could carry you, but then I'd be a sitting fucking target. So you got to help."

"What happened? Where's Gillian?"

"Don't know. We arrived and Holly was holding the passage like a one-woman army. Piled bodies outside the airlock door as a barrier—bodies all had reflexor suits, kept the lasers off. She had a mask against the gas, unlike you. Couldn't find Gillian anywhere."

Kyle stared at him, incredulous. "But she was there, under one of the crew in the airlock. She was hit, Rex. Full in the face with a stun blast. She needs help."

"Kyle, we did the best we could. We don't have the force to break into that ship and take her out, if that's where they have her. Any second now they could sweep our people away and take us

all out. We gotta go, and fast."

Kyle staggered to his feet, his legs quivering like jelly, slowly stiffening to form semi-solid supports. "I can manage," he said.

Rex led him straight out from the ship, over to the wall of the giant hangar. Kyle could hear the shouts of the Snow assault force, orders to fall back. He recognized Diane's high-pitched call. Suddenly he remembered Holly, and risked a quick glance back as Rex pulled him along the hangar wall. He could not make out faces, only figures darting about in the gloom near the back of the ship, outside the airlock. Something struck him as he gazed down the ship's side. The shape, or the markings, the long narrow windows arrayed across the front where the bridge must be. He stopped in his tracks, for the moment frozen in place. Large red lettering along the ship's side, glistening as if wet in the eerie light. MISTRESS MIRA.

He choked back a cry, his body suddenly numb with fear and confusion. Rex pulled him forward, and together they staggered out under the open sky. Another great ship stood there, its forward landing lights blazing, weaponry bristling from beneath its jaw-like prow. Bright blue and white—AF colors. POLICE was written in black along the hull. Nothing made sense any more. This ship had fired on them. Now it sat idle while Rex pulled him past—no, not past. The airlock hatch stood open, and they stumbled towards it. There was a loud crackling and sizzling, and a streak of dazzling green light flashed over their heads up into the night.

"Quick, Kyle. They've started firing."

Inside now, through the airlock and into the main corridor. The crew wore AF uniforms, but he was sure—yes, a face he recognized from the Snow. They reached the bridge. Rex passed him to another man that Kyle had seen before at the Temple, and took a seat near the front of the ship. They had a clear view across the open ground to the hangar, where the Mistress Mira crouched like a rabbit hiding in its dark hole. Ant-like figures crawled and jumped erratically across the intervening space, while occasional green flashes winked out from the hidden ship. As Kyle watched he saw one of the flashes streak towards the ants, only to change direction at the last moment as a broad wafer of light stabbed out from their own ship and spread across the air like a shield in front of the fleeing insects. The Mistress Mira began slowly to move.

"She's under way, sir."

The shout came from Kyle's right. He turned to see a short blond man intent on a glowing map grid. One of the spots on the display winked insistently.

"I see it," Rex said. He shot a glance toward a slim, poker-faced man at a panel to port. "Keep them covered, Roach."

The burly AF man in the chair beside Rex gave him an inquiring look.

"OK, Howie," Rex said. "I guess we do it."

"You got it."

Both Rex and Howie took to the controls in front of them. There was a remote throb as the engines came to life. Outside there were two more weapon exchanges, the second leaving one of the ants immobile on the ground. No, no longer ants. Kyle could now make out faces, and the person that ran back to scoop up the fallen soldier was....

"Holly." He turned abruptly to the man beside him. "Take me down to the airlock. They're going to need help when they come on board."

"Rex wants you here. They'll have enough extra hands to bring them in."

Kyle was in no condition to argue. He could not make it to the airlock without help. "Take me down to the airlock," he said again.

His guard rose and took him by the arm. The Command had been weak, but strong enough. They went through the bridge hatch into the ship's main corridor, and headed aft. Kyle noticed doors along the corridor this time, most of them closed. One open hatch led to a galley, another to a changing area. Sealed suits complete with hoods and masks hung in neat rows, with thinner versions along the opposite wall. All were in AF colors.

They had reached the airlock, and it was bustling. Kyle strained to get a view of the outer hatch, but there were too many figures in the way. Then he heard, clear and unmistakable, Holly's gentle but authoritative voice.

"Get him up here. We're lifting off any second."

'Holly.'

'Kyle. Shit, I thought you were gone too.'

'What happened to Gillian? She was in the airlock. Where is she?'

Holly's answer did not come right away. A few seconds later her dirty, blood-spattered face appeared in the crowd. Her eyes said it all. She shouldered her way through to him, raising eyebrows from the mostly male company. He saw that her clothes were torn and filthy, smeared with red.

"I don't know, Kyle," she said softly. "I just don't know."

Kyle took her arm and led her down the passage. His guard followed, looking sheepish.

"Tell me what happened," he said. "I was useless from the moment I stepped inside the hatch."

Holly sighed. "She took a stun blast, real bad. It should have been me. She figured out faster than I did they were wearing reflexor suits, so we couldn't do anything hand-to-hand. That's why she went for the legs. Took down the guy who had me pegged. Then it was lights out."

"I saw it. I—felt it. But what happened when the inner hatch opened? The gas canister...."

"Yeah, at least I figured that right. I got through the hatch before they shut it on us again. There were only two in the corridor on the other side, and the stunner worked fine on them. I grabbed a

mask from one and moved the bodies together to give me a wall to hide behind, facing towards the front of the ship. I swear it only took me thirty seconds. And nobody else showed while I was doing it. I can't see how Gillian could have been taken."

"What about behind you? You were focused on the front of the ship. Couldn't someone have come from the other direction in the corridor, from aft?"

"There was a closed bulkhead door. I checked when I went through. And it stayed shut."

"So where the hell is she? Rex says they only found me in the airlock when they arrived."

"Fucked if I know. Something all too D-damned strange about this whole mess. Gillian warned me she'd alerted her people at the Snow, said we'd have to walk into the trap and last long enough for them to move in. Well shit, we did that. So how did she just vanish?"

Kyle said nothing about his thoughts. Why, if they had managed to get into the airlock while Holly was not aware of it, had they taken Gillian and not him? Up until now he had been the main target of these attacks. Why her, this time? It didn't make sense.

"Listen Holly—"

"Broke away from another tight spot, eh Kyle?"

Diane stood beside the man who had been assigned to watch Kyle. Her face was grime-streaked and sweaty, but the taut smile was recognizable. There was a sudden slight shift in the deck, and they all grabbed at walls for support. Rex's voice buzzed across the intercom.

"We're taking her up, people. Let's get everything strapped down."

"Come on," Diane said. "We better all grab a seat quick."

"What's he think he's doing up there?" Holly said. "We don't even know where Gillian is. And even if she's on that ship, how do you expect to get her back? Wherever they lead us is sure to be less friendly than this place. And we couldn't even take the damned ship here."

"As for Gillian," said Diane, "we know she's on the Mistress Mira. Before they powered up their shields, we scanned for her DNA pattern." She looked grimly at Holly. "And as for taking her back. She's my friend, the best D-damned tactical soldier I ever knew, and one of the finest people that ever came to our Temple. Rex takes my orders. We'll get her back. One way or another, we'll get her back." She pushed gently past them and headed towards the bridge. "Best get up here and find a seat. It might be a rough ride."

Holly followed her, with Kyle at her heels. Kyle's humbled guard tagged along quietly at the rear. Kyle knew he should apologize for cowing him into disobeying orders, but at the moment it seemed unimportant.

They reached the hatch to the bridge and Kyle caught Diane's arm as they went through. "It's not that simple, Diane," he said. "This is—" He paused, searching for words. "I've seen this before. We could all die." He looked up into her questioning eyes. "It's me they want. I don't think they'll

harm Gillian if you give me to them. I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

She looked at him, a long hard stare. "So. They just want you, but given the choice between you and her they take her. Makes a lot of sense to me. Maybe you can explain to them that they screwed up and took the wrong person."

"I know, I can't figure that out either. Unless they want to get all of you as well." Kyle put his hands to his temples and closed his eyes tight. "I don't know what I think any more. All I know is that if we take this ship after the Mistress Mira, we're all in deep trouble."

"Tell me something I don't already know, Kyle," Diane said. She pointed to a row of empty seats with full crash harness at the back of the bridge. "Now get into those seats, and save the talk for later. We're out of here."

Holly helped Kyle into a seat, and they strapped in. "In a way I'm glad someone else is taking the responsibility for this, Kyle. I'm sick of having to be involved in making the decisions all the time. But if I had been, I guess I'd have done the same as she's doing."

"We both would. But Holly, I know what's going to happen to us. I've seen it. In a dream, more than once. Visions."

"I know," she said. "I saw it. But you don't know how it finishes. If we work at it, we might change even the beginning. And this, now, is our chance. The only one we'll ever get. Let's make sure we don't screw it up."

CHAPTER 25: Chase

It was a mere speck against the darkness, a tiny glowing fly winking in the blackest night that ever was. Kyle watched it dwindle into the distance while the pale city glow faded to the lightless void of space. It made his skin crawl. Like an insatiable sponge, the emptiness sucked up all light, seemed even to draw from his very body the breath and energy of life. He was falling backwards into a dark hole, and the last mote of light, the last faint hope of escape, was all but swallowed up....

"Kyle." The grip on his shoulder was painful in its intensity. A shadowy vision floated away from him, drifting across the bridge of the ship and out through the viewport like a physical embodiment of terror. It was gone.

Kyle raised an aching arm, unknotted the cramped fingers of his hand, and passed it shakily across his brow. It was clammy with cold sweat. His body was chilled, and the smell of fear clung to him like a skin-tight blanket. He licked dry lips, reached up and rested his damp palm on Holly's wrist.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely.

"I can't figure you, Kyle," she said. She finished unbuckling her harness with her free hand, then rose to stand in front of him. Diane too stood looking down at him, her expression unreadable.

"Ten minutes up and you get space sick," Diane said. "What'll you be like when we get into the real void?"

Holly eyed her coldly. "Leave it alone, Diane," she said. "It's not what you think—sort of a Mental crisis. Like learning how to walk and talk, listen, speak, all that shit, right from scratch again. Only this is the super crash course. Three weeks to learn it all, or die in the process." She turned back to Kyle, her expression grim. "The jury's still out on that one."

"It was the darkness," Kyle said. "I had a vision. I—sometimes I don't know where I am, or

what's real. I feel like I've seen this all before, only worse. And a couple of times in the last few days...." He put his head down in his hands and let out a long shuddering sigh. "It was just so dark."

"Seems to me you better get some real rest Kyle," Diane said. She gestured to two of the Snow militiamen standing at the ready beside the main hatch. "Take Mr. Andrews back and hook him into the medical diagnostics unit. And he needs sleep—make sure he gets some."

Kyle looked slowly up at Diane, then at the two men who now flanked her on either side. He held Holly's wrist tightly so she could not easily take her hand from his shoulder. "I don't think rest will help, Diane," he said. "I appreciate your concern for my health, but I can't afford to be out of touch with what's happening. I have to stay awake, and I have to stay here."

"Listen—"

"No, you listen," Kyle said. The Command was instinctive, not consciously applied. Most of the heads in the room turned towards him, with the exception of Holly and Diane. "I'm pretty fucked up, you're right about that. But I'm not here by chance. If I see things right, none of us are." He looked hard at Holly before he went on. "This whole D-damned thing has been engineered, precision crafted, set up like some intricate stage play. I feel like a helpless puppet, but at least I know it's happening now. And if I can convince the rest of you, maybe together we'll be able to rewrite the final act. Because if we don't, none of us will be coming back from this trip alive."

Diane's expression did not waver. She glanced briefly to either side, taking in the attentive audience, then looked back towards Kyle. "I see myself as being on a mission here, Kyle. We've had suspicions for three years of a powerful group within the AF, manipulating it for their own interests. But we could never trace any connections. Ever since Cyndi died Gillian's been acting strange, and I figured she was close. I know we're onto it now, and I'm not letting go. Especially since Gillian's life is hanging in the balance. But you. I don't trust you. You're like a tool in the hands of the enemy, and you're D-damned dangerous." She had her stunner out and levelled at his head before she had finished the sentence.

Holly had been watching Diane from over her shoulder, and as the stunner was drawn she spun low in one swift movement and swept Diane's feet out from under her. Diane rolled with it, and was up with the stunner levelled again, this time at Holly. She fired harmlessly at a bulkhead as the smaller woman sprang forward and rolled to the left, pulling one of Diane's men back to place him between herself and the re-aimed weapon.

