# Magic Man

## Chapter 1

The 10:18 Metro-Link was on time, which took Redflare by surprise. Not its punctuality; Camineet's mass-transit trains were partly under the aegis of Mother Brain, and when the incredibly advanced AI that was Palm's chief executive took charge of something, it worked. Even in the slums of Ossale Court, fresh water and reliable power were available (to those who paid their bills or did some creative tinkering with the lines) and the trains ran on time.

No, the train had caught the street magician off guard because his mind had been on the station instead of his wrist chron, scoping out the concrete-walled block from his vantage point midway down the stairs and not liking what he saw. The Camineet Transit Company security robots were upstairs on the other side of the turnstiles, there to protect the ticket clerk--and his money--rather than seeing to the comfort and safety of the passengers. Anyone on the platform below could work out their own problems amongst themselves.

What bothered Redflare was the presence of too many other people there with him, seven in all. Four wore the green headbands and blue jackets that marked them as members of the Wild Riders, a street gang whose turf was the train system, at least those parts it wasn't profitable to kick them out of. The gangers, three boys and a girl all about seventeen years old, had been talking together in low, angry voices. From the occasional dark glances they shot across the station they were trying to decide what to do about the other occupants of the waiting room. Redflare sympathized; he was trying to work out pretty much the same thing.

It had taken Redflare all of two seconds to mark the three who were the cause of so much agitation as gunjacks, street muscle. They didn't have the polish or bearing of hunters or mercenaries, and with the weapons they carried they sure as hell couldn't be anything else. The thin one in the ratty fibercoat had a short sword at his belt and a cheap sonic gun, a one-hit wonder, shoved into his waistband, the second 'jack could have had pretty much anything under his full-length duster, and the third was carrying a broadaxe slung over his back in clear violation of city law. Not, Redflare reflected, that anyone bothered to enforce those laws in Ossale Court. He didn't think it was likely the three were there for a Petty Thug's Night on the Town; chances were they were going to stick their noses into his business.

That was how far Redflare had gotten when the train pulled into the station, hissing to a stop in front of the platform. The gunjacks, who hadn't even seen him yet, immediately moved towards the opening doors, reaching for their weapons while Redflare's party stepped off the train. He had a couple of seconds' edge on them, because he was looking for Dace Maxwell and Isis while the 'jacks had to wait to see the woman the team was escorting, who got off behind them, before taking action. Even so, they were moving while Redflare stood around flatfooted, letting cheap muscle show more professionalism than he did.

Then again, he wasn't a professional hunter, and the gunjacks' quick move might not have been the good idea it had seemed. While Ashlyn Dumont looked like she wanted to jump back on the subway at the sight of drawn blades, the Wild Riders had an entirely different reaction, sort of a "Who the hell are you to pull steel on our turf?" kind of thing. Even as the 'jacks made their first move towards the train, the Wild Riders tore into them with knives and lengths of chain. Redflare stepped out of the shadows of the stairwell and waved at the three passengers.

"Dace, over here!"

The blue-haired man got the message at once and grabbed Dumont's arm, virtually dragging her along, skirting the edge of the melee on the way to the magician's side. The team leader shot him a dark look as he let go of the lady, the kind of look that suggested explanations were in order. Redflare sympathized, but this wasn't the time or place for talk. He pounded up the concrete stairs, hearing the echoes of three sets of feet behind him.

"What is all this?" Dumont protested, still very confused and not a little scared.

"Save it!" Dace snapped. Before they ran, Redflare had seen the 'jack with the sword stab one of the gangers, and he figured Dace, like him, assumed the thugs would get the better of it and be after them sooner or later. The idea was to have Dumont as far away as possible just in case it was sooner. They dashed through the turnstiles, past the security robots, and out into the darkened streets.

One of Ossale Court's least endearing qualities was its lack of regularly constructed buildings. There were some, like the Metro-Link station, that were still following their original purpose, and more that had been abandoned, but at least half of the structures in the former industrial zone were squatter's shacks thrown together from scraps of wood and metal. It gave the slum a squalid atmosphere that reeked with despair. Crime and violence were epidemic there; it always ate into Redflare's soul every time he was forced to visit.

He'd grown up in Ossale Court. That had been enough of it for him.

There was no time to worry about the setting, though; the need for action kept Redflare from getting too philosophical over it. Dace looked around, scowled, and rounded on him.

"Where's Kemet? He was supposed to have the van waiting."

"He got hung up. I'll explain if we can get some breathing room."

Dace cursed, then nodded. He led the little group in a zigzag pattern through the streets and alleyways, getting out of the line of sight of anyone coming out of the station. Ossale Court was a sprawling, ungainly place, and if you didn't know where to start looking for someone you might never find them. Redflare hoped that logic would work for them this time. It seemed to be; he didn't see anyone dogging their steps or hear cries of "they went that way!" There hadn't even been a second group of gunjacks waiting outside the station in case the first bunch screwed up.

Dumont gasped for breath as they stopped running. She clearly wasn't used to the exertion and bent over, hands resting on her knees to support herself while her lungs sucked in air. Her feet had to be killing her from sprinting in three-inch heels.

"We need to stop and sort things out," Redflare said, "and I think Miss Dumont needs a break. Tough to run if you pass out."

"Good idea," Dace agreed. He glanced around and his eyes settled on a subway car that had been turned into a diner. A sign out front proclaimed it to be the Dining Car, except that the first "in" had been painted over with a Y in neon red light-gel paint by some food critic. "How about there?"

It seemed as good a place as any.

"Sure. I just hope the name isn't an omen."

The layout of the diner was pretty standard for cheap restaurants, a row of booths along one side of the place, counter and kitchen on the other. They took the booth in the opposite corner from the door, along the short side of where the counter bent into an L. Not only did it give a good vantage point for observing the entire room, but it also was away from the row of windows that pierced the entire front side of the converted Metro-Link car.

A waitress in a white blouse and pink skirt came over almost at once as the diner was nearly empty. She gave Dumont an odd look; the lady's cream-colored silk shirt and navy skirt-and-jacket carbonsuit were obviously corporate mufti, making her definitely not the sort to be found in an Ossale Court diner. Since the others were dressed more normally for the streets, she had to figure it was something under-the-table, anything from hiring muscle to an illicit metachem buy. Also figuring it was none of her biz, she brought the coffee they asked for and took care to stay well out of earshot. The waitress had a paying job, not the regular state of things in the slum, and didn't want to blow that success by prying into something that could end up getting her killed.

For a while, no one said anything, coming to terms with the sudden, unexpected violence. Redflare took the time to get his first good look at the woman in the suit across the table. Ashlyn Dumont looked just the same as in her picture: slender-bodied, with long, ash-blonde hair worn in a single thick braid down her back and iron-gray eyes that while blurred with confusion now Redflare could easily imagine settling into a gaze as cold and stern as a winter sky. The slim leather handbag she carried no doubt contained data--papers, chips, or some other information, the kind of thing she dealt with as a project manager for Sarranas Development Enterprises--data that would be immensely useful in starting up for a new employer.

Dumont was on the inside of the booth, against the wall. Isis had the outside seat, which put her between the corporate defector and any threats but also kept Dumont from jumping up and making a break for it. Isis wanted answers and Redflare doubted they'd be leaving until she got some--the missing Kemet was her twin brother. They shared their mahogany-brown skin, bright red hair and eyes, and their attractive, sleek facial features, but Isis was most definitely female. Her snug white leather unisuit and flat heeled long boots showed off that fact quite plainly.

Both women were looking at Redflare, curious about the brawl that wasn't supposed to have happened and the missing transportation. Dumont, though, was doing something else, sizing him up the way she'd no doubt done to Isis and the tall, handsome, lean-muscled Dace on the train. He wondered if his white T-shirt, faded jeans, and denim vest (layered with light carbon-fiber armor) gave her any insights into the man under the clothes.