"Stop!"

Rex was on his feet now, his booming voice startlingly loud in the enclosed space of the bridge. Diane did not fire, and Holly held her grip firmly on her human shield. "I don't need this shit. Whatever you believe, aren't we all here to follow that ship and find out where she's headed? Aren't we all agreed on helping Gillian? While you're all trying to decide who trusts who, and who kills

who, we're losing the D-damned race." He pointed agitatedly back over his shoulder. "We can't figure out how to keep them on our scanners, and we have no visual contact. They got a docking drive that matches our main engines, and ten times our firepower. I can't even lock onto their com channels. So do me a favor, people: work out your personality problems later. Unless we can figure a way to trace them soon, none of your arguing'll make a scrap of difference."

Diane slowly lowered her stunner, but did not put it away. Her gaze was fixed on Holly, but Kyle was sure she had one eye still on him. He unbuckled his harness and stood slowly.

"I think I know how we have to track them," he said. "It's part of the script. I'm supposed to recognize the clues that've been laid for me, and piece it together. Sort of like a test, to decide if I can progress to the next learning stage. So far, I guess I've passed, followed the storyline the way it was written. Except for one thing...." He looked meaningfully at Holly. "Holly was never supposed to come back. If she hadn't, I don't think I would have figured out what we're dealing with. And since she's supposed to be dead—well, she's got a part in the play that just isn't in the script."

Holly loosened her grip on the frightened Snow soldier, and nodded in Diane's direction. "So, like he says Diane, don't fuck with me. I may be your best shot at coming out of this alive. It's the uninvited guest that spoils the party."

Kyle felt the eyes of all ten Snow crew members on himself and Holly, sensed their doubt and uncertainty. Rex broke the silence again.

"Let's get to it, Kyle. If you have a way to keep us stuck to their tail, I'm fucked if I know what it is." He looked at Diane. "Unless anyone else has any ideas, I figure you're our only chance."

Kyle waited. Diane's tense posture slowly relaxed, and she nodded resignedly. "OK, we do it. For now." She turned to Kyle, her expression harsh. "But I'm watching you like a Hawk. If you steer us wrong, you'll be the first to die. And don't think of using any of that Mental shit on me. I may not have an arsenal like you, but I can still defend myself."

Kyle nodded his head in Holly's direction. "Lay off Holly, too. I'm serious, Diane. We're going to need her. You included."

Diane gave a snort, and strode stiffly to the back of the bridge, followed by the six militia who had witnessed the confrontation. Diane ordered them to positions by the corridor doors. Then she turned and stood, hands on hips, head cocked impatiently to one side. "Well?"

Kyle moved forward to the console that Rex had been manning. "I need to know how the basic controls work. Direction, thrust, that sort of thing. So I can use the right terms to direct you." He looked down at the bewildering array of graphic displays, touch panels, and contoured control pads. "Do the two seats have duplicate panels, like pilot and copilot in a speeder?"

Rex waved a hand in the direction of his empty seat, and turned to the man still seated in the adjacent chair. "Give him a quick lesson, Howie. I need a word with Diane."

Kyle found it hard to concentrate on the lesson. Yet he forced himself not to intrude Mentally on the conversation going on behind him, contenting himself with the less efficient but more honest eavesdropping. Diane was really fired up about something. He had to work out how to appease her, or she would be on his back so hard he'd have no manoeuvring room.

"...yaw control at terrestrial speeds, but not efficient at escape velocity." Howie was small and mousey, with an annoyingly monotonous voice that grated at the edge of some hearing threshold. He pointed toward a pair of multi-directional moving displays. "Balance the readings on the fore and aft gyros or you'll send her into a cycloid spin, and we'll tear apart. Thrust on port and starboard engines must be within five percent of each other or we lose directional control. There's a built-in computerized limiter on that, but it's not always effective in these boats. When you...."

"Hold it, Howie. This isn't helping. You lost me somewhere back on the port and starboard problem. I don't understand half of what you're talking about. Let's try this: you pilot the thing, and I'll guide you as to direction. Can we do that?"

Howie looked doubtfully at Kyle, his broad flat nose twitching nervously. "We can try," he said.

Kyle opened a Mental link to Holly. 'I'm going to need all your help for this.'

She was beside him in seconds, sitting on the floor with her back to the console that Kyle faced. 'What are we doing, Kyle? I thought this was to be your show, so you could demo your newest skill to whoever's pulling the strings.'

'In a way. But if you help me keep focussed, I can try and track the ship while keeping aware of what's going on here. I don't know what to look for, but I do know there's something strange in this ship. Something not right. I need you to help me figure it out. Keep in contact, so I can see with your eyes. If this happens the way I think, I'm going to be a long way away.'

'I'm on it. My eyes and ears are yours. And I'll watch your back out there. Go for it.'

Kyle clung to her hand like a lifeline, using the physical link to reinforce the Mental one. He sent a questing probe out, gently at first, then strengthening it slowly as he gained confidence. His own view of the bridge and the front viewport of the ship faded, but he made sure he could still interpret Holly's information feed as he extended his Mental reach. He found what he sought, sooner than he'd expected. A light brush, almost unnoticeable, but stronger as he zeroed in on it. There were several other minds close, but he had no trouble touching that which he sought, eagerly forging a link and flowing across, probing, assessing. Conscious processes were weak. Surface thought patterns were confused, snatches of images blended together into a bewildering collage. But the Wall was there, strong and unbreached, reassurance beyond doubt. Gillian was there. And she was alive.

Kyle conveyed his discovery to Holly, and felt her remote response. 'Starboard,' he sent.

`They're bearing off to starboard.'

He heard through Holly's own ears the distant echo of words she spoke to some unremembered audience. And slowly, he felt the gulf spanned by his Mental link shrink, his massive Mental energy output drop. He fed the signals, via Holly, and sought the shortest path. Then suddenly they were closing the gap, very fast.

`Slow,' he sent, `Ahead.'

He could sense movement on the bridge, Holly's awareness picking up signs, something he should understand. He felt their approach rate lessen, began to pull back to his own mind, something there, pricking at him, Holly, do something, they're....

"The shields!" Holly screamed. "They're firing at us and the shields are down!"

Kyle was back in the chair beside Howie, drained from his Mental ordeal. Holly still clutched his hand. She was staring to her right, her face contorted with the intensity of her emotion, her body rigid with tension. It was the dream. The Mistress Mira was just ahead, drifting slowly under the outstretched arm of a vast space station, like a small moth dropping towards a giant waiting spider.

The station had fired a long-range weapon. He had sensed it, knew it as surely as if he had pressed the button himself. Then the events through Holly's eyes had crystallized. The defense console, weapons and shields. Movement there, changes in the patterns of lights. The dream, agony and pain on the bridge. The ship was defenseless. He stared straight ahead, watching the flickering glow surge towards them, waiting for the blast to hit, the heat to flare through the room. And out of the corner of his eye he saw Diane, a flash of movement, a uniformed body falling, lights glowing. The ship shook as the energy struck, but no pain came.

He turned his head slowly to look at Diane as she leaned heavily against the Defense panel, Roach's body lying at her feet. She smiled faintly.

"If that was staged, I don't know anything about anything. You convinced me. Thanks."

She spun to the weapons controls and activated their offensive systems. As the panel lit up before her, she yelled back over her shoulder.

"Now get the fuck out of that seat so Rex can fly this thing in!"

CHAPTER 26: Assault

"T-suits. Now!"

Diane's order mobilized all those not at a station. She singled out three of her squad as they passed, and waved an arm in the direction of Kyle and Holly. "Bring suits for those two, and for the crew," she ordered. They nodded and left.

There were now six on the bridge, apart from the unconscious Roach: Kyle and Holly, the blond communications officer, Rex and Howie at the controls, and Diane at the weapons console. Kyle had a sudden waking vision. He was both on the bridge, watching the station approach, and within his own inner world.

But it was not the private garden of before. Instead, a changed version of the scene around him filled his mind. He was looking through the forward viewport toward the station, vast and menacing against the darkness. On the bridge with him at the periphery of his sight, four shapes. No, five. With himself, six. The same six, at the same stations. But here the entire bridge was filled with smoke, a thick blue-white haze. The others were dark figures in sluggish motion, their movements spasmodic and unnatural. Disembodied cries of pain drifted by him with the wisps of smoke. Suddenly, Cyndi strode out of the fog beside the viewport, stepping gingerly around Roach's body. Her expression was intense, urgent. Kyle tried to run to her, but he was rooted to the spot.

`Mother. How did you—'

`Two realities, Kyle. Only one will happen. You have to choose the right one, and follow it through.'

`But which one? I'm—this isn't what I expected.'

His mother nodded slowly, her expression grim. `I know. But I can't help you any more, not in this. At least, not yet. It has to be you. Make the choice, and quickly. Time ebbs away.'

Kyle stilled his racing thoughts, forcing calm on mind and body. In both scenes, the station drifted ever closer, a huge docking bay yawning wide to receive the ship. The nightmares, the dreams, had taken him only this far. To the docking bay, with its garish blue-white spotlights and miniature people scuttling up and down from platform to platform. Which scene was real?

Logically, since his mother was merely a vision, the reality in which she appeared was false. Yet, looking at her, he found he could not tell to which scene she truly belonged. But he had saved the ship, prevented the station's attack from having any effect. There should be no smoke, no damage to the ship. All the others had left the bridge after the attack, and all had been well. There were only six left on the bridge, six in both scenes. He swept his eyes around the chamber then, certainty growing in him.

'I'll be with you, Kyle. As soon as I can help you, I will. But for now, you are the one with the power.'

She was gone. And at last Kyle could move. The screams of agony took on their true intensity, and shivers of pain and shock ran down his spine as he tuned entirely into the reality he had chosen.

He could not remember why he was uninjured. How long he had been living a vision, implanted, projected, or otherwise, he could not be sure. But Roach had been the clue. The smoke-filled bridge had contained identical personnel except for Roach's body. Cyndi's image had passed around Roach's form as if he were an obstacle in her path—the reality containing Roach had to be false. In his own mind alone.

Kyle assessed the desperate conditions on the bridge. Diane lay on the floor next to the weapons controls, writhing in silent agony. Holly was unconscious at his feet. The blond com officer lay slumped over the panel in front of him, blood flowing across his face from a huge gash along his forehead. Howie howled hideously, clutching his shattered abdomen, wide eyes staring in shocked disbelief at the smoking control panel that had exploded, almost cutting him in half. Only Rex, looking dazed and bewildered in the seat in front of Kyle, appeared uninjured.

"Rex," Kyle shouted. "What happened?"

The words seemed to surprise Rex, and he turned a stunned gaze towards Kyle.

"Sonic weapon system," Rex muttered. "Like in the Hawks. Shields were useless. Must've used modulated carrier, drawn on our com system for demod." He looked blankly back at the viewport. "We're out of control."

Kyle grasped his shoulder and spun Rex round to face him. "Roach," he said. "Where's Roach?"

Rex stared for a long moment, as if Kyle were not even there. "We have nobody with us called Roach," he said at last.

Kyle didn't wait for any more. Through the viewport he saw the docking bay walls rapidly

approaching, slowly rotating as the ship spun towards collision.

"Strap in Rex," he yelled. He ran back down the corridor to the prep room, jumping over injured and unconscious bodies as he went. In the room two of Diane's guard squad sat immobile, Thermal-tight suits already on. They looked up expectantly as Kyle entered.

"On your feet, soldiers," he Commanded. "Pick out five more suits, and get them on the bridge crew. Now."

They were up and moving, out into the corridor in seconds. It was as if they had been waiting for orders and would have continued to sit idle if none had come. Kyle scanned the remaining suits. They had to be self-conforming, and self-sealing. He had never put one on, but at school they had learned about T-suits and the latest technology. He pulled one off the shelf and hung it from the back of his head by the hood. In one smooth motion the suit rolled down and around, wrapping him in a bulky but spacious air-filled cavity. Then slowly it shrank, sealing tight against his body.

Half a minute later he sprinted down the passage to the bridge, the suit conforming to his every movement like a thin second skin. The two soldiers had done their work. The com officer's suit, the last to be fitted, was into the shrink phase. Rex was up and looking coherent. Holly sat on the floor, shaking her head as if to clear it.