Then again, she was probably more interested in the fact that he wasn't openly carrying a weapon. That was the sort of question people asked about a bodyguard. In fact, he did have a gun: a small Inverness YZ-6 holdout poisonshot. But unlike Dace his main fighting skills lay in the use of techniques.

"Redflare," Isis asked, "where is my brother? He was supposed to meet us with the van when we left the Metro-Link station." People hearing Isis speak for the first time tended to be caught off-guard. She looked sensual and brazen, the stereotypical "hunter babe," the slinky sidekick of a holovid hero. She spoke, though, with the accent and educated vocabulary of a scientist or university professor. Redflare suspected she got a kick out of jarring people's complacency with the contrast.

"He had to dump the van," Redflare explained. The team had borrowed (stolen, albeit temporarily) it to use as transportation that, if seen, wouldn't lead back to them. "Apparently the watchman at the shipping company counted the landskimmers, came up one van short, and called the cops."

"How'd you find out?" Dace asked.

"Nima told us." Nima was the gridrider who worked for Dace's crew. On commando-type missions, she'd keep in touch with the team by headset commlink, but since they were operating in public where such things might attract the wrong kind of attention, they were forced to do without on this job, except for Kemet. "Luckily she had an auto-scan checking for that, just in case."

Paranoia, in the hunter biz, was less a mental illness and more of a job skill.

"So he's getting his hands on a new vehicle?" Dace asked.

"Right, but he dropped me off so I could hook up with you and explain the delay. He was going to ditch the van, find something, and pick us up."

"Surely we were not supposed to wait at the Metro-Link station for him?"

Redflare shook his head.

"No," he answered Isis, "I told him we'd call Nima with the time and place so she could relay it to him."

Dace nodded.

"Okay. There's a phone in the back; I'll make the call." His gaze narrowed. "Now, what about the other problem? That's the first time in my life I've been thankful to have the Wild Riders around.”

"The muscleboys were there before me," Redflare told him. "I was trying to figure out why they were there and if I needed to do anything about it when the train showed up and the questions pretty much answered themselves."

"Next time, figure faster. Miss Dumont is important property, and failed bodyguard jobs don't pay the bills."

He could tell Dace wasn't really angry at him, just blowing off steam at the situation in general, so he didn't take it personally. Well, not too personally. Dace, Isis, Kemet, and Nima were used to working together; they were a team. Dace's crew knew each other's moves, how to deal with each other both as people and as units in combat. Redflare, on the other hand, was always a step or so off the pace, a gear that didn't fully mesh.

The magician cut that line of thought off and stifled it. There was no time for self-pity, appealing as it seemed to be, when there was biz going down.

"The 'jacks were after the lady, weren't they?"

"I think so. They moved on you as soon as you got off the train."

"A three-man team," Dace mused. "Dumont wouldn't be up to three all by herself. Maybe they work together regularly, or maybe they were expecting an escort."

"Especially as they were waiting at the station," Isis observed. Her eyes met Dace's; it was clear that they were thinking the same thing, but neither of them wanted to put it into words. It was Ashlyn Dumont who brought it out into the open.

"I fail to understand why the three of you seem so concerned," she said coldly. She had recovered most of her composure now that the immediate danger was over, and was once again the smooth, iron-hard corporator. "I'm in the middle of jumping from SDE and bringing valuable research data. Until I'm safely placed with my new employer, my life represents a potential loss to them. Killing or kidnapping me would be their most logical choice."

She said it like she believed it. Typical suit, putting money ahead of human life, even her own life. Redflare wondered how many meseta she valued herself at.

"That is," she continued, "why your team was hired to protect me, after all. Why are you so surprised?"

Dace shook his head.

"That isn't it. Trouble we expected. If SDE had intel you were going to jump, they might have had your home staked out, your usual haunts covered, even followed you."

"Given that you are valuable company property," Isis observed. From another woman it would have sounded catty; from Isis it was a straightforward statement of fact.

"That's why we set up to make the extraction on the Metro-Link . It's crowded, and the flow of trains bring people of every social class together," Redflare explained. It was his idea, though the others had honed it, based on the most elemental principle of magic--misdirection. Namely, the fact that while Dumont rode the Metro-Link from work to home each night, the train made two stops along the way. Dace walks by her casually, mentions the prearranged password, and presto! He and Dumont step off one train and onto another, quick as a flash.

"If the corporation did have Miss Dumont under observation, then it is possible that the watcher, or his or her superiors, deduced that we would be disembarking at the Ossale Court station and arranged for a train to be waiting."

"Why use the gunjacks, though?" Redflare asked. "Why not have a corpsec team there to do the job?"

"Deniability," Dace told him. "A bunch of SDE troopers can't just come in and shoot up a train station. Big difference between corp agents gunning a defector in a public place and a woman being killed in a random street crime."

Dumont nodded her agreement.

"All any witnesses would have seen was a well-dressed woman attacked by thugs, who killed her and stole her case." The way she said it made it clear she wasn't impressed by Redflare needing an explanation.

"What's wrong is the level of opposition," Dace said.

This time Redflare had the satisfaction of seeing that the corp manager was as confused as he was. It felt easier on the ego to have Dace explaining things to her instead of him.

"SDE's not Luveno or Scion-Colesburg. They don't have the cash to have a team at every train station in the arch' just in case you decide to run for one of them. If the 'jacks were waiting for us it's because someone specifically saw us switch trains at West Neroton and figured we'd get off here in the Court, since it's the next stop on the Green Line and 'cause it's easy to get really lost in the slums. If that's true, then they'd have known you weren't alone, and would have upped the stakes."

Redflare grinned.

"What, you're miffed they didn't send enough people to deal with a tough guy like you?"

Dace smiled back.

"Heck, yeah, I've got a rep to maintain!" The smile vanished and he added, "I'm serious, though. I checked out the car carefully before making contact, and I didn't see anyone that was keeping tabs on the lady."

"In addition," Isis contributed, "I swept Miss Dumont for electronic tracking devices on board the train and found none." She was the team's electronics expert; if she said there wasn't a bug then Redflare was willing to bet there wasn't one. On the other hand, he'd have said the same thing about trusting Dace to spot a tail.

"I think I get it," he said. "You're trying to figure why a security team with enough talent to watch Dumont without you noticing and the brains to figure out where she was going would arrange for a hit team that at least looks like it wouldn't be able to take down the escort."

"That's the holy truth."

"Then what?" Dumont asked, her slim fingers toying with her coffee cup but not lifting it to drink. She looked more like the Gothic Regal type than Kedge InstaKaf, a can of which Redflare had noticed next to the coffee machine behind the counter. "Where does all this reasoning leave you?"

Dace shrugged.

"I don't know. It just feels off. There's something that explains it, but we don't know what that is. Maybe it's important, maybe not, but I don't like only having part of the puzzle." He knocked back half his cup in one gulp, then rose. "I'm going to call Nima. The faster we get you out of here and off our hands, corpgirl, the better I'll like it."

"That is something we both can agree on. I don't cherish the idea of being killed any more than you want to lose your fee."

Dace was only gone for a couple of minutes. Just in case the diner's staff or the few patrons there got the idea to watch Ashlyn Dumont climbing into a specific vehicle, the pickup wasn't to be right there but around the corner by the burned-out hulk of a tenement. They paid their bill, then headed that way. Halfway there, though, that plan was cut short.

Redflare looked over the three muscleboys from the station as they stepped away from the ruin of the burned building. "Well, Dace," he said wryly, "looks like you get to see if these guys were up to the job, at least."

## Chapter 3

One of the most common mistakes amateurs--and a lot of professionals, too--made was to put themselves into what Redflare thought of as "crisis mode" when they were in trouble. They focused all their thoughts on the situation at hand, let adrenaline raise their senses and reflexes up a notch, and generally pushed themselves to the limit in order to get themselves through their problems. It didn't sound too bad, but there were a few things to realize that took the gloss off. One was that people needed rest. People who kept themselves going at full steam for too long wore down. Sleep and physical relaxation were important, but more so was mental rest. Obsessing over one subject wore the brain down. It was absolutely key that in moments of relative safety and security the mind be allowed to relax, or it might shut itself down sometime when its full power was needed.