`You OK, Holly?'

`I've had more D-damned headaches since I met you than I had in my whole life before.'

`Glad to know you're not hurt.' Kyle sent out a Mental touch which said more than any words could convey about how glad he truly was. `We're going to crash any second.'

`Won't happen. They're not going to let their station get damaged just to shake us up some more. But the T-suits—that's probably smart.'

"What in Deity's name is going on, Kyle?"

Diane was hauling herself to her feet, one hand clutching her left side. There was blood streaked across her cheek, spread thinly across the skin by the mask of her suit.

"I've just figured it out myself," Kyle said. He grimaced as his quick probe picked up the pain Diane was suppressing. "As soon as we're docked they'll breach the airlock seal. This docking bay is in vacuum. We need to have everyone in suits or in a sealed chamber." He gestured back in the direction of the hallway. "Can you take charge of that?"

Diane nodded grimly. "What chance do we have of doing anything effective here with almost the entire crew crippled?"

"You just take care of the crew and yourself," Kyle said. "Leave the rest to me."

Diane looked at him quizzically for a moment, then turned to Rex. "Come on. Let's get everyone safely sealed away before it's too late."

Kyle was already focused on the viewport again. He noticed that the ship's spin was slowing, as

was her approach towards the bay wall. They were close enough now to see details, and he could identify the docking station where they would be pulling up by the bustling activity on the platform. To the right lay the Mistress Mira, a sealed docking gangway attached to her airlock. All those on the waiting platform wore T-suits or bulkier AT-suits, the armored version of the same.

"What do you have in mind when we dock, Kyle?" Holly was the only other conscious person now left on the bridge. "I'm game for almost anything, but I'd say Diane more or less summed up our chances."

"We could never have hoped to do anything by direct assault here even from the beginning," Kyle said. He watched the scene out the viewport stabilize, and their movement slowly die away to a crawl. Then he turned to face Holly. "The Snow people were not intending to try a rescue when they arrived. All they wanted was to locate the Mira's destination, so they could launch a more furtive assault later. They didn't reckon on becoming involved in my problems. So now I've got the lives of still more people hanging in the balance."

"Kyle, the way things look any decision you make has a better chance of being right than the obvious alternatives."

"Thanks," he said. "I hope I've figured this right, or those alternatives will be all we get. As it is, I can't even be sure that what's happening here is real. And if it isn't, I'm going to be wasting a lot of Mental energy for nothing. You're the key, Holly. How I tell which way to go. You weren't supposed to be here, so you don't fit into the equation."

"What, like when those assholes chucked the second gas cylinder into the airlock on the Mira, and figured everyone was down?"

"I don't remember."

"They tried to get in and take you and Gillian. Six of them. I couldn't handle them all at once, but I took out four and kept them from getting at you. I thought you were still conscious, just groggy from the gas."

Kyle could not remember any such event. "Holly, how did you die?" he asked.

She looked deep into his eyes, and a vision swam across Kyle's mind. The lab, Ice-Eyes, the torture, the beating. Kyle knew it by heart. A lump came into his throat, and he nodded, swallowing hard before he could talk again.

"It's—going to be hard," he said.

Holly nodded grimly. "Let's do it."

Kyle dived deep into his consciousness and pulled up the other-reality. Parallel in every way. Yet there were differences. He could sense a feeling of calm and well-being, peace. He set his mind to work, letting the vision flow. They moved to the airlock, Holly in front. The ship seemed deserted. The lock opened to reveal a platform empty of guards, inviting. Confidently they stepped

forward, and before they had moved three meters away from the hatch Holly fell soundlessly to her knees, then flat on her face. Kyle knew instantly that she was dead. An energy weapon trained on the platform, concealed high amongst the tangled metal rafters of the docking bay. He scanned Mentally, and found three such installations.

At the far end of the platform, a squad of guards now approached him, stunners levelled. He marched to meet them, seizing the chance to test his hypothesis. With a stab of Mental energy, he imagined a transparent wall between himself and the approaching guards, impervious and reflective to stunner blasts. A faint shimmer arose where he projected his power. Within moments, the guards fired. Kyle felt the stunner blasts hit, and he went down into oblivion. He had been right about that. Now, if only he was right about the rest. He withdrew, and stood once more beside Holly on the bridge.

"Did you catch any of that?" he asked.

She grinned at him. "Right up to the time I got shot."

"We'll see about that."

He took her firmly by the hand and led her down the corridor towards the airlock. Diane and Rex were quickly dragging the unconscious bodies of the Snow team into a side chamber. Diane glanced up as Kyle moved past, and stopped him with a look.

"You're a brave kid, Kyle," she said. "If none of us make it out of here, I just wanted you to know. I think Cyndi would have been proud of you."

"I know."

He moved past them, and a sudden jolt shook the ship. They had stopped moving. When he reached the airlock, he turned to Holly.

"I go out first. Stay behind me, and don't get exposed. There may be a few guards right on the platform. I'm not sure just how far the parallel goes, so we have to be prepared. Once I take out the weapons nests, you can have a free shot at any that are left standing."

He smiled at Holly's quizzical look.

"Just link with me, and form a joint Mental Wall. That way, when I send out my blast, you're protected for sure."

Kyle felt Holly's instant probe, and they tied their two minds together like one single pattern. It was easier that it had been the first time. Neither mind rejected the bond.

`We must have something in common, Kyle.'

`Yes. We've been through death together. But once is enough for that.'

He cycled the access door to the airlock, and stepped through to the outer hull door. Without pausing to consider his actions further, he tapped the control and readied his imagined energy reflector wall. As soon as he saw how things stood on the platform, he raised his wall in a short

radius arc around the hull door, snapping up a wavering barrier between themselves and the six AT-suited guards that stood with weapons ready. All six fired, almost simultaneously, and Kyle watched them each crumple to the metal platform before he turned his attention to the more deadly weapons nests. He released a vicious Mental blast, focused exactly at the locations where he knew the nests to be. A rapid probe revealed no conscious response at any of the sites.

Moving his reflective wall just in front of him as he went, he ran forward along the wide metal ramp towards the now-opening airlock door leading to the space station's interior, Holly at his heels. More stunner blasts stabbed out towards them, but none penetrated the wall.

Of the eight uniformed and suited figures in the squad that had appeared in the doorway, only one remained standing after their attack. He turned and moved calmly back through the door, then touched the cycle switch on the inside. The door drew slowly shut, the gap narrowing rapidly as Kyle sprinted forwards. It sealed tight just as he arrived.

'Don't quit now, Kyle,' Holly sent. 'The way it's working, your mind is proof against anything here.'

Kyle was back inside his head, past the incident on the platform, thinking his way through the door. The material carried a field that defeated his Mental probes. It took a moment before the answer came to him. It had been there all the time, or he had imagined it to be there. A small panel in the wall which housed a set of door controls. The panel was unlocked, of course. Kyle returned to his place in front of the closed door, and walked across to where the panel was now visible on the wall. He opened it.

'Get behind me, Holly.'

'This is D-damned weird Kyle. That panel shouldn't be there. And I'd swear it wasn't there a moment ago.'

'You're probably right. But both realities exist simultaneously, in a way. In the Mental one, I can let time scroll by at full Mental speed. I can establish Mental effects, but they don't actually do anything. Here, though, things happen at normal speed. And...'

He spun the door cycle switch, and the door slid smoothly open. A T-suited Ice-Eyes stood on the other side, gaping. He was completely swept away by the Mental blast Kyle sent out, physically knocked off his feet. The airlock was otherwise empty. Kyle turned to Holly.

"As you see, unlike my Mental other-reality, things I imagine have real effect here. Maybe it's just the potency of my Mental belief in what I decide is real. But if I conjure something up in my Mental world, whether such a device or item exists or not, it becomes real here." He looked down at the unconscious Ice-Eyes. "And that, Mr. Grezman, is how I'm going to get my friends back. Because if I work things right, I can change anything I choose as I go." Almost involuntarily, Kyle looked upwards. He raised a clenched fist towards the gleaming metal of the ceiling. "Predict that!"

CHAPTER 27: Gambit

Grezman lay unmoving at their feet. The short airlock passage was now pressurized, the outer doors leading to the platform sealed. Through the open inner doors Kyle could see a single straight corridor leading to a closed hatch.

"There'll be an automatic security system," Holly said. "They've probably monitored our attack, and this whole area could be sealed off and shut down any time."

"OK, so we need to know what they'll hit us with. I'm on it."

In the time it took for them to move past the helpless Grezman, Kyle had an answer. Scouting ahead in the parallel reality, he encountered an energy field that weakened his limbs and numbed his mind. He pulled back, uncertain.

'I don't know what it is, or how it's created. I need more information if I'm going to get us through.'

'I've seen it before. It's an energy resonator. Scans a high-power field through a range of frequencies until it hits resonance with the electrical impulses in the nervous system. Shuts down all conscious body activity. The AF use it in their high-security containment cells.'

'So what can I do?'

'Reflexor suits would protect us, shunt off the fields. Any other method would probably be too short-term to do us any good. They're sure to use this on us more than once if they know it'll slow us down.'

Kyle was back in the parallel world, in time sync with their own location. He envisioned a new side door leading off the short corridor ahead. Inside, a storage room full of stun weapons and reflexor armor. Then he was back beside Grezman and Holly.

"Let's go," he said. He jogged quickly to the new door and watched it slide smoothly open.

Holly followed him inside.

"Better stow the T-suits, Kyle," Holly said. "Reflexors won't cling properly otherwise."

She showed him how to doff his T-suit, a 3-key code on the control unit in the belt. Then they each fitted a reflexor suit, Kyle marvelling again at the amazing speed with which these outfits conformed to the body. They holstered stunners and left, the whole episode taking under a minute.

"We're lucky," Holly said. "They could have dropped us any time while we were in there."

"I don't think so. That room is not exactly part of their station layout. It's certainly not on their defense...."

`What is it, Kyle?'

Kyle had been looking back towards the airlock to check on Grezman's status. `Take a look at the spot where our extra door was.'

Holly turned. `As if it never was. You didn't do it?'

`I think our adversary has figured out what I'm up to. And I'm not the only one that can make adjustments.'

`Or maybe it's just the station itself. Ever think it might have a built-in intelligence? Maybe it's just trying to beat you at your own game.'

Kyle checked the reflexor suit he was wearing. Real, so far as he could tell. `I hope not. I don't even know all the rules yet. If it's that powerful it'll be able to predict my next move even before I make it. That'll make this a really short trip. Unless—'

`It might even be reading our Mental communications.'

The thought chilled Kyle's blood. Suddenly the brightly-lit corridor felt like a sterile stainless coffin, part of a vast intelligent robot seeking to eliminate a bothersome but impotent virus.

`I don't believe it. Let's stay on Mental link for now, and hope for the best. Follow me.'

Kyle began to run. He projected himself almost simultaneously into both present and Mental realities, the Mental just seconds ahead. Closed and locked hatches opened to their touch, and they avoided two guard patrols without incident. The station defenses assaulted them with the scanning energy field twice, each time in isolated sections of corridor. After the second fruitless attack, the defense system seemed to give up.

`It's sure to come up with a new strategy soon. We've got to figure out where we are.' Kyle was leading the way down a long stretch of passageway, at least fifty meters without doors or hatches. They could see that it branched two ways at the far end.

`If we stop at an internal com screen long enough to do a search, the defense system will catch us. How about we nab a guard and force him into helping?'

`Easily done. There's a patrol ahead, along the right passage, first side hatch on the left. Only three of them, reflexor suited. We should be able to take them out.'

`How do you get so far ahead? Have you checked out all the passages up there?'

`I'm getting better. When I scan ahead, if I come across any trouble, I cut back to the present and try an alternate route. I can do it pretty fast, so it's easy to find the route that's least trouble.'

`What about just adjusting things so there's a lone guard walking away from us down the left corridor? And jamming the door on the other guards in the room to the right?'

`I don't know. Haven't tried actually affecting people directly. We'll give it a shot.'

Kyle set it up. As they turned left round the corner, they saw a shimmering shape walking away from them. It wavered for a moment, then slowly faded and was gone.

`OK, so you can't conjure up people. Let's tackle those guards.'

Holly turned and took the lead down the right-hand passage. Just before the first closed corridor hatch there was a small recessed door along the left wall.

`Kyle, stand in plain view across the corridor from the door. I'll set my stunner on auto so it'll fire using infrared targeting.' She made the adjustments on her stunner and rested it on the floor, aimed to fire into the room once the door was open. Then she nestled against the wall beside the door and nodded. `Anyone comes out, I'll flatten them.'

`Neat plan, Holly.' He grinned briefly as he took up his assigned post. Then he went back into the parallel reality to release the jammed door mechanism. But before he got there the door slid open, and he was being fired on.

Kyle recoiled reflexively, but there was no need—the suit deflected all the energy aimed at him. Holly's stunner scattered the guards inside the small storage room, and she kicked her weapon aside as she went in after them.

Kyle followed her through the door and took a well-aimed kick that swept his feet out from under him. He landed well and rolled forward, bounding to his feet against a rack on the far wall.

As he turned back to the fight Kyle's suit partially deflected a punch, and he lashed out blindly. His fist found only empty space, turned by his opponent's reflexor suit. Kyle saw him for the first time, a tall lanky man with thin blond hair and close-set blue eyes, two meters away. Deft hands plucked a dart from a specially-designed belt. A twist, a finger poised....

"Stop."

The man held stiff for a brief moment, then pressed the launch button. Kyle had just enough time to dodge, and the dart plunged into the soft metal of a small cleaning robot on the rack close by his head. There was a muffled 'bang' as the robot exploded in fragments of flying metal and plastic.

"Kyle!"

He caught a glimpse of Holly struggling with her own opponent in the far corner of the room.

`Drop him! Exploder darts will penetrate a reflexor field.'

Kyle couldn't understand why the man had not responded properly to his Command. He had

used more than enough Mental power to affect the average mind.

"Hold still."

Kyle was momentarily frozen as his Wall snapped up full force to block the Command. Then he ducked and felt a cool rush of air against his cheek. Another robot was turned to scrap just above him.

`Holly. This one won't do as a hostage.'

`Drop him, I said.'

Holly sprang away from the wall, vaulted off the floor, and landed a vicious kick against the side of the dart-man's head. He crashed into the rack beside him, knocking it from its moorings and burying himself under a pile of robots. Despite his suit, he was clearly dazed. Holly reached carefully through the protective field until her hand touched his face, then gave his head another firm rap against the floor. His eyes flickered shut. Holly favored Kyle with a mirthless grin.

`So much for the capture plan. None of these guys was my idea of an easy fight. Whoever runs this place is D-damned picky about personnel.'

Kyle caught a tiny sound from outside the door, raced into his parallel reality to close and lock it. He created a second exit from the cleaning storage room, and flicked back to Holly. She handed him two darts from the belt of the man she had just felled.

`Who knows? They may come in useful.'

They turned towards Kyle's new door, and it began to fade. With a lunge, they dashed through into a vague corridor, which soon readjusted and became the cleaning room again. Two new guards were in the room, and at least another pair stood outside. Kyle threw a reflective wall up around the two in the room.

`Out and right!' Kyle sent.

Kyle propelled Holly out the original door, knocking both the guards in the corridor off their feet. They sped down the corridor to the right, Kyle inventing a corridor hatch behind them as they ran. Glancing back, he saw it fade almost as rapidly as he had placed it. The new guards were pursuing closely.

`We've got to put some real station structure between us and these guards. If we have to take them on, the station's defenses'll nail us.'

`Passage hatch up ahead, Kyle. Wait until the last second before you unlock it.'

Kyle timed it well. They got through the hatch and watched it close behind them. Kyle's false control panel had vanished almost instantly.

`We can't run like this, Holly. They know the hatch access procedures, and we don't.'

`Then why are they not through yet?'

Kyle realized that she was right. If they knew the opening procedure, it would have to be simple

and fast. He looked around at the room they were in, some kind of computing facility. It slowly faded as he watched, and turned into a small five meter square bare-walled cell.

`It's ahead of us.'

Holly turned away from the door, glanced quickly round the room, then looked at him.

`Yes, I saw it change. You can't let it beat you at your own game, Kyle. Else we're dead here and now.'

Kyle was back in the parallel reality, scanning fast. He glimpsed the station's next wave of antiviral assault. He made a small adjustment. Then he was back.

`Hit the door override. On your right.'

Kyle saw Holly look at the blank wall, where Kyle had imagined the panel to be. The door remained sealed. He felt a sudden rush of panic. His action had been anticipated, and he had no counter to the station's next move.

"Eyes closed, arms over your face. Now!"

Kyle had bare time to comply before Holly threw him to the floor in front of the door. Their backs were to the searing flash of white-hot light that winked suddenly into being in the center of the room. In spite of the suits, there was an intense burning pain across Kyle's entire back. Holly had him on his feet in an instant, forcing him to stand in spite of the agony of his burned legs.

"We need a way out, and fast. These suits won't take another blast like that. The next one will fry us."

Kyle had a germ of an idea. His Mental probe could not penetrate the station's structure—but he might imagine that it could.

`Get ready, Holly. Here goes.'

He felt Holly grasp his arm as he jumped back into the parallel reality. Faster now, practice lending him confidence. Even in the parallel reality, he could avoid danger, getting further in his thought streams than he was able to do at first. He imagined another exit from their room, then a steady advance into the complex, dogged defense against energy assault weapons from the station, moving fast, managing to keep just ahead of the enemy for long enough to allow his other thoughts to take form.

Suddenly, it was ready. A third reality, this one self-styled, not the partial creation of the station-Deity. And in this third reality stream, he was truly his own master. While he plodded along in the Deity's reality, Kyle worked his new plan, believing that he could in fact penetrate the station's Mental barriers, zeroing in on Gillian's Presence. He imagined, as the Deity-controlled reality faded to black, that they were with her, he and Holly. Then as he drew back a sudden sensation of weakness grew and dissipated. Once again he stood beside Holly. They were no longer in the cell.

It was a vast chamber, a meeting or audience room, richly decorated with pastel-colored fabric hangings and carpeted with cushioned pale green rugging. The metal walls of the station hull, if they were there, were completely hidden.

Gillian stood defiant, legs fettered and wrists cuffed, glaring down at her seated captors. These were represented by the Beak and an escort of three similarly uniformed crew from the *Mistress Mira*—and, seated comfortably beside these, Becky Rebaro.

Before Kyle could react, Holly was in motion. The Beak's stunner tumbled to the floor as Holly's flying kick struck a head-snapping blow to his jaw. She landed between the chairs of two of the Beak's crew, then took one out with a lightning fist to the windpipe.

The two other crew were now on their feet, reaching for weapons. Kyle took his cue from Holly, and focused his effort on blocking any attack from Becky. He linked Gillian into his and Holly's defensive Wall, and Gillian's fiery frustrated Mental strength surged out in support. Kyle sensed the fury in Gillian, and it worried him. They could not afford to be reckless.

Becky did not move. She lashed out with a Psychic blast, one which Kyle was sure he could not have withstood on his own. The combined Wall held.

Gillian hopped forward once, twice, gaining momentum, then launched her trussed body at the scrambling Becky, who could not move quickly enough to dodge. She took Gillian's head butt squarely in the chest. There was an audible crack, and Becky fell back in her chair gasping and wheezing. She clutched her ribs convulsively, and her eyes bulged with terror. A bloody froth appeared at her mouth.

Kyle looked away. He saw Holly land a crushing blow to the cheek of the last conscious crew member from the *Mira*. The man toppled with agonizing slowness, and broke the fall with his face. The entire conflict had lasted twenty seconds.

'Holly,' Kyle sent.

Gillian crouched on her knees in front of Becky's chair. Vengeance still sparkled in her eyes, but she looked weak. Kyle helped her to her feet and waited as Holly retrieved a wad of coded keys from the Beak's belt. She slid one into first the cuffs, then the shackles. As Gillian shook free, Becky gave a last ragged gasp and was suddenly quiet.

"They've put Suzanne in a high-security containment cell, somewhere on the station," Gillian said. She stood on her own now, swaying slightly. The dangerous look in her eyes still remained.

"We're glad to see you too, Gillian," Kyle said.

She gave a slight smile. "I've been expecting you for a while." She glanced briefly at the unmoving bodies lying around them. "So were they—at least, they thought they were."

Holly jerked a finger in the direction of the nearest of four exits from the room. "Listen, whatever Kyle did to get us here, it bought us some time. But this station has a scary way of

figuring out things. We can't hang around."

"OK. We go after Suzanne. The same way we got here." Kyle put one hand on each woman's nearest arm, and reached into his parallel world.

CHAPTER 28: Union

Kyle perceived the detention cell area as an indistinct vision. He fixed the target based on Suzanne's surface thought patterns, and willed the location into existence around them.

It was like weaving a tapestry, strands of the image snatched at random from scattered sites, a mosaic of coherent mayhem. One instant structured and almost concrete, the next jumbled beyond all comprehension. Kyle knew the station was resisting him, unravelling the fabric of his Mental projections as they formed. He clung to the arms of his companions, drawing warmth and strength from their presence.

A vague dimly lit corridor, rows of dull gray metal doors. Shattered into unrecognizable fragments. He tried again. The corridor was there, the doors still too blurred to be identified. He concentrated on one, fighting to hold it clear in his mind as the rest of the picture fluttered and fell apart. It zoomed into sharp focus, smooth flat blue-gray, the frame white now in the light, brighter, shadows falling across the doorway....

"Watch your backs!" he shouted.

They stood facing the door, stainless grating underfoot, the click of metal on metal as the guards closed from behind. Kyle leaned forward against the edge of the door as a wave of weakness took him, the price of his struggle to get them here. How long had he fought in virtual stasis between realities while the station prepared for his arrival?

A soft hum came from behind him, and he knew he had to respond. Somewhere in recent memory the sound had meant something. He turned as the tone changed, rising rapidly in pitch. Gillian was on his left, fighting to fell her three opponents so she could get at a fourth guard holding a small flat yellow box. Holly was on his right, waging a similar battle. Neither woman was faring well against the reflexor-suited guards.

Suddenly it came back to him. Gillian was slowing visibly, reeling under punishing blows that she could not evade. The numbing impact of the punches shook him as his Empathy drew her pain across the gap between them. And he understood now why his weakness had been so abrupt and unrelenting.

Kyle fumbled at his belt and drew out a dart, Holly's present from only moments ago. With a careful twist he cocked it, then sighted past the now advancing guards Gillian had been holding back. A small unfamiliar light winked off and on at the dart's tail. He ignored it. Two of the nearer guards dove clear at the sight of his dart. He had an unobstructed line to his target, and he pressed the launch stud.

The man with the yellow box saw the dart too late. Kyle watched his eyes go wide with fear before the small device struck the yellow box and detonated. There was a rolling boom that shook the corridor, and Kyle was slammed back against the door by the blast. When he looked up again, he saw that all those in the passage had been knocked off their feet. The targeted guards' shattered body lay a full twenty meters down the corridor.

Holly trotted past him, going towards Gillian. She gestured back over her shoulder. "Put those two away, Kyle," she said.

He saw that of the three she had been fighting, only two were moving, and neither looked to be any threat. They had been facing the blast, and had been completely unprepared. He got to his feet and stumbled over to where they lay, then applied Holly's technique for dealing with stunned reflexor-suited opponents. Both of them were soon unconscious. By the time he had finished his task, he was feeling stronger and more alert.

He looked back in Holly's direction. She'd made short work of Gillian's remaining opponents and was kneeling beside Gillian now, helping her to sit up.

"Gillian OK, Holly?"

"Looks better than I feel," she called.

"Don't believe it," Gillian groaned. "Took you long enough to put that asshole away, Kyle. I thought you'd pass out before you realized what was happening."

Kyle shrugged apologetically as he strode up. "Sorry. I wasn't really here for a few moments. Then my Empathy drained what little strength I had left."

Gillian gave him a tight smile. "I'm still alive. Guess I can't complain." She surveyed the bodies on the floor. "Figure I'll strip one of these minions of his reflexor suit while I have the chance. Anyone carrying a Rackham decoder?"

Kyle reached for his card, but found an empty pocket. Holly handed Gillian hers, then looked at Kyle.

"How do we find the cell we want?"

"I'm as close as I can get. I suppose we just open doors until we find the right one."

"And how do we do that? Are you an expert at these door systems, or didn't you realize this was a detention area?"