Another consideration was intuition. Logic was the tool of the conscious mind, moving carefully from one step to the next, but the subconscious functioned without much rigor, adding up the myriad of details that no one really noticed to arrive at its conclusions. Sometimes it made emotional associations that were wrong, really wrong, but a well-developed intuition most often didn't. That was why some people could count on their hunches and others lost lives and fortunes on them. When the conscious mind focused intently on a subject, it cut off input from the subconscious, keeping intuition out of its way. A person who did that too much trained himself to ignore the urgings of the subconscious. It was people like that who got knives stuck in their backs because their brains filtered out the warnings that their unconscious shouted at the sound of a quiet footstep. They became vulnerable as hell the instant they stepped out of "crisis mode."

So, one professional trick Redflare had managed to learn was to let his brain drift whenever a lull in the action presented itself. When the Brocknar reached its destination, he'd give the extraction his full attention, but until then he fastened on whatever other topic he could and let his subconscious take a shot or two at putting together some answers. This time, unfortunately, his mind latched onto his own poor performance.

Dumont had it right, sort of. Money was the root of all evil. It was the only reason Redflare was there. Unlike Dace's crew, Redflare was not a professional hunter. He was a street magician, pure and simple. As a hunter, he was strictly a part-timer.

Redflare had grown up in Ossale Court, a kid enticed by stories of magic that would make the world seem bigger, better, more comfortable than the Palm of technology and computers that had condemned him to a life in the slums. A magical world would be a better world, at least in his mind, one of mystery and wonder.

As a kid, he had run with the WizKids, one of the tech-gangs that ran the streets of the slum. These gangs were almost tribal, obsessed with magic and with the ancient days. They dressed like something out of a sword-and-sorcery holovid, imitating the old-time Espers in whatever ways they could, based on the scraps of mass media information that crept down to them. Most of all, they assiduously practiced to develop their potential with the techniques that were the closest thing to magic Palm had to offer.

Sometime along the line, though, the bloom had fallen from the rose for Rick Denton, now called by the supposedly Esper-like name of "Redflare." Some part of him couldn't take it anymore, the pretending to live in a world that was long since gone and probably wasn't anything like what they thought it had been, anyway. So, he'd turned to magic, not the real thing but sleight of hand, to escape the illusion.

If he'd ever told the story to someone, he figured that they'd think it was strange to escape an illusion by joining a profession whose basic nature was rooted in deception. The difference was that stage magic was an illusion he controlled, he created with words and props and the skill of his own hands. Instead of being a prisoner of his own yearnings, Redflare lived in the real world and, as he imagined the true Espers had, commanded his own "powers" with his own will. It was a good way of life, one he liked, but it was plagued by one major problem.

Money.

Being a street magician may have been fulfilling, but lucrative it was not. Redflare wasn't a big-name conjurer who performed on stage or over the holovid; his box office receipts were whatever his audience thought to toss into his hat, minus the occasional fine when the Division of Law Enforcement beat agents were bored and had nothing better to do than check on the status of his public performance license (which, of course, he didn't have).

The fact was, that while he was a better-than-average magician and made pretty high-end meseta for his profession, if Redflare had to support himself by magic alone, the best he'd be able to afford was a tenement flat back in Ossale Court with cold Global Envirotech nutribars (without flavor packets, even!) three meals a day and the occasional First Food Shop daily special for a treat.

So, like many people on all but the top levels of the entertainment industry, Redflare had a part-time job. Jinn Krystal had waited tables before she hit the big-time, Aron Mercury had sold insurance by visiphone, and Redflare was a hunter.

The difference between hunters and muscleboys and gunjacks basically boiled down to talent. Hunters were often more skilled in combat than thugs, but they were also capable of doing a wide variety of jobs, some involving brute force, others involving negotiation or special skills--breaking and entering, hacking, explosives use, or whatever was called for. A good hunter team was like a corp or government black ops squad, only in a mercenary (and therefore less traceable) capacity.

Dace was an old pal of Redflare's; they'd grown up on the same streets, but he had taken a different path. Like many of the kids in Ossale Court, he'd taken up with a gang for protection, a sense of belonging, and maybe to get out of the hole he'd been born into. Unlike his comrades, who generally ended up burned out on metachems, stuck forever in the slum, tossed into prison, or just plain dead, Dace had had the skills, smarts, and luck to make a name for himself, first as the gang's war boss, then as a part-time enforcer for the Green Ring syndicate, and then finally as a full-fledged hunter, until he became the leader of his own team. That team was good at what it did, but sometimes it needed a little bit extra, the help of the techniques Redflare had learned with the WizKids.

And, Redflare reflected, leaning back into the battered seat of the landskimmer, he was all too eager to take those jobs, throw in for hunter biz. It paid the bills, then let him go back to the life he enjoyed the rest of the time.

He wasn't a pro, though, and sometimes it showed--in his reaction time, in his knowledge of the biz, in a half-dozen different ways. For example, in his shock and distaste at Dumont's shooting of the downed thug.

Admittedly, no one who had grown up in the Court could have been squeamish about death, or about killing to protect your life, your friends, whatever was yours. The WizKids had rumbled with other gangs more than once over territory or just pride, like a pack of wild animals defending its hunting grounds. Guns, knives, and lethal techs had been part of those battles. Redflare himself had cut down one of the gunjacks with his poisonshot. No, he wasn't unfamiliar with death.

To walk up to a helpless person, though, and coolly execute them, that was another order of business altogether. That was something he wasn't so used to. It was the cold, almost inhuman nature of the corporations, of business efficiency--the kind of thinking that led them to hire hunters for industrial espionage, kidnapping, "wetwork," sabotage, and more--anything for the bottom line, regardless of legality.

Dace didn't appear to be overly upset by Dumont's actions. Maybe he was just used to it, the cold expenditure of Palman life like it was any other asset, from his years as a hunter.

Or maybe, Redflare granted, Dace was making allowances for the situation. After all, the gunjack was undoubtedly a hired thug who had accepted money to kill Ashlyn Dumont. Not a minute before his death, he had been firing a sonic gun at her. Yes, she had been way too frosty to sit easily with Redflare's gut about it, but in truth it wasn't too hard to see her side of it. The thug had been an assassin, she the intended victim. She had simply turned the tables on him.

Redflare still didn't like it.

When he opened his brain back up to the outside world, they weren't in Ossale Court anymore, and Dace was talking.

"Kemet, where in the name of all that's holy did you find this wreck?" he asked with a grin.

"Used-skimmer lot," he replied.

"Is it not standard practice for landskimmers on a dealer's lot to be encoded with a transmitter and shutdown switch that summons the DLE and disengages the engine if someone attempts to venture beyond a certain radius of operation?" Isis asked. It was a common anti-theft device which kept a test drive from turning into a test drive-away.

"Well, maybe," Kemet admitted, "but I don't think the dealer would have put one on his own car, do you?" Even Redflare had to chuckle at that one.

"If I may," Dumont changed the subject, "what is our next destination? Garriner didn't pass on more than the date, the fact that I'd be approached on the subway, and the code word you'd use to identify yourself."

"That's the way it's supposed to be," Dace told her. "What you don't know, you can't squeal to corpsec if they catch on you're gonna jump ship."

"True, but that danger is past, now."

"We are going to the Southern Industrial Sector," Isis explained, "where we will rendez-vous with your new employer."

"I'm not being turned over to Garriner?"

"Garriner sets up extractions," Dace said. "He doesn't carry them out. That's what he hires people like us for."

"I see. Then you know everything."

He shook his head.

"Not unless they show up with their company logo all over their transport. It ain't our biz to know anything more than we have to know. Makes us less of a security risk," he added, eyes narrowing, "for corp types who figure the best way to cover their carbonsuited backsides is to gravestone everyone who knows anything about the jump."

That wasn't just hot air, either. Even if SDE couldn't stop the extraction, knowing the name of Dumont's new employer was worth something in and of itself. Acquiring that name (say, by squeezing it out of a hunter team indiscreet enough to learn it) would enable them to mitigate the damage by directing resources to counter the effects in the marketplace. Or, as Redflare thought of it, they'd know which guy had the new knife so at least they wouldn't get it in the back.

Would Ashlyn Dumont order them killed to keep that name out of SDE's hands? Redflare figured she'd do it in a heartbeat. Would her new corp go along with it? Maybe. It would all depend on if they felt the gains from keeping quiet were worth more to them than the potential loss they'd get from screwing over loyal hunters, which really wasn't all that likely.

It was funny, he thought. Even when clients were trying to play it straight they always held something back, something they thought was irrelevant or, more likely, which was personally embarrassing. Then there were the ones who thought the hunters might double-cross them--which was possible; after all, hunters were criminals almost by definition, never a good recommendation for someone's character--and so played their little need-to-know games. There were other times when clients thought they were giving out the straight goods but had been lied to by their bosses or had info that was just plain screwed up, big surprise.

To Redflare's way of thinking, it wasn't odd at all that he preferred the plain simplicity of magic, where he controlled the deceptions.

The fact was, though, as he knew from his limited experience and which was backed up by Dace's crew, that hunters simply didn't get sold down the river with the shocking regularity they did on the holovid or in the latest databook thriller. Most clients, either directly or through fixers, were corporate, and doublecrosses were bad business. That kind of thing got around the streets fast, and a corp that got a rep for setting up its independent contractors found itself unable to hire talent and having to pay through the nose (up front, of course) for those willing to take the risk. When the high cost of revenge was factored in on top of that, it became clear in a hurry that while betrayals did happen, it wasn't standard operating procedure. Dace had been in the biz for five years, after all.

"Really, Mr. Maxwell, you don't need to be quite so obvious," Dumont said, a faint smile on her face.

"I'm just letting past experience guide me," the team leader replied. Redflare bumped back up his opinion of his friend's morality; Dumont's execution of the gunjack had more of an effect on him than the magician had first suspected.

"Perhaps a wise decision, but it's quite clear to me at least that you are trained professionals who know how to act like them." In other words, who would keep their mouths shut.

Maybe it was just that they took that advice to heart, but no one said much of anything for quite a while.

## Chapter 4

Meetings, Redflare had learned, were decidedly more complicated when there were people involved. If the job was just to pass over information, usually on datachip, or just to collect a fee for a completed task, then the meeting could be anywhere, from a dark alley to a bar to out on the street to a glittery skybox at a Knights-Corsairs game. It could be casual or out in the open, depending on the necessary level of privacy.

When the job involved people--and they usually were, because that's what most of Redflare's techniques were good for--things got complicated. In this instance, the meet was set for a large warehouse at Kelvain and Murrough in the Southern Industrial Sector, a district affectionately known to its residents as "Machine Hell." The name fit. There were manufacturing plants, run largely by robots, like concrete blocks where smokestacks belched toxins into the air at levels a hair's breath under the very liberal legal limit. There were refineries belonging to Alliance Oil and to petrochemical subsidiaries of Nakagaki and Scion-Colesburg, mazes of pipes and tanks and catwalks like a twisted product of an insane sculptor. And there were warehouses.

Southern wasn't the arch's biggest manufacturing district. That honor went to the Parolit Industrial Sector. It was possible that Machine Hell would have gone the way of Ossale Court, were it not for the warehouses. The Southern Industrial Sector served as the "road harbor" section of the archopolis. It was where the huge overland cruisers picked up and dropped off goods. The giant automated rigs, three hundred feet long and fifty wide, were about the cheapest way to ship things by ground, but no one wanted a landcruiser rolling down city streets. So, the firms that used them largely clustered their warehouses in Machine Hell, at the southern edge of the arch'.

The meet with Dumont's new employer was scheduled to go down at one of those warehouses. Probably, Redflare thought, it was owned or leased by the clients. Also probably, it would be owned through a series of shell companies, holding companies, even joint ventures with other firms so that even if a gridrider cut through all the financial backtrail they still couldn't be sure if they had the right company or just someone in the chain.

The warehouse looked dark and forbidding other than the lights illuminating the sign over its door. That door was big enough to accommodate a landcruiser, a massive barrier of reinforced steel. The team had been given a code to use at the meet, so Isis installed it into the skimmer's beacon (the device that let it tap into the city's autodrive system, for example). It, in turn, broadcast the code to another machine which read the code and analyzed it. Apparently it decided that it liked the hunters. The door rose smoothly and Isis guided the Brocknar inside. Behind it, the door closed again.

Redflare had expected something, crates, drums, pallets loaded with boxes, large pressurized containers like they used in ships--something. But there wasn't. The warehouse looked exactly at it had from the outside--bare walls, slightly angled ceiling. Thick steel beams crossed overhead, possibly providing support for winches and other loading equipment. There wasn't so much as a single crate for someone to hide behind, no windows or skylights, though there was a door in the back that probably led to the warehouse manager's office.

That made it very easy to see the landskimmer parked at the far end of the warehouse. It was a Palman Motors Microglide, long, sleek, and black, its finish glistening as if wet in the dim light. No doubt the warehouse illuminators could bring on near-daylight, but only auxiliary power was currently in use. The Microglide was among the elite in near-limousines, a personal hovercraft that gave a ride smoother than silk. Or at least that's what the rumors were; Redflare sure as hell hadn't seen the inside of one.

Two men stood by the doors of the vehicle. Both were tall and broad, wearing dark exec-styled two-piece suits. Probably carbonsuits, possibly with added protection underneath. They also wore dark glasses, an affectation more common to syndicate muscle than to corp bodyguards, and one for which that Redflare had never really seen the point. If your whole job was combat effectiveness, why inhibit visibility, of all things?

The actual contact, presumably, was inside the Microglide, waiting in comfort instead of standing around in a dusty warehouse.

One thing was for certain; there was no place to hide a sniper or other cover for a doublecross. It didn't seem to matter, though; Redflare's neck still itched as if someone was slipping up behind him. Was his intuition trying to tell him something? Or was it just lingering concerns about the gunjacks, who they were and why there had just been the three of them?

You should stick to magic, Rick, he told himself, not for the first time.

Isis drew the Brocknar to a stop about a hundred feet from the other skimmer and popped the doors. Dace, Kemet, and Redflare got out along with Dumont.

"Wait here," Dace told Kemet, "and cover us."

The red-haired hunter drew his paired sonic guns, military-model Redfield Marksmen pistols similar to the gunjack's weapon, but kept them at his sides, pointed down. No threatening moves, just a precaution in case of trouble.

Dace and Redflare flanked Dumont as they walked forward, treading lightly on the bare concrete floor. One of the bodyguards opened the door of the Microglide, and a blue-haired man got out. He wasn't wearing shades; his face was clean-shaven and he looked to be in that thirty-to-fifty range that many corptypes settled anonymously into with the help of biosculpting salons. If he was armed, then his tailor had done a good job concealing it. Then again, the same could be said for the two hard men. The exec's suit looked like a designer weave, silver-gray, with specks that glittered in the pale light as he moved. Probably titan-laced, Redflare assumed. Armored designs by Oldoran or Tessier of Scion were all the rage among the modern corporators who felt their business negotiations might turn lively.

There was a curious look on Dumont's face as she regarded the man, as if she felt there was something out of place but didn't know exactly what it was. Was her subconscious bothering her too, Redflare wondered?

That was when he saw it. Only out of the corner of his eye, off to his right, but there all the same. There was a rippling in the air, like a reflection in a pool of water, or like when the pulse from a sonic gun is fired. No weapon had been fired, though; there were no heat sources that could disturb the atmosphere--so what was it?