"Give Kyle a break, Holly," Gillian said. She stood up and watched as the two reflexor suits she had released unsealed themselves. She gave Holly a sour look. "He got us this far, admittedly with your help. But he didn't come in here with an answer to everything."

Holly frowned for a moment, then touched her hand to her forehead. "Sorry," she said. "This place is really fucking me up. It's like I'm more than one person, and it's hard to keep track of which is the real me."

Kyle looked at her uneasily. "Don't say that, Holly. You're my only connection to actual reality here. If you don't know who you are—"

He sent a Mental picture, images of Holly's lab, Ice-Eyes' face, his voice. A wave of anguish and nausea came back at him, and as he watched Holly's face he saw the response in her eyes.

"Don't do that again, Kyle." Her voice was dry and choked. "Once was enough. Three times is a fucking nightmare."

"I needed to know." He took her hand, and she squeezed so hard he let out a cry of pain. "Gillian and I, Suzanne, all of us. You're the only certain link we have to reality outside this place. I've been bending things right out of shape ever since we got near this station, and I don't have a D-damned clue what's real any more. I'm just trusting that where you are, that's real. Stay with us, Holly."

She gave him a long, slow look. "I'm trying to keep up," she said. "Let's finish the job, so we can leave this D-damned place."

"Now that we've done our reality check," Gillian said, "we should get to work opening doors." She held up a set of access cards. Her reflexor suit finished its last contortions as she spoke.

"Any idea how they work?" Kyle asked.

In answer, Gillian scanned the wall all around the nearest cell door. As far as Kyle could see, it was completely featureless. Yet within a few seconds, Gillian smiled. She thumbed through the cards in her hand and separated them into pairs.

"Take a couple of pairs each," she said.

Kyle and Holly complied, then watched as she demonstrated their use. She pressed one card flat against the wall on either side of the door, at about shoulder height. She slid the cards outwards together from the door edge, watching the door as she did so. Nothing happened. She plucked another pair from her belt, and tried them. Still nothing. Then she pulled one set from Kyle's hands. This time the door opened.

A tiny cupboard two meters on a side lay beyond, lit only from the corridor. In one corner a

frail old man slumped, unmoving. The cell was filled with the stench of death.

Gillian looked away as the door slid shut. She studied the walls and the effective cards, then began experimenting with individual cards. After a minute of testing she nodded in satisfaction and turned to the others.

"Try one card from each pair on every door as you go along. Listen for a faint click as you pass them over the wall. Listen closely, or you won't hear it. If you hear nothing, try another card. The click means that pair should open the door." She handed Kyle back his cards. "Between us we should be able to do every door in the place. Let's go."

Kyle had opened seven cells when he found Suzanne. He was getting into the practice of triggering the mechanism and moving on with only a glance inside, since five of his cells had been unoccupied. The other had housed a fully-suited guard, feeble and starved, but able to crawl out on his own when released. At the seventh, he was bowled over backwards by a savage kick to the thigh. His reflexor suit took most of the impact, and he recovered in time to yell "Suzanne!" before she had run far.

Suzanne stopped ten meters from him, beside the unconscious guards. The instant she turned back and really looked at Kyle, recognition and relief lit up her face. It was like watching a gray mist transformed to sparkling droplets by a sudden gleam of sunshine.

"How in Deity's name—"

Kyle felt an overwhelming urge to rush up and hug her. For a moment he just stood, unable to speak. "Gillian's with me," he said at last. He heard Holly calling to Gillian behind him, as she relayed the news of Suzanne's release.

Before Kyle could say anything more, Suzanne threw herself at him, squeezing ineffectively against the reflexor armor. She laughed. "I didn't think I'd see any of you again," she whispered.

Kyle swallowed hard. "I tried not to lose hope. I felt like I'd betrayed you."

She pushed him away and held him at arms length. "Fuck that. You're the one that was betrayed. You were set up. Someone in the Snow knew the AF could see through our Distorter, and they set that Marker onto us. Shit, Yuri and I should've seen it coming."

Kyle smiled in spite of himself. "You were too busy fighting."

"It was my fault. My temper always gets me into trouble. And now Yuri's dead too because—"

"What do you mean, Yuri's dead?" Kyle asked.

Gillian and Holly came up quietly and stood beside Kyle. Suzanne looked guiltily at her mentor.

"I saw him go down," she said. "He took a massive stunner blast as he pulled me through the back streets away from Kyle." Kyle could sense the pain in her voice. "They sent a Hawk after us, and Yuri stood up to it. He got off a good shot and knocked it out, but not before it sent out the blast

that hit him. I—he was dead when I got to him."

"It was a setup, Suzanne. Not your fault, or Kyle's, or Yuri's. If I'd kept closer tabs on what was going on at the Temple, I could have prevented it." Gillian's eyes showed the conflict Kyle had expected, but she still held her emotionless mask in place.

Kyle forged a surface thought link, two-way, between Suzanne and her mother. Tears came to Suzanne's eyes, and for only the second time since he'd known her Gillian's unbreachable emotional barriers broke. She moved past Kyle and took her daughter in her arms, holding her with a ferocity that defied interference. Holly bowed her head and Kyle saw that her eyes, too, glistened.

Slowly he let the link between them fade, never once glimpsing the thoughts they shared. Mother and daughter turned together to face him. "This we won't forget, Kyle," Suzanne said.

Kyle nodded slowly, for a moment emotion choking him. At last, he managed to say what had been creeping unwanted into his thoughts as he watched the union of their two spirits. "It's not over yet," he said.

CHAPTER 29: Trail

It was as if the words had been pre-determined, chosen for him to say at that moment. Kyle had a sudden strange sense of the meaning of the word fate. He felt the fabric of the corridor slipping away. Everything looked the same, but he could not shake the growing feeling of unease. As if the very walls were crawling, creeping, adjusting themselves into something new, just out of his sight. He took Holly firmly by the arm.

"Don't let go, whatever happens," he said softly.

Holly gave him a quizzical look, but nodded. "I guess it's your show. Whatever you say, Kyle."

A chill trickled down Kyle's spine as he fought to control his fear. His hands grew moist with sweat. He noticed that Gillian was looking over his shoulder.

"We better move," she said.

Kyle didn't have to look. He heard groans and the soft scrape of thick fabric on metal grate. His free hand shook as he wiped the clammy palm against his leg, then reached for Gillian. Her eyes found his, but she said nothing.

"Quick, Suzanne," Kyle said. "Take Gillian's arm. I'm going to try...."

The floor buckled beneath them, then dropped away altogether. They were tumbling through empty space, falling. A doorway formed below them, ahead of them, downwards. They spun through it and hit a wall, hard. Kyle lost his grip with both hands, but vice-like fingers still held tightly to one arm. He lay breathless on the wall, slowly tilting as the world rolled sideways. They began to slide, accelerating as the corridor went vertical. Doors and hatchways whizzed past, and Kyle bounced painfully against walls as he dropped. He saw a closed hatch at the end of the shaft. They would hit it any instant. He shut his eyes, forced his mind to work.

He formed a picture, the docking bay where years ago they had first come aboard this

nightmare station. Standing on the platform beside the Police cruiser that might mean their escape.

`Get us out of here!'

Somebody screamed it, in Kyle's alternate reality, but he had already committed himself. He felt a numbing jolt, and then all was still.

His body ached, and his left arm sent agony up through his shoulder. He gasped for breath, forcing back a scream of pain. Voices, there were voices now, and the echoing sound of booted feet on metal. Gaspd again, searching for air that would not come, felt his body bloating, being picked up and dragged, bumping, across the roughened metal platform. He opened swollen eyes, fighting for control over the pain and fear, and horror filled him at last.

She wore a T-suit, sealed against the airlessness of the hangar. Behind the thin mask Holly's face grinned evilly at him, a mocking gleam in her eyes. About him, on either side, the Snow team that had piloted the Police cruiser stood aghast, staring not at him, but beyond. To the end of the platform. Kyle knew his body would explode now. He felt it coming, inevitable, yet death no longer held any dread. There were worse things.

He tore his dying gaze away from Holly's gloating face, cast his last glance down the platform. The ship's airlock was open. Someone stood in the opening, blocking entry. He could not see a face. As he watched, one of the Snow crew sprinted for the airlock, scrambling over a barricade that surrounded it, leaping towards the figure—and dropping like a fallen leaf, dead in his tracks as the shape in the airlock door waved a hand, clenched a fist, and resumed its calm vigil.

Kyle recognized the barricade then. Knew what had become of the rest of the crew. Knew that those who remained had no way to escape without his help. He felt his skin give way, his flesh tear asunder, his vision blur with red as his body succumbed to the vacuum around it. In his mind echoed a last message as blackness took him. `You failed, Kyle.'

"It's not over yet."

The voice was sincere but apprehensive, lonely, haunted. He recognized it from somewhere. His thoughts seemed to snap back into place. His own voice.

He looked about him. The detention cell corridor was the same, dim and eerie, Gillian and Suzanne standing side by side in front of him, Holly to his right. They were looking at him. "What happened?" he said.

Gillian's eyes. For an instant, Kyle would swear....

"We were about to get the hell out of here," Holly said. "I think it's your move, Kyle."

Suzanne frowned at Holly. "What do you mean Kyle's move? We're all in this together now. I

say we get our asses in gear and kick the shit out of anyone who gets in our way." She turned to Gillian. "You've got a plan, don't you Gillian?"

As if it had never happened. Either it never had, or only he could remember. This was Suzanne as he remembered her. But the others? Kyle had that creeping feeling again. How could he control anything, find the real power here, get them all out if he couldn't be sure what was real? And what was? His glance strayed to Holly, and the mocking vision from the docking platform swam before him. Reality check. How could he be sure, even of Holly? Gillian snapped him back to—reality?

"If Kyle doesn't have a quick way out, I'll find another route," Gillian said. "But we better make up our minds fast. Those guards will be on their feet any minute."

Kyle turned. Two of the prone figures were struggling to raise their heads. He made his decision.

"Take us out, Gillian," he said.

She nodded grimly, took Suzanne by the arm, turned and led them away from the guards. They moved fast, single file, Kyle bringing up the rear. The corridor ended at a bulkhead.

Gillian scanned it quickly, then whisked one of the captured cards from her breast pocket and pressed it flat on the wall, chest height. She traced a small circle with it, and the wall dissolved like a thin sheet of salt dipped in water.

On the other side of the now open bulkhead was a small chamber, unoccupied. The walls were lined with closed cabinets, and three sets of control banks stood on raised tables in the center of the room. There were no doors.

Gillian gestured for them to stay in the corridor, and held a finger to her lips. She raised an egg-shaped device and aimed it high on the walls, swinging it full circle round the room. Then she led the way in and began studying the controls. Kyle forged a link.

`What's up, Gillian?'

`Security area. They'll have live cameras and audio sensors. What happened in our corridor they already know. But this,' she held up the egg, `jams the cameras. Sets up a freeze frame or disables, depending on the setting. Sound pickup we're stuck with, but we can at least blind them.'

Holly waved for them to gather round. She indicated a set of coded buttons with door symbols, and a card slot above them. Gillian nodded, and inserted the card she had used on the bulkhead. All the buttons glowed.

There were three green and at least fifty red, with one yellow at the top of the bank. Gillian touched a green button and the bulkhead door they had come through solidified. She pressed both other green buttons, and two other walls faded to reveal new doorways similar to the first. They left by the center door, Gillian brandishing the egg like a sword as she led the way.

This corridor was short, wide, and doorless. Kyle concentrated on the immediate surroundings,

letting Gillian deal with the problems instead of applying his Mental wrench. She studied the end wall, then slid her egg into a leg pouch and turned her reflexor suit to maximum. They followed her example. She looked at Kyle and tapped her forehead. Kyle set up a four-way link.

'This is a security door. I don't think we can get out without setting off something. Pass cards and guesswork get you only so far unless you know the correct procedures. So now—we get against the wall, trigger the mechanism, and hope the suits absorb most of whatever we get.'

'Let's do it.'

It was Holly. Kyle sensed Suzanne's confusion about the source of communication. He smiled at her, trying to look reassuring. She didn't seem convinced, but she hugged the wall as instructed. Gillian tried her card.

The end wall exploded in a cloud of hot metal vapor, searing heat that tore away reflexor armor, scalded flesh and boiled blood, until there was nothing left in the world but agony and pain, screams he could not endure, his eyes seared into blindness that hid from him the last dying moments of his friends. His body became one with the pain, and a black blanket sank slowly over him, shrouding him in forgetfulness.