The original ripple lasted only an instant, but now that he was aware of it, he could see others here and there.

"Dace," he said softly, barely moving his lips, "something's not right."

"Yeah, I can feel it."

"Something's wrong with the air; you can see it."

Dace acknowledged him with a slight, almost imperceptible nod, though whether to say that he could see it too or just that he'd heard and understood Redflare didn't know.

"Let's just get this done and bail," he said. "It ain't worth playing games over." He had a point. Oftentimes the best way to avoid trouble was not to get involved in it.

"Good evening, gentlemen, Miss Dumont," the contact said as they drew near. "I'm glad to see that everything went successfully." He had a pleasant, almost generic voice, the voice of a man experienced in corp dealings. It matched the face. At this range, though, Redflare could see something about him that was in no way off the rack: his eyes. The magician had never seen truly black eyes before--dark, yes, but not like these. The contact's eyes were like two chips of obsidian, and they were ringed with bands of gold, like jewels in their settings.

Deep in his heart, although the man had made no threatening moves, not so much as raised his voice, Redflare was terrified.

"Some complications, but nothing we couldn't handle," Dace assured the contact.

"That's good. Obviously I employed the right people for the job." He glanced at Dumont. "A practice I hope to continue with you, Miss Dumont."

"If the contract terms are identical to those Mr. Garriner provided to me, then I'm sure you'll have no trouble there," she replied smoothly.

The ripples seemed to be coming from closer, now, nearer to the Microglide and the six people by its side.

Dace cleared his throat.

"Not to get pushy, but--"

"Of course. The matter of your payment," the blue-haired man said. He reached into his pocket and took out a bank access card. Blank credit, no doubt--certified funds where the meseta had been transferred electronically through several accounts, usually at several different banks, so that discovering the original source of the money was for all practical purposes impossible. "As agreed, ten thousand meseta upon completion."

Dace took the card, then drew a portable reader from his pocket, slotted the card, and verified that the amount was there.

"Thank you," he said, putting the card away.

"Not at all."

The shimmers were too close, now; Redflare turned and saw them approach, almost forming a ring around them.

"What the hell's going on?" he snapped.

The bodyguards reacted to his stance and tone at once, reaching for their guns, but Dace was faster. Though primarily a swordsman, he also carried an Inverness AN-9 laser shot for those times when ranged combat was unavoidable. The pistol was pointed at one goon's head before the man's sonic gun could clear its holster.

"Let's not lose our heads here," he said quietly but firmly.

The contact chuckled.

"Oh, quite the contrary. You definitely need to do just that." He made a quick, slashing motion with his left hand and then, as if a veil had dropped away, the rippling spaces resolved themselves into people. There was no fading in, no progression from unseen to visible. One moment no one was there and the next, it looked like over a dozen men and women surrounded them.

They were gangers, Redflare was sure--the long, narrow, inverted black triangles painted or tattooed like spikes around each one's right eye, sleeveless black fibercoat vests, and green bandannas tied around their right biceps were obvious colors, and at least two-thirds were still in their teens. All had weapons drawn--guns, knives, swords, clubs, whatever was handy, Redflare supposed.

He only had a few moments to notice these things, though, because what happened next happened fast. Dace squeezed the trigger of his laser shot, piercing the bodyguard's skull with a searing blue-white beam. A flick of his wrist shifted his aim and he gunned the second bodyguard while the man was still bringing up his weapon.

Kemet vaulted for cover over the hood of the Brocknar and popped up, rapidly pumping sonic gun shots at the gangers. More than one returned his fire, adding to the landskimmer's already battered condition, blowing out one rear window.

Redflare went for his poisonshot, but a baton cracked into his right elbow and the gun dropped from numbed fingers. He punched out, bloodying the ganger's nose and making her stumble. Two more gangers grabbed Dumont, wrestling her arms out to her sides. That made the magician grateful; until then he hadn't been sure which side Dumont would join if she wasn't in personal danger.

The best move would have been to take the contact hostage. That way, the gangers' added numbers wouldn't matter. With the man's bodyguards down, Dace sprang to do just that, but he never got the chance. The blue-haired contact raised his right hand, then swept it out in an arc.

Instantly, Redflare felt incredibly sleepy. His brain swam, he staggered dizzily, and the ganger's baton pounded into his gut while he was defenseless. Redflare dropped to his knees, barely even aware of the pain due to his exhaustion. Somehow, with a surge of will he fought off the wave of unconsciousness threatening to consume him and at once his senses snapped back alive.

Maybe I should have stayed asleep, he thought, wincing as the pain from his stomach caught up to him. The baton was descending towards his head, though, so he found the strength to lunge up and head-butt the female ganger in the belly. A hard, two-handed shove knocked her down.

Dumont, too, had resisted the effects of the sleeping influence, and was struggling and kicking to break free. Dace, on the other hand, had not. He was laying prone on the warehouse floor, completely unconscious, unable to react to anything, even as one of the spike-eyed gang members rammed a knife into his back once, twice, three times, making his body jerk reflexively as blood gushed from savage wounds.

The fourth time, he just laid there.

Someone screamed, and the roar of the Brocknar's engine filled the air. Kemet wrestled open a door and dove in as the big sedan began to move with a screech of tires. More gunfire crashed into the skimmer as Isis drove right at the biggest knot of gangers. A sonic gun charge blew out the already-starred windscreen, actually improving her visibility even as it showered her with plastiglass shrapnel, but she kept right on coming. The gangers scattered, but not fast enough. One was hit dead-on; he bounced off the hood and nearly ended up in Isis's lap before falling off to one side. Another nearly dodged but the fender caught her hip and sent her sprawling.

The contact looked like he was going to try something else from his bag of tricks, but Kemet leaned out the window and opened fire, slamming multiple charges into the man's chest that knocked him over backwards. Redflare didn't see any blood, implying that whatever the man's armor had cost was worth it.

Worse the luck.

Redflare leveled his index fingers at the two punks holding Dumont and cried out, "Gelun!" The technique sapped their energy, actually making them react as if their aging had rapidly accelerated. The effect was limited in duration, but it made even an untrained woman like Dumont strong enough to wrest her way free. She and Redflare ran for the skimmer, yanked open a door, and clambered inside.

"What about Dace?" Isis asked. Just then came the low, ripping sound that could only mean that someone had brought out the heavy artillery. Vulcan shells pounded into the Brocknar, decimating its back end. Kemet started to fire back in the direction the shells had come from, but gave a gasp of pain and lurched back inside, his right arm bleeding badly from two wounds that had pierced flesh and shattered bone.

"He's dead," Dumont snapped. "If we don't want to join him, we've got to get out of here now."

The boom of shotgun fire had joined the vulcan and sonic guns. The sedan might have been tough but it wasn't armored; it wouldn't hold out much longer.

"She's right," Redflare said, wincing inwardly at the thought of losing another friend. "We have to get moving." The rear window went, illustrating his point; if the passengers hadn't been ducking they could well have been killed.

Isis gunned the engine as Redflare dug an injector of Dimate from his vest pocket. He set it against Kemet's sleeve and pressed the button, sending the powerful healing medicine into the hunter's system. Before Redflare's eyes, the bone reknitted itself together, the flesh healed over scarlessly as weeks of healing passed by in seconds. Moments later, Kemet was blazing away out the broken rear window with his sonic guns.

Vulcan rounds spattered off the concrete as the landskimmer drove full-speed towards the closed door.

"The door isn't opening," Isis said, the tension in her voice giving the lie to the apparently calm, rational analysis of her words. "The opposition must have anticipated we would seek to escape at some point and invalidated our code."

"Hell, then, ram it!" Kemet shouted.

"That would not work; it's reinforced steel."

"Do we have a choice?"

"Maybe I can help." Ashlyn Dumont clenched her fists, teeth gritted as she went through some obvious mental effort, then all but flung her hand at the door, opening her fingers as if hurling something, and commanded, "Gigra!"

The Gra series of techniques focused waves of gravitational energy over a large area. Generally they were used against living targets, but there was no reason that they couldn't be applied to objects. Dumont must have been a fairly powerful tech-user; the reinforced steel buckled and crumpled under the impact of the Gigra. The landskimmer hit it going about fifty--nice acceleration, a somewhat detached portion of Redflare's brain noted--a second and a half later.

The ensuing jolt was major. In fact it was about halfway short of "thunderous." Redflare, Kemet, and Dumont were all catapulted into the back side of the front seat; the magician was stunned by the impact despite the thick foam padding inside the imitation leather.

It worked, though. The corp defector's tech had damaged the door badly enough that the hinges tore free with a hideous shriek of metal that sounded like a soul in torment, and then the door fell one way and the Brocknar skidded the other, and they were out into the open streets. By this point, Redflare was half-expecting anything from another gang pack to a double squad of corpsec troopers to a bloody DLE battalion backed up by a couple of Aerotanks, but it appeared that the streets were deserted.

They were free.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slowly, the blue-haired contact rose to his feet and surveyed the damage. The decision to wear the augmented carbonsuit had paid off; the three sonic pulses would leave several ugly bruises, perhaps a cracked rib, but nothing that a dose of Monomate couldn't deal with.

The gang members were checking out their own condition, cursing the target's escape. Several of their own were dead, but this did not concern them overly much. The price of doing business, the man's corporate side thought, though the gang didn't think that way. They just didn't care.

He observed one of the gangers, a boy of about sixteen, slotting a fresh clip in his vulcan to replace the last one he'd exhausted against the hunters. The contact's eyes narrowed. He'd heard the shattering of plastiglass under the impact of the weapon's shells. The ganger had fired at the skimmer, not low at the tires but high, at its occupants.

"What," he snapped, "were you told about the use of weapons?"

The boy looked up, then flinched as he found the contact's coal-black gaze on him.

"Indiscriminate fire was not to be used," the contact answered his own question.

"They were getting away..." the boy protested feebly.

"How does this permit you to disobey a direct order?"

The stammered replies fell silent. The contact turned to another ganger, and nodded once. The girl pulled out a laser knife, took one step, and ripped it across the offender's throat.

"Someone else take the vulcan," he ordered. "Someone who can remember that knowing when to use a weapon is as important as how. Someone who can follow orders."

"But what about the hunters? They got away."

"Then we'll just have to find them, won't we?" He smiled wolfishly. Even if they couldn't dredge the mercenaries out of their hiding place, it didn't really matter. Sooner or later, the hunters would come back to them.

He glanced at the sprawled form of the fallen hunter.

Oh, yes. They'll come back to us.

The contact walked back to the Microglide and slid into the rear seat. Not having a driver was inconvenient, but no more than that. The landskimmer was equipped with a highly advanced autodrive that would take him to his destination in response to voice commands. The Microglide started up and left the warehouse, and after a bit of looting of the dead, the gangers followed.

When they were gone, a figure detached itself from the shadows across the street. He'd arrived too late to have a hand in the outcome of events, but worse than that he had arrived too late to learn what he needed to know.

Possibly, he supposed, there might be something left behind at the scene.

Inside the warehouse, he found only the evidence of violence, only bodies--one hunter, five gang members, and two individuals who, curiously enough, looked to be corporate or syndicate muscle. It was an intriguing combination. He examined the room carefully, using his mind as well as merely his senses, and after only a few seconds he realized how he could get the information he needed.

## Chapter 5

Executive Director Taran Kendrick did not appreciate being awakened at 2:16 A.M., but it was something he had come to accept as being part of his job. The head of Sarranas Development Enterprises rarely got more than four or five hours of sleep on any night, which was why he treasured those hours so strongly, but he also knew that emergencies arose at all times, no matter how inconvenient it was for him. Those who ignored problems to pursue personal comforts didn't last long at the top. That was how he had been able to oust his predecessor eight years ago, by acting while she pursued handsome men and high-profile society parties.

Kendrick's home was actually a penthouse apartment occupying the upper floor of SDE's downtown headquarters. The building was a modest one, twelve stories, nothing compared to Luveno's tri-towered headquarters or the Nakagaki Spire, but nonetheless an indicator of the corp's up-and-coming status. Kendrick's penthouse kept him close to the action, able to respond at once to a business crisis. It took no more than ten minutes from the moment the visiphone had woken him for the XD to be dressed and in his office, face-to-face with Reiko Yoshida.

Yoshida was SDE's Security Division Chief. What that title really meant was that she was not only in charge of protecting the corporation's facilities, usually through contracts with Emerald Legion Security, but also oversaw all kinds of industrial espionage and under-the-table business. She was a slender, wiry woman with a thin-lipped, hawklike face. Her shimmering lavender hair was her sole point of vanity; it fell in an exotic sweep to mid-back length against her jet black military-styled carbonsuit. Her looks and body language were strictly business; Yoshida never bothered with lulling her enemies into a false sense of security the way some women did.

"We have a situation on our hands, Mr. Kendrick."

"So I assumed."

"Ashlyn Dumont has vanished. We're presuming that it's an extraction."

"Dumont..." Kendrick mused, then placed the name. He made sure to stay familiar with the names, faces, and personal profiles of the corporation's executives, considering corp heads who did not to be short-sighted idiots. "She's on Herrod's staff, isn't she--one of the project managers?"

Yoshida nodded.

"That's correct. Currently she is assigned to the paratechnology project we're working on in conjunction with Nakagaki."

"Her disappearance is confirmed?"

Yoshida nodded again.

"Yes; we're certain. Moreover, it appears that she has taken the records of the paratechnology project with her. The computer files have been wiped, and the datachip backups were found missing."

Kendrick sighed.

"It's a matter of defection, then, isn't it?" The question was rhetorical, and Yoshida did not answer it. He wanted to ask her how this could have happened, how a trusted executive could have slipped through the cracks. Security should have been aware that she was a flight risk, maintained surveillance, had better protocols to protect the project data.

The XD rose from his chair and crossed the office to the floor-to-ceiling armored plastiglass window that made up one exterior wall. Outside the building, the archopolis spread out beneath him. On the southern edge of Downtown, the building afforded a near-unobstructed vista of half the city. The bright, steady glow of thousands of lights sparkled among the silhouettes of the buildings. In the countryside, one could look up in the sky and see an endless field of stars, while in Camineet the glow of man-made lights and the haze of polluted sky drowned them out. Yet, Kendrick thought, were the stars beneath him not more beautiful, more varied than those wrought by nature? They represented the power of Palmans, the power to go beyond what this world had given them and shape it for themselves.

"You believed this was possible as early as two months ago, didn't you?"

"Yes. It was suspected that she could harbor disloyal sentiments. Nothing was proven, as yet, but we kept a discreet eye on her."

"Too discreet, I'd say."

Yoshida flushed at the rebuke. She took her duties very seriously, and didn't like the implication that she hadn't been living up to them. She also wasn't egotistical enough to hide from the truth.

"Apparently so. We let her slip away from us."

Kendrick turned, resting one hand on the window. There was no point in fixing blame. Perhaps an individual security agent had made a mistake in surveillance, perhaps Yoshida had not handled the situation correctly, or perhaps the ultimate responsibility lay with Kendrick himself as executive director. Pointing fingers, however, would not solve the problem.

There certainly was a problem, too. The Nakagaki Corporation was Palm's fourth-largest megaconglomerate and closing in hard on IMVE for number three. They were not going to be happy with SDE for losing key research, including information that had been compiled by Nakagaki researchers and had been obtained with Nakagaki funding. At the very least, they would pull out of the project, cutting their losses. That would send SDE's stock price and business reputation plunging. More assertive action could mean demands for reparations, possibly a lawsuit.

Not all corporate battles were fought with hunters and black ops. The ones fought at the boardroom table could be as brutal and more damaging.