"It's not over yet."

Recognition came quickly this time. Kyle forced his mind to assign meaning to his surroundings, and saw once again the familiar detention block. The three women watched him expectantly.

Panic surged over him, seizing his chest and closing on his throat. How could he save any of them if he didn't know what was real? He had tried initiating his own route out, with disastrous results. He had stayed Mentally detached, allowed only physical actions to effect their escape, but here he was again, powerless, a toy for the Station to play with. They were looking at him, waiting. But which of them, if any, were real? Where did reality stop and illusion, twisted and distorted events, begin?

An idea came. He leaped into his own reality, seized on his memory of the room where he and Holly had rescued Gillian. He froze the image, the three of them together, Gillian still dazed but recovering from her encounter with Becky. He wrenched himself away, back to that place, backwards, to where he was sure he had control.

There was a lurch. He stumbled, reached out for support. His hand found a chair, soft and yielding to his touch. For a moment he could still see Suzanne looking at him, standing beside her mother in that nightmarish corridor. Then the picture faded, and he was back in the room with

Becky and the Beak, Gillian dazed as she climbed slowly to her feet, Holly's chest heaving from the exertion of her combat. Becky's rattling, agonized breathing seemed to fill the room.

"Gillian."

Gillian looked up at him, her face set.

"I know," she said.

Kyle nodded. It was the only way. The real Gillian would know that.

"We'll get her out," he said.

She smiled grimly at him. "I'm not leaving this shit-hole without her."

Kyle strode forward and seized both women by the arm. He forged a three-way Mental link, tying them together as one mind. Then he sent out his thoughts, seeking what he had to find. Behind the spectre of the Station and its insane illusions, its myriad realities, there must lie a controlling Force, that One which he had felt so far away on Earth, when he had intercepted the Ice-Eyes conference.

He found it. A sudden surge, a Mental leap. And the Presence was there, waiting for them.

CHAPTER 30: Execution

Kyle felt Holly and Gillian stiffen. They were in an audience hall, richly adorned, thickly carpeted. A huge throne dominated the room, set in the center of a raised platform in front of them. And seated upon it, a man. His body glowed and shifted as if electrified, his clothing a blur of unstable color, the very throne itself adjusting its shape as Kyle watched. Yet the piercing eyes stared steadily at them from beneath a shaven scalp, bare but for three strips of graying brown hair that converged to form an arrowhead on his forehead. Hypnotic. His Presence beat down on them with awesome intensity.

‘Excellent work, boy. You should be proud of your achievement. Even I had to struggle to anticipate your creative response to the tests. You are truly the Last One.’

His smile sent shudders through Kyle's body. He glanced briefly to either side of Kyle. ‘Let us be rid of these useless companions that dangle at your side. They have served their purpose.’

Like long dark limbs reaching out of the very air, gray-black shrouds appeared about Holly and Gillian. They began to fade. Kyle still sensed them in his Mental link, but their Presence was fast disappearing. For a moment he was numb, the potency of the deadly will that wielded such power beating him into submission. Then he found his courage, and his Mental energy surged forth in defense of those he held dear.

‘NO!’

The shapes of his friends stabilized, neither strengthening nor weakening. Kyle glared up at his foe. The man rose slowly to his feet, the throne writhing and twisting behind him, until it hung above him like a glowing halo of shifting light. The platform detached itself from the floor and floated cloud-like, wreathing his feet in drifting smoke.

‘You are strong. Unassisted, you have invaded this station. No other living being could have

achieved that. Yet you do not understand your own weakness, compared to the power of the Deity. Your companions....'

He gestured to either side of Kyle, and both Holly and Gillian vaporized as if they had never been.

`Nooooo!'

Kyle's outrage and anger finally overcame his fear, overriding the awesome Command that held him in place. He leapt forward and up, but his hands snatched only air, wisps of drifting mist. The platform dispersed, enveloping him, turning dark gray, then black. He stood in the center of a huge transparent dome under the stars. No, not a dome. He was....

`Adjustment of reality extends beyond what you have yet seen, Kyle. You wield a power that will not be contained, once it has come to full bloom. No feeble T-suit need protect you from the chill airlessness of space, if you so choose. Reality is as you make it. And you will make it as I decree.'

He stood alone, bewildered, sensing the ultimate cold and vacuum of the void, yet separate from it. And slowly his terror turned to realization, his numb submissiveness to resolve. He would not yield. His mission was not complete.

`Who are you?'

'I am the Deity. The One that holds power over all the world. Over the Council and its puppet members. Over the DT's who worship and loathe me. Over the petty Black Snow temple and its would-be revolutionaries. Over the AF and its misguided minions.' Kyle felt the Command beat down on him like an irresistible hand, driving him to his knees. `Over you.'

Kyle's conviction only strengthened with every word. In his mind he conjured up an image of the room where he had last stood with Gillian and Holly, where he had encountered the man who laid claim to the Deity's title. And the blackness of space brightened slowly, as the two realities battled for supremacy.

`There is no Deity.'

Kyle sent the thought with all the conscious power he could summon, and for an instant the opposing will wavered. He stood once more in the room, Gillian and Holly beside him. The man stood on the platform, but now held a rigid stick that ended in a collar about Suzanne's neck. Her tousled brown curls hung down across her cheeks, the proud green eyes sad, sunken in dark sockets, the scar white against a pale, drawn face.

Kyle looked away from that haunted vision, and marshalled his courage.

`You can't harm any of us,' he sent. `The only powers you truly hold are illusory. I will not believe what you conjure up.'

Kyle felt the full strength of the other Will fall upon him again, and he sank to his knees. But

Gillian sprang forward, her frustration and fury unleashed at last. She vaulted up the steps, lightning fast, and launched a full-force kick at the man's head. Kyle was powerless to restrain her, and Holly was not quick enough.

Illusion it had been, at least in part. Gillian hit a wall where the Deity had stood. Her foot cracked sickeningly. Kyle felt the wave of Empathetic pain stab up his leg. Tears came to his eyes, but he remained frozen, on his knees. Holly had disappeared, gone again.

The Deity stepped through the wall, alone once more, and stood over Gillian's agonized body. She lashed out with her fists, but he stood clear of her reach.

"Where is she?" she screamed. "Where is my daughter?"

The man ignored her. He pulled a small metal rod from his belt and slowly levelled it at her head. Then he raised his gaze to take in Kyle.

"Enough of this game." His voice was harsh and commanding, horribly powerful. "You have tried and lost, as it had to be. You are too much like your mother, Kyle. But I will see to it that you change. Compassion has no place in those who wield ultimate power." He looked back down at the helpless Gillian. "Illusion, as you suggest, is my puppet. But this, I assure you, is no illusion."

The shaft of the rod glowed a livid red, and Gillian jerked spasmodically once, twice, her face a mask of silent agony, her Mental death struggle against the invading, rending Will force that assaulted her mind starkly etched in Kyle's thought as she endured the very torture that Cyndi had undergone.

Kyle's Mental energy surged out in her defense, only to be blocked entirely. Gillian's Wall collapsed, and her mind was crushed. She lay still at the feet of her murderer. And Kyle knelt, horror-struck, helpless, as tears of pain and shock rolled down his cheeks.

CHAPTER 31: Destiny

The floor heaved beneath Kyle's knees and he fell onto his side. The chamber was coming apart around him, fragmenting, like a china doll smashed against stone. Suddenly there was empty space below him, and he flailed wildly with strangely heavy arms as his shattered world spun away. His swollen eyes were dry. Yet he saw that he was not alone.

The Deity swam before him, spinning slowly, Gillian's slack body drifting eerily around him. Kyle concentrated on him, watching as he struggled to free himself from her lifeless limbs. But as she had done consciously in life, so her body now defied His efforts.

The Deity's Will force had wavered, and His reality had crumbled around them. This was Kyle's chance. For this instant, he was master of his own fate. His anger flared up like a roaring furnace. He fashioned a parallel Mental world and structured a stable platform for himself. It did not materialize. He willed ropes about his hated adversary, but they would not appear. There was only Kyle, and the Deity. And Gillian, still doing in death more than any soul could ask of her to help him—to help all of them.

Racing images flashed through his mind: Holly, Suzanne, the Snow Temple, Raj and his desperate little group. So many people struggling for a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. The world was a confused tangle of threads, each attached to a living, breathing individual who wanted only to be valued, to contribute meaningfully. The Deity should have woven the fabric, taken each thread and knit it in place to make a whole, so that each could feel the strength and support of the others. Yet this man before him, He who claimed that title, had shown Kyle nothing but an ability to distort, unravel, and destroy with the power He held. Gillian's death was the final blow.

Kyle reached slowly to his belt and tugged at the short, thick object that was lodged there. A

present from Holly, so long ago. He raised it carefully, twisted the knurled shaft, watched the tiny light wink back ominously. The world turned, Kyle and the Deity floating, tumbling directionless. Kyle sighted along the shaft of the dart, but could not keep his line on target. He waited.

With a final effort the Deity pushed Gillian clear. She drifted slowly away, her face turned to Kyle, her raised hand almost waving at him as if to say "He's all yours." A grim smile creased Kyle's face, and the tears were back again. He waited.

The line was there, through the blur of his tears, a straight path. The Deity saw it, tried to spin away, but there was no escape. Kyle pressed the firing stud and the dart whizzed out, fatefully straight, inexorably slow. Kyle sensed a surge of Mental energy but he shut it out, kept it at bay with his Wall, ignored it until the dart struck and the explosion blasted him backwards to hit solid metal. He dropped to the ground, hard.

Then the Deity's final message and its meaning seeped through and he wept anew, wept as he had never done, for the life he had abandoned and the lot fate had handed him.

The Deity, the man who had terrorized the world and warped the lives of so many. The man he hated, loathed for the pain and suffering he had brought into his life. The man he had killed. Tom Reese. Founder of the Reese Syndicate. Kyle's father.

How long he sat there, oblivious to all around him, he did not remember. But suddenly Holly was there, kneeling in front of him, looking with concern into his eyes.

"Kyle," she said gently. "Kyle, it's alright. It's over."

He stared blankly at her for a long moment. "No," he said. The voice sounded empty, sucked dry of all emotion. It was not his voice. Not any more.

He watched Holly turn and look over her shoulder, and slowly he let his gaze follow hers. Suzanne crouched beside Gillian's body. She shuddered, weeping softly. He could feel her pain.

"She knows," he said.

Holly nodded. "She also knows you did all you could. We all did." She paused. "Especially Gillian."

"You—don't understand," Kyle said. He looked back into Holly's eyes. "The Deity. The one who called himself the Deity—"

"He's dead," she answered. There was a harsh ring of finality to the words, and Kyle sensed the loathing in her thoughts. "He won't fuck up the world any more."

"But Holly," Kyle said slowly, "who will?"

For a moment Holly looked confused.

"Who the fuck cares?" she said at last. "Anything is better than what that asshole dished out. Look what he did to your mother. And to Gillian." She glared down at him. "Look what he did to you and me Kyle!"

"It wasn't all his doing," Kyle said. "People bring a lot on themselves. But he found a way to achieve almost God-like powers over reality. How can any one person stay sane with that kind of power in their hands?"

"If they make mankind's benefit their purpose, and don't just use their power to seek more power." Suzanne's fiery eyes were strangely soft and sad, red with weeping.

"He was corrupted and warped by the power he'd found. None of us can ever forgive him for the way he used people. But for finding a way to work...miracles...." Kyle suddenly grew rigid and stared wild-eyed at Suzanne, then Holly.

"Miracles," he whispered. "I can—"

"You can't bring her back, Kyle," Suzanne said softly. "My mother is dead, just as yours is."

Kyle scrambled to his feet. "We brought Holly back. Gillian and Cyndi did. We can cool her down, get her back to Earth, use the labs—"

Suzanne snatched his arm and hauled him over to the other side of the room where Gillian lay. She was a mess. The blast from the dart had shattered much of her chest, blown her wide open. There was nothing left to save.

"Nooooo!" he wailed. Kyle fell across her, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Kyle!" Holly shouted. "It wasn't your fault. You had to do what you did, or all of us would be dead. It's what Gillian would have wanted."