"Do we have any idea where she's gone?"

"No; thus far our efforts have not been able to keep track of her. We aren't even aware of which corporation wants to acquire her."

"Unfortunate," Kendrick said softly. He glanced out the window, watching the running lights of an aerojet cut through the night sky as the jet descended towards Camineet. "Is there anything we can work with, some clue?"

"Not as yet. I have security teams reviewing surveillance information, backchecking her communication, and otherwise attempting to establish whom she dealt with--probably a professional headhunter." This was a fixer who specialized in corporate extractions. "Unfortunately, he or she probably wouldn't tell us much. Still, there are possibilities to be explored."

"Do you have any leads at all?"

Yoshida smiled nastily.

"A few."

"All right, then. I'll leave the retrieval effort in your hands. We must have confirmation that neither Dumont nor the project files have reached our competitors."

"Do you want her alive?"

Kendrick considered the question.

"It would be preferable, but do not make it a particular priority. Our friends at Nakagaki will want a full recovery of data if possible but will insist that the situation be fully contained. Under the circumstances, their priorities should be ours."

"Yes, sir."

"Hopefully, by the time they receive word of Dumont's extraction, we will be in a position to say that the situation is already under control, that the files have been recovered."

Yoshida nodded; she understood the dynamic as well as Kendrick. A large corporation like Nakagaki was hampered by its size when swift action was needed. Hopefully, SDE could move quickly and escape trouble.

"Thank you for reporting this promptly," the XD said. "I won't keep you any longer."

"Very well." Obviously dismissed, she turned to go.

"Oh, and Reiko?"

"Yes, Mr. Kendrick?"

"Good hunting."

As the security chief left, Kendrick was already back at his desk, requesting the personnel files for the Research and Development Division. Even if Dumont was brought back alive, she'd have to be replaced as project manager, and the director wanted to look over possible candidates. It was always better to promote from within whenever possible; it fostered loyalty.

Loyalty, Kendrick thought, was a quality that would rank very high among his criteria for replacing Ashlyn Dumont.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reiko Yoshida was fuming inside when she left Kendrick's office, though her face remained blank and impassive. She took her failures personally; there had been few of them in her corporate career and each one still stung. The lean, whiplike woman was determined not to let this become one of them.

She went back to her office, footsteps muffled by the soft gray carpeting. Few people were around; most of the offices she passed were dark. It was indicative of SDE's status as a small-sized corp; the night shift at Nakagaki, for example, was as busy as its daylight counterpart. Yoshida didn't sit down; relaxation didn't come easy to her, especially when she was at work. Nor did she pace, just folded her arms across her chest and stood, eyes fixed on nothing on particular.

When security had first tagged Dumont as a flight risk, Yoshida had informed the project manager's superior, R&D Division Chief Herrod. He had downplayed the risk, noting that Dumont was highly placed and well compensated, extending his personal trust. Some people would have reported this to Kendrick in an attempt to shift blame, but Yoshida was not like that. As she saw it, the fault lay with her. Herrod was not trained in security work, and yet she had accepted his opinion, keeping only a limited watch on Dumont's comings and goings from work and home.

Now, due to her lapse in judgment, her corporation faced disgrace and financial ruin. If blame was to be placed, it should fall upon her.

By now, she reasoned, Ashlyn Dumont had either been safely delivered to her destination or had gone to ground to wait out the search efforts. If it was the former, then there was nothing left but to hope to learn that destination's identity. Therefore, she had to proceed on the assumption that the latter case was true. Even if it wasn't, investigation along those lines would probably turn up all there was to find, anyway.

So the question became, where was she? Camineet was the largest city in the world and there were a lot of nooks and crannies for one woman to hide in. She wasn't just hiding, though. Dumont would want to reach her destination corp because until she did she was a target. That meant staying in contact with her fixer; probably it was the headhunter's people who were keeping her out of sight. Ideally, Yoshida could find the headhunter and interrogate him or her as to Dumont's whereabouts, but that was probably not going to happen. Anyone who made a living in the extraction game was certainly familiar with the problem of a pursuing corp.

One lesson Yoshida had learned, though, was that there were always alternatives when the direct approach was unavailable. She used her corp ID passcard to unlock one of her desk drawers, then pressed her thumb against the hidden catch that opened the false back. The print reader verified that it was her, and she was able to manipulate the catch. Inside the secret compartment was her personal record of various agents, contacts, and hunters she could turn to in different situations--written on paper, not in any form that could possibly be hacked electronically. She already had a good idea of whom she wanted to call, but took the time to read over the entry, verifying her recollection of the individual's abilities and trustworthiness. When that turned out to be in tune with her memories, Yoshida checked what she had needed the record for: the method of contact. Some methods noted in the journal were extraordinarily complex; this one was not, just a visiphone number to call (one which connected to the man himself by several automated data relays no doubt set up for him by a friendly, or well-paid, gridrider).

"Yeah, what the hell is it?" was the sleep-numbed response.

Were this man one of her subordinates, Yoshida would be offended at his belligerence and lack of respect, but she reminded herself that he was not, in fact, subject to her authority except under the terms of specific contracts between them. She might deplore the attitude, but she also knew that it was not her place to chastise him for it.

"Are you interested in five thousand meseta?" The mention of money cut through many complaints.

"Hell, yeah," Gunter Holst replied at once. He squinted, getting a better look at Yoshida. "Well, whattaya know, the big cheese herself. Last couple times we had to deal with your flunkies."

"You didn't complain too much, as I recall."

"That's 'cause the pay came through on time. Nice to work for someone who don't put up a stink 'bout forking over the meseta when it comes time. You said five K?"

"I did."

"You're paying the piper; name the tune."

"There is a person I need found and returned to me."

"Living or gravestoned?"

"Dead is acceptable. I would consider a bonus if you were able to capture her alive, but that is not your first priority."

Holst's mouth twisted thoughtfully.

"Five K now, plus a bonus if your lady is still breathing."

"One thousand up front, the rest on delivery," Yoshida countered.

"Two K on the front end, corp lady, or you find yourself another pack of errand boys."

"All right, two thousand meseta in advance."

The hunter grinned, showing bad teeth.

"Sounds like we can do biz, boss lady. What's the game?"

It didn't take long to pass the information to Holst, the sparse briefing supplemented by a transmission of carefully edited datafiles. With his street contacts, he had a better chance of tracking Dumont and her escort than the sec-chief did. No matter how smart or experienced she was, Yoshida was still one step removed from the world hunters and fixers moved in. Lacking the resources of a first-tier corp's black ops division, she preferred to work through agents. It wasn't like the days when she'd been a hunter herself, when she'd had her finger on the pulse of the city's underside. She had traded up into the realms of corporate finance, industrial espionage, and trade wars. Maybe that was why she so hated mistakes, because with every one she made she could feel the street stretching up to reclaim her. This is what happens to one who reaches too far; she falls back into the shadows that birthed her.

"I'll arrange for you to receive your payment in the usual way," Yoshida finished her orders.

"Yeah, and don't forget to make it in cash this time. I've got people to deal with that don't take damn bank access cards. You corps may do fine with computer transfers, but real people like to have money in their hands."

"Will hundred-meseta notes satisfy you?"

"Of course."

"Consider it done."

Yoshida cut the connection. Now it was just a matter of time.

## Chapter 6

Good hunter teams had safehouses, boltholes to run to, set up in advance, before it all hit the fan. Dace's crew was definitely a good team, which is why they were coping with shellshock from a room at a boardinghouse in a low-rent district in Neroton rather than while desperately trying to find somewhere to flop. Shellshocked described it pretty well, too. Three of them had lost a team leader and friend, and Dumont was facing the fact that her nice, easy extraction was blown to hell.

As for Redflare, he was not only out a friend but also had to cope with the realization that his nice, easy life was almost as screwed as Dumont's. Biz with Dace's team had occasionally been difficult, with guns fired in his direction, but when it was done it was done. This was the first time a job had gone completely off the wire.