Kyle lay where he was, still unable to control his sobs. Holly's words held no consolation. His thoughts went back to the first time he had met Gillian. Her strength and independence, her Mental power, her icy calm. He remembered the ride in her speeder, could never forget the feeling as the music had flowed around him, drowning both of them....

Something hard pressed against his stomach, a pouch on Gillian's belt. He pulled back, avoiding any glance at her upper body, and fumbled in the pouch. It had an airtight seal, fireproof lining.

"Kyle," Suzanne said. "What are you doing?" There was shocked disgust in her voice.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe she did it. She knew she was coming for you. She knew she might die." He extracted a small blast-proof container from the pouch. His hands shook so badly that he couldn't manipulate the lock. He handed it to Suzanne.

"Open it," he said hoarsely.

She slid the locking clip aside, and drew out a miniature cassette. A music cassette.

Kyle swallowed hard and took Suzanne's arm in a convulsive grip. Hope raged wildly within

him. "We've got to play it for you," he said. His words tumbled over each other as he tried to stay in control. "Now."

CHAPTER 32: Snow

The door to the chamber hummed as it slid open. Four men in gray-blue station guard reflexor suits stepped through, stun pistols levelled. Ice-Eyes strode in behind them, his customary cold expression replaced by one of suppressed fury. He glanced down at Gillian's crumpled body, and a gloating smile flashed briefly across his face.

"A satisfying end," he said softly. Then he pushed his way through to stand in front of Kyle. "And you, meddling little shit, I should have killed the first time I saw you."

With startling speed, Ice-Eyes raised a small pistol and fired. Kyle had no chance to prepare. His head swam, and he felt himself pitch forward, spinning with the room. His face struck soft carpet, and there was a bright flash before everything went black.

A vast orb hung low in the sky, bright blue and brown on one side, dark with a glowing white outline on the other. Close enough to touch, yet far beyond his grasp. Across the black space between, a tiny yellow dot moved erratically, winking like a firefly. There were others now, weaving spastic paths through the void, twinkling like fairy lights on a great shadowy tree. Closer now, growing, the lights formed shapes, long and narrow, lit at one end, metallic cigars emitting a deadly smoke. Very near. Their clouded breath was a chill blast of frost vapour, billowing in like an ice fog, wreathing all in its deadly shroud....

There was a violent lurch. A sharp pain stabbed up Kyle's side and jarred him partly awake. He struggled against wakefulness, terrified of what it might bring. A metallic clang echoed hollowly around him, and he shivered. His nose throbbed, and his body was icy cold. When he opened his

eyes there was only blackness, so that he could not be sure of his sight. A loud hissing began, ominous in the blind black. The very air seemed spongy, frigid, thick and yielding. For an instant he imagined himself floundering, drowning in a vast drift of snow, so deep that all light was shut out, suffocating, freezing—black snow. The thought was ominous. His body shuddered violently, and the vision fled.

He focused on the sound. Escaping air, or gas. He sniffed suspiciously, but there was only the sharp tang of bare unpolished metal, matching the hard chill beneath his body. A cell, perhaps, like that he had imagined in the detention area of the space station. His probing hands found walls above, below, on all sides save one. He moved in that direction until he touched something soft and warm, human flesh warm. There was a face, and his fingers traced a scar up across the cheek.

He sighed with relief, and for the first time noticed that his breath was coming in great long gasps. He felt winded. His imagined death in the docking bay flashed before his mind, and he scrambled frantically over Suzanne's body, feeling the walls until his hand landed squarely on the thigh of another body. With a heave he rolled Suzanne beside him, and put an arm round both forms. Then he lay still, his chest burning as though he had been holding his breath for minutes. He marshalled his strength and strove to retain consciousness. And as the sound of the opening airlock hatch echoed through the chamber, he sought protection within his mind.

The remaining pressure within the airlock thrust them violently out through the opening into the void beyond. Kyle imagined a thin yet rigid barrier enclosing their bodies, insulating and airtight. He prayed. Ten seconds later, he was still in one piece. He poked his nose gently outwards, and hit his barrier a few centimeters from his face. Ice-Eyes and his associates, it seemed, had restored the power to the station's generator.

"Big mistake," he said softly.

Their bubble was drifting slowly away from the station. He could see it clearly as it spun gently along its orbital path. The Earth glowed bright blue, green, and brown, a vast orb filling most of the sky. Kyle felt strangely detached from the world and all its ways, relaxed and somewhat dreamy, at peace with such a magnificent view. Almost too late, he wrenched himself back to awareness, shaking off the lure of unconsciousness. Oxygen deprivation was new to him. He imagined a small air-filled tank strapped to his belt, reached carefully down and turned it on. Within moments, the tiny volume enclosed by his conjured barrier was rich with breathable air. It took him several minutes to dispel his lightheadedness, and the station was hundreds of meters away by then.

Kyle tried to remember some of the basic laws he had learned in his physics classes. In space, every action he took would cause a reaction the other way. He did not want to breach the barrier, yet he was not sure he could devise something on the outside which would not interfere with their self-contained life support system. Gently, he thrust his leg down against the barrier. Their capsule

began to spin, not what he had intended. The station itself, then. Indirect, but less dangerous.

Kyle saw that their capsule was outside the orbit of the station, ahead of it, moving away. If the station were to slow down slightly, perhaps it would drift far enough in their direction to reach them before it corrected its orbit. He moved into his Mental world, followed a reality forward in which he forced imagined thrusters to fire on the station so as to reduce its orbital speed. It took several tries before he got what he wanted. The station drifted out towards them, at what seemed like the right rate. He let the reality progress until he knew they would just touch the station surface, then pulled back to wait.

When the station was just meters away, almost matching their orbital speed, Kyle used his powers to install an open airlock door directly in their path. Within a few seconds they were swallowed up by the station hull, and Kyle had the door closed. The airlock pressurized itself under Kyle's control, and he dissolved their protective capsule. Then he carried the two women through the inner airlock doors into a small equipment room, much like the one he had constructed when he and Holly had first needed reflexor suits.

He checked the condition of his two companions. Both were unconscious, but breathing evenly. He lay them down as comfortably as he could then sat between them, a hand on one arm of each. And he waited tensely, prepared in case the room melted away and the station began yet another assault.

None came. Long minutes ticked by, and the tension slowly drained from his body. If the station was not attacking him, or distorting his actions, it meant only one thing: without the Deity to control it, the power of the station was now his to wield. He should be able to take Ice-Eyes and his followers without a fight. But first, he had a tape to play.

Kyle concentrated on the wall opposite him, and a small door marked with a large red cross formed. He opened it, extracted two stimulant injectors, and gave one to each of his companions. Then he shaped a doorway from the equipment room into one of the station's corridors. Within seconds of searching he had found a deserted bedroom, complete with a cassette player unit. He stepped back into the equipment room just as Suzanne and Holly were sitting up.

"Kyle," Holly said groggily. "What the hell happened?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now we have to get Suzanne's cassette to a player."

Suzanne looked at him quizzically. "Kyle, are you alright?"

Kyle smiled as reassuringly as he could, then took each of them by the arm and helped them up. "There's a bedroom with a player a few meters down the corridor. Let's move."

He led them to the bedroom, closed and locked the door. When he turned Suzanne was standing beside the player, still looking confused.

"Just try it, please," he said. "For Gillian's sake, we have to try."

Suzanne plugged in the cassette, and the wild, exuberant music of the late 20th century filled the room. For a moment, Kyle felt nothing. Then it began—a gentle tingling of his Mental senses. And he knew, as he watched Suzanne drop onto the bed and stare dreamily into space, that it was happening. For the first time in he could not remember how long, he let himself relax. The station was theirs to control. And more important, Gillian was not dead—at least, her mind was not. Just as his mother was not dead. He let the music flow over him and carry him away....

Take a bite out of life,
Don't throw it away,
You've got so much to give,
You have so much to say,
Keep aiming high,
You got nothing to lose,
And if you do it right,
You can have what you choose.
There's a way to the top,
For those willing to try,
Never give up,
Even angels must die....

EPILOGUE

The music had long since stopped, but Kyle knew he had been lying entranced for minutes, perhaps hours. At last he saw Holly's lithe form move against the wall lighting. A moment later she touched his shoulder gently, peace and bewilderment still showing in her face.

"What was it?" she said. It was hardly a question. More like a statement made from habit, rather than purposeful inquiry. Kyle focused his eyes with an effort. The transfer had touched him more than he had expected, even as one outside the process. Yet he felt sure it had worked its magic.

"Gillian," he said dreamily. "It was Gillian." He smiled at the confused look on Holly's face. "I don't understand it any better than you do. All I know is, the cassette acts as storage and the music like a channel. It happened to me once." He tapped his forehead lightly. "That's how my mother got in here. She found a way to store her personality, her knowledge, all the things that were her, and encode them on a graftab cassette. The information is projected with the music, and targeted at a particular individual. I don't know how it's done. Probably only Cyndi and Gillian could ever explain it."

There was a moan from the bed and Suzanne opened her eyes. "What happened?" she said.

Holly frowned at Kyle for a moment, then looked doubtfully across at Suzanne.

"How does it feel to have another personality stored away in your head, Suzanne?"

Suzanne rubbed her temples, then ran her hands across her face as if awakening from a deep sleep.

"I don't—what do you mean?"

Kyle tried a link to her then, gently, and hit the reflex Wall he'd expected. Suzanne sat up straight, instantly alert.

"Kyle?"

"You shut me out," he said. "I could be wrong, but I'd say you've inherited the same kind of dual personality I landed a few weeks ago."

She held her hands to her head again.

"The music. Something to do with that music."

"Gillian always loved to listen to it. So did Cyndi. And together they found a way to pass their knowledge and experience on directly to their children." He moved across to where she sat, doubt and confusion still showing on her face. With both hands, he reached down and helped her to her feet. "That's us," he said.

"I feel the same, but...." She fixed him with her characteristic stare. "When you tried to touch my mind, I felt it. I knew what was happening, and I just kind of—well, watched while my mind shut you out. Almost like a wall of energy to block contact."

"You'll get used to it. And when you learn how to navigate inside your mind, in the Mental world, you'll find her. Gillian, I mean. She's in there somewhere, inside your head. She'll be waiting for you. Like Cyndi was for me."

There was a sigh from behind him, and Kyle turned back to Holly.

"This double personality shit's got me lost," she said. "I don't know how you're ever going to keep yourself straight, Suzanne, if Gillian's running around inside your head."

"I guess I'm the only one who can speak from experience," Kyle said. "I don't think she'll have any trouble."

"So be it," Holly replied. "And I know Gillian will understand this, Kyle: we got to figure out what goes on in this place. Especially now the hot shot man in charge is dead."

The import of her words struck home hard. Kyle looked up at the ceiling for a long moment.

"Something happened to him that gave me that chance to kill him," he said. "Otherwise, I would have been powerless to do anything."

"When we first saw him, I felt the Mental power he was sending out," Holly said. "Gave me really creepy vibes. I blocked fast. Then while he was toying with you and Gillian, I ducked out. I'd been thinking for a long time about how you suddenly began twisting reality around since you got out near this station. And the guards we met, really powerful but you couldn't reach them Mentally. I figured there had to be some kind of energy field, like an enhancer for your Mental powers, running on the station. And I guessed this guy was tapping into it. Big time."

"You shut it down?"

"Seems he was the main focus of the whole thing. While he was concentrating on you, the station computer was cooperative with maps and information. The access corridor and hatches were security locked, but between the T-suit and my decoder, we got in and shut down the generator."

"The cell I was in suddenly was just part of a long open corridor," Suzanne said. "I didn't see anyone else until I ran into Holly and—"

"—and she tried to take me out," Holly said, smiling. "I had to show her some new moves before she would even listen to reason. Still, she's a pretty fair fighter for her age."

"Damned right," Suzanne said. "Gillian...." she hesitated, "my mother taught me most of what I know."

"And you had one hell of a teacher," Holly said. There was a long moment of silence.

"Holly led us back to where she'd left you and Gillian," Suzanne said at last. "And we found you unconscious."

"Listen Kyle, that guy who strolled in on us—the one that blasted you—don't you think he'll be tracking us down again soon?"

Kyle was about to answer when he felt a Mental touch from outside the room.

'Figured it out yet?'

Kyle's heart skipped a beat. He willed himself calm. That Presence. He almost thought he recognized....

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You were in the trance for a long time. What, you figured Ice-Eyes and his loyal followers wouldn't find you?'

'What do you want?'

'Don't give me that shit, Kyle. You know you can't do a thing any more without me.'

Kyle looked first at Holly, then at Suzanne. Neither showed any sign of having received the Mental contact. He didn't move.

'I won't let you do this....'

'Fine. So sit there. I haven't got the hang of this yet anyway.'

Kyle watched the walls, his whole body tense.

'What are you going to do to us?'

There was no response, unless it was a vague sense of mirth. Then he felt it, this time unmistakable. A Presence he recognized.

'Gillian!'

'I'm finally getting a better handle on this. But I figure I need Cyndi in here to help decipher some of it. Get her on line.'

'Are you....'

'Inside the station's brain. If you want to call it that. Your father was one nasty son-of-a-bitch, but I guess he discovered a few things about his Mental powers.'

'I know. I couldn't tell anyone. He sent a message to me just before the dart....'

`Skip it, Kyle. He was a warped asshole. But one thing he told you was true. You are the last one that could have taken this station's power and used it. The Mental powers of your parents combined inside your head gives you almost unlimited capability.'

`It scares me shitless. I need—I need your help, Gillian. I wish you were here.'

`This is as 'here' as it gets now, Kyle. And you've got Holly and Suzanne there to give you support. If you get moving and wake them up.'

`I'll need a moment to explain this all to them...'

`I'll take care of it, Kyle. It'll be faster.'

`But Suzanne is only just starting to understand what happened to her in the transfer. I don't know if she's ready to encounter you on a purely Mental link.'

`Not even I know what happened on the transfer. So far as I can tell, it worked the way it should have. But the station tapped into the process and absorbed the information as well. I'm going to check when I link with her. I want to make sure I'm really in her mind.'

Even Kyle had to smile at that. The Mental world was a strange place to exist at any time. But to exist there and only there, and in several locations at once, would be a split personality experience he didn't think he could cope with.

`What about the others, Gillian? The Snow crew. And the station guards.'

`The Snow people on the Police cruiser are out of danger. Diane should have them all back on their feet within the hour. And the station guards are shaking off headaches about now. They're wondering why they're here.'

`You can sense everything on this station? And control it?'

`Shit, Kyle, I can sense things from almost anywhere on Earth. It's fucking mind-boggling. Even for me. But I only have control on things within the immediate station area. Outside that, the station can only channel Mental support. For you.'

`Won't it work with anyone else? Why does it have to be me?'

`I haven't figured it all yet. All I know is, you're the last one of a line on your father's side that has the right Mental gift to be able to tap into the station's Mental generator. There could be others somewhere in the world. But you'll have to find them.'

Holly stirred. She opened her eyes and looked up at Kyle, confusion in her gaze. Before he could say anything, he sensed a surge of directed communication, and her expression changed. She smiled.

"So, Mr. Magician," she said. "What's the next miracle?"

Kyle felt the familiar Mental touch of Holly's mind, and he allowed the link to form. It was now three-way, with Gillian in control.

`Miracles are my department, Holly.'

Gillian's Presence was there behind the thought, as if she were standing beside them. 'For now. And don't you get any ideas Kyle, you've done enough fucking about with reality for one day.'

Kyle sent a tentative request, then slipped down inside his own inner thoughts. He conjured his unique retreat, weaving into the fabric a small cleared lawn surrounded by sheltering oak trees which rustled gently in the breeze. A bubbling brook trickled softly over a stony ledge. Blue and yellow birds flitted in the branches, chattering as they went. Pale morning sunshine stole through the swaying boughs, glistening on the dewdrops that hung from leaf and blade.

Kyle sat and dangled his feet in the cool water. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts flow with the sounds about him, slowly sinking into a state of relaxed calm.

"Taking a break from the labours of the world, is that it?"

Kyle kept his eyes closed, his head filled with dreamy thoughts. "I needed this. You've never been here before, have you?"

There was a soft rustling, then something brushed against Kyle's left arm. He felt the warm touch of a hand pressed over his own.

"I would have preferred to arrive from another place."

Kyle felt a lump grow in his throat, and tears pricking at the corners of his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. He reached out and held her then, as he had never done in life. "It should have taken me, too."

Kyle opened his eyes and looked at her. She wore a loose white shirt and a short light blue skirt. Her hair was a little ragged, tousled, hanging low on one side as it had ever done. Gillian looked more at peace than he had ever known her. Her Presence was massively strong, but there was no turbulence beneath the surface. She smiled slightly.

"It had to be that way. I figure this is what was meant to be. That means, you were meant to inherit this whole mess from your father. President of Reese Syndicate, Chair of the United World Council, everything. If we work it right nobody down below has to know about the power changeover. But you can do something D-damned worthwhile with it." She looked down at her clothes, following Kyle's gaze. "Kyle, Deity or not, you've got a lot to learn about choosing women's clothing."

Kyle smiled slightly, but it did nothing to reduce his growing feeling of distress. "Sorry," he said.

There was a soft sigh from behind them, and Kyle turned to see his mother walk out from beneath the trees. Cyndi had a deep sadness in her eyes that belied the smile on her lips. She crossed to where Gillian sat, and touched her tentatively on the shoulder. They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Gillian sprang to her feet and threw her arms around her.

"Is this the only way I could get to see you again?" Cyndi whispered.

"Not the only way," Gillian replied. "But the most direct."

"I'm sorry, Gyl. If I'd known that Tom Rase would ever find us...."

"You suspected, didn't you? I knew something was up before you were killed. You knew he was after you."

"I don't know. My memories show no record of it. Whatever I discovered, it came after I made the personality recording. I thought the son-of-a-bitch was dead."

"Yeah, well he sure as hell is now."

"Mother," Kyle said. "About my father...."

Cyndi looked at him long and hard before she spoke.

"When I was still young, on the streets. I lived with a gang called the Breakouts. There were hundreds of little pockets of rebellion against the AF and the World Council decrees. Your father lived with the gang for a few weeks. Called himself Tom Rase then. I guess he changed his name later to Reese. He was intelligent, bright, full of adventure. I was with him—long enough to conceive you. That was before he turned our group in to the AF. Even then he was a devious son-of-a...." She stopped, and looked away. "I never told him about you. But I let him know what I thought of him. And I guess he never forgot."

Holly strode out from behind the rocks near the waterfall. She planted herself in front of Kyle, indignation in her face. "Kyle, you have a chance to take what this guy did and make it into something good. What's happened has happened." She glanced round at Gillian and Cyndi, then looked back at Kyle. "With Cyndi here and Gillian on the station, and me helping you, maybe we can give people back some of their dignity. Our Mr. Reese may have fucked up a lot of things, but the bastard gave us a tool we can use to more than make up for it."

"She has a point, Kyle," Gillian said. "I've seen some of what this station's power can do. Cyndi can help me decipher the rest of it, if you'll let her stay linked for a while. Together we have the AF and all the assholes of the world by the fucking balls. Let's kick some ass."

Kyle looked at the three women, felt the determination and resolve they all shared. "You three make one Hell of a support staff," he muttered. "I don't even know what I can do. I don't understand what people need. I'm scared shitless of what my mind can do. How can I help anyone when I've never even been there?"

"We've been there, Kyle," Holly said. "We can help you do it right. And after a while, you'll know yourself."

"Do what?" Kyle said. "What am I supposed to do, go round helping each person in the world who wants a better life? If I lived for a hundred years I couldn't even work my way through one city." He stood up and walked briskly away, ignoring the thorns that pricked his bare feet. The garden was silent and still now, and the sunlight through the trees was fading slowly away. He was

under the deepening shade of the trees when his mother called softly to him.

"Kyle. It's OK."

He stood still, struggling with his thoughts. The desire to share them was overpowering, and he knew the combined Will Force of the three women in the glade was at work on him. He did not fight it. His chin drooped to his chest as he turned, and he held his head in his hands.

"I'm scared," he whispered. "I'm scared of what I might do. How can I hope to do better than he did, with the power to change almost anything in my hands?" He looked up at them, despair in his face. "Even now I can see what will happen. When I find I can't really help the DT's, that what I do is just a tiny insignificant effort, I'll sit back and spend my energy making sure we're OK. I'll become as selfish and thoughtless as he was, and maybe even more dangerous. How can I—"

"What makes you think you're going to be so all-fucking powerful, Kyle?" Gillian strode towards him, anger flaring in her grey eyes. "Didn't you hear what I said to you? It's me inside this station now. You're not just dealing with an obedient artificial intelligence, dedicated to your personal fulfilment. Glory to Kyle and all that shit. I've got this kind of uncluttered perspective. You know, life issues for myself don't seem such a high priority any more. I can draw on massive AI to enhance my reasoning. I can make instant decisions that would have taken even me weeks in your place. I can devise strategies for dealing with almost any problem you can think of. Hunger, overpopulation, unemployment, pollution, world apathy. Lack of confidence. So don't let your head get too big for your body. You might be the channel of a lot of power, but without my OK ain't much flowing down the pipe."

She rolled suddenly sideways, dropping to the ground and arcing her legs across behind Kyle's knees. Kyle went down like a severed tree trunk, falling back with a thump onto the soft moss. When he looked up Gillian was standing over him, grinning.

"I still got a few tricks, Kyle. Even in here. If you fuck up, it's not going to be your fault." She nodded her head in the direction of Holly and Cyndi. "Not even just mine. At the least, it's you, me and Cyndi that are taking this on. And Holly's earned her way into this mess as much as the rest of us. No, you won't be on your own. And no way you're going to get carte blanche on the miracles."

She reached down and pulled him to his feet. Then she put an arm round his shoulders and led him back to the clearing. Kyle noticed how soft the grass was under foot. The birds sang sweetly, and the sun sparkled off the flowing water of the stream.

Gillian passed Kyle to his mother and she held him tight for a long moment. Then she pulled back and looked at him, this time the smile on her face touching her eyes.

"It's not a matter of going in and trying to change everything overnight, Kyle," she said. "You start by leaving things more-or-less as they are, but weeding out the worst elements of the power structures in the world. Most of them are Mentally strong, and you'll need Gyl's help to remove

them. The United World Council first. Then the AF. Let the existing structure start moulding a better existence for everyone. Gyl can tell you the plan we've worked out. I don't think you'll be disappointed."

"It won't just be us, either," Holly said. "You may be the only one now, but there could be other people in the world that can tie in to the station's power." She paused and looked at Gillian. "And one of the first steps in establishing peace has to be a softening of the Council and AF view of splinter groups. There's ready-made organizations of motivated people all over the world. If we can encourage cooperation instead of enmity, things should improve a lot faster. The Snow Temple probably has as many members as the AF has officers. And if anything, they're even better organized."

Kyle looked around at his garden, then back to the others. "I guess I don't really have much of a choice. It's like my destiny, or my fate, to be the focus of this crusade. And I can't imagine anyone having a stronger set of personalities to help them. So...."

He paused, and looked at Gillian. She grew grim-faced, and shook her head.

Kyle smiled and continued. "I guess I give it a try, on one condition." He looked past the three women to a gap in the trees just above the waterfall. A slight figure clad in dirty blood-stained overalls pushed her way through the branches, then stopped and stared at them in amazement.

"Jesus, Kyle. Gill—where the fuck am I?"

"Suzanne," Kyle said. "I want you to meet the members of your little team. We're going to save the world."

BACK COVER

August, 2111

Suddenly Kyle's whole life was here, deep underground in the hidden Black Snow Temple. Somebody was after him, but now he was safe. For a while.

He could not stay here for long. He did not fit in, and they did not want him to. Gillian knew. He was scared of her, scared of her power and her strength, her unbreachable calm; scared of what he had glimpsed just under the surface. She was a bomb waiting to go off. Yet he needed her, and she needed him. She knew.

There was Holly, the Mental adept, who lived her life inside other people's minds. She questioned the dead and the living from within, searching for the truth. Kyle was sure she knew more than she told.

Suzanne. Volatile and unpredictable, his friend. Street smart, technically adept. He knew he could trust her. If only she could trust herself.

And out there somewhere, Ice-Eyes, whose very glance chilled his blood. Sooner or later, Ice-Eyes would find him. By then, Kyle would have to be ready.

No, Kyle couldn't stay hidden forever. They would find him, or he would find them. But he could not know, could not even begin to imagine what that confrontation would bring. He was truly about to discover what it was like to have your world come apart at the seams, and reality disintegrate before your very eyes.