The door opened to Isis's knock; the room's only occupant was the last member of the team, Nima, whose computer was rigged into the fisheye cameras Isis had set up to reinforce their security. What took most people, Dumont included, off-guard about Nima was that she wasn't a Palman. The blue fur that covered her body, the yellow beak in place of her nose and mouth, the tufted ears, and the pupilless red eyes all marked her unmistakably as a native Motavian. Her race was uncommon on Palm; perhaps a few hundred thousand in total existed among the millions of Palmans. Many seemed to have a knack for technology and machines, almost a genetic predilection; Nima was a neon angel par excellence, a gridrider who might someday fly with the legends.

Her face didn't show emotions in the same way a Palman's did, but her drooping ears and the tears glistening in her eyes told Redflare how she was feeling.

"It made the holovid," she said quietly. Her voice was nothing like the one the team was used to hearing on the commlinks. That voice was generated by her computer, an electronic sylph on wings of data. "The DLE publicly called it an incident of gang warfare."

"Slow news day, I see," Dumont commented dryly. Isis slowly turned to the corp exec. The look on the redhead's face went beyond anger. She didn't curse or bluster, just walked over to Dumont, grabbed the defector's braid, and jerked her head back.

"I have no trouble with the fact that you don't have any friends, or at least none you value more than a few thousand meseta per year in increased salary. Judging your life is not my affair. But...do...not...ever again make light of the death of someone I care for."

She said it softly, in tomes almost devoid of emotion, which made Dumont take the warning all the more seriously. The corporate woman could see that she was only a heartbeat away from death without having to be told. She glanced past Isis to Redflare, her eyes beckoning with desperate appeal, but at that moment the magician was having a hard time deciding whether, if Isis made a move, he would or would not try to stop her. Finally, Isis let go with a flick of her wrist and strode into a back room.

Dumont rubbed the back of her neck. No one else said anything for several minutes. The hunters were still in shock, coming to terms with the fact that Dace was gone while Ashlyn Dumont was nursing her wounded pride. The way she'd been faced down would be a festering sore on her ego which, Redflare suspected, might make for trouble later. It could have been two or three minutes or half an hour--he couldn't tell--before Isis returned.

"I am sorry," she said. "I behaved unprofessionally in a situation where none of us can afford to lose our heads with emotion."

"Look," Redflare said, "it's obvious that we've been set up here. Either the whole deal was in bad faith from square one, or SDE's deniable assets have cut in on the action. We've got to figure out who, what, how, and all that or we're all going to end up where Dace is."

He dropped into a chair. Being the first to sit, he chose one that at least had the fewest number of unidentifiable stains. The others followed suit, Isis and Kemet taking the couch while Dumont and Nima pulled two more chairs into a rough circle.

"All right, so what have we got to go on?" Redflare asked. "Whom are we working for, anyway?" Since he had been "subcontracted" by Dace for the job, as usual he didn't know any of the background details.

"Kail Garriner hired us," Nima told him. "He's a headhunter--a fixer who specializes in arranging extractions, willing or not."

"Does he have a good rep?"

"Yeah; we've worked for him before."

"All right, so who was his client?"

Nima clicked her beak in the Motavian equivalent of a shrug.

"Beats me; we were just hired by Garriner to handle the extraction and delivery."

That held together; a pro like Garriner wasn't likely to spill his secrets to the hunters if they didn't need to know. The way this jump was supposed to go down, they wouldn't have required that info. They'd have been home asleep, with meseta in their pockets, not still awake at two A.M., trying to sort out what had gone wrong.

Kemet turned to Dumont.

"You'd know, though," he said. "I can't see our fair lady risking her neck in a corporate defection without having the details of her new contract hammered out, right down to the color of the paint in her new office."

The blonde woman nodded.

"Of course. I'd be foolish to do it any other way."

"So?" prompted Redflare.

For a moment it looked like she'd argue about it, sort of a that's-my-business-not-yours thing. There were all kinds of reasons why that wouldn't work, though, and she didn't bother testing them.

"I'm not sure how familiar you are with SDE--"

"We researched it in preparation for this job," Nima jumped in. She wasn't being impolite; Motavians tended to be highly enthusiastic chatterers among themselves, speaking up whenever they had something to say. As Redflare understood it, Nima had to concentrate on the fact that she was with Palmans, who considered interruptions rude.

"Know your enemy," Dumont noted. "Very wise. In that case, I'll just say that my current assignment was as the project manager for a joint paratechnology study between Nakagaki and SDE."

"Paratechnology?" Kemet asked.

"The study of the interaction between so-called magical forces and the physical laws governing energy and matter in the absence of such forces," his sister provided. "Global Envirotech is the planetary leader in paratechnology and parabiology, but Nakagaki is also noted for its studies in that area."

"Quite so," Dumont stated. "In fact, the project was quite near to the discovery of two new techniques, to say nothing of certain breakthroughs which might explain how slashers work the way they do."

"Oh, great," Kemet groaned. "Bad enough SDE's on our backsides; now you're telling me that bloody Nakagaki is gonna be after you, too?"

Dumont smiled thinly.

"Of course they're after me," she said. "They're the ones who contracted for the extraction."

"That's just a little twisted, isn't it?"

"Not at all. The Nakagaki researchers were well aware of the joint project's success and my own contributions. As project manager, I was able to wipe the data from the SDE computers and take the backup copies." She patted her handbag.

It made a twisted kind of sense, Redflare decided. If the project had any valuable commercial applications, Nakagaki wouldn't want to share the profits with SDE, and they would have a better idea than any other corp of its value and Dumont's worth. Or they figured that meeting Dumont's price was cheaper than paying SDE its fair share of the proceeds.

Something bugged him about that, though, a thought that nagged at the back of his mind. Redflare's subconscious again, apparently doing its job.

"So who tried to kill us?" he asked. "Someone sent those gunjacks to the station and arranged the ambush at the warehouse."

"Gotta be SDE," Kem said.

"Then somebody sold us out," Redflare said flatly. "The 'jacks might have been lucky, or the results of surveillance, but SDE could never have done all that at the warehouse without advance knowledge of where we were going."

"No one on this team is stupid enough to mouth off about a job, not even as pillow talk," Kemet said with a shrug.

"I certainly didn't," Dumont stated. "I don't have any family to bring with me, and talking about my career plans on the job would border on the insane. Three years ago one of my staff actually bragged to his friends about the 'adventure' he was going to have. I'm sure you can guess the outcome." The exec's tone and expression elegantly conveyed her opinion of that kind of juvenile behavior. The story was believable, though; researchers in any field could get so far out of touch with reality that they'd need magic to summon them back.

"Garriner and the Nakagaki exec running this would hardly shoot their own project in the foot. No profit in that," reasoned Nima. "So that leaves our likely suspects as someone who heard about it from one of those two, some cut-out or staff member, and decided they needed a few more meseta than they were being paid."

"It seems logical," Dumont agreed. "After all, personal loyalty is something that seems to have vanished with feudalism and oaths of knighthood. I'm living proof," she added with a slight smile. It seemed Miss Corporate Executive had a sense of humor after all. "Putting that aside, though, I'm more interested in how you intend to deliver me to Nakagaki rather than in finding the informant. That part has nothing to do with me."

Kemet's temper flared up at once; unlike the usually-cool Isis he was as volatile as his red hair suggested.

"Nothing to do with you? Exactly who do you think those guys were after?"

"Oh, me, of course, but that was just business. It's the four of you who were betrayed by one of your own, or however the phrasing goes. Your private vengeance really doesn't concern me."

"It had best concern you," Isis snapped. "Until our 'private vengeance' is resolved, you will be staying with us."

"Is that a threat?" Dumont hissed.

Given what had already happened between the two of them, Redflare had the feeling that sooner or later the sparks they were striking off each other would explode into open conflict.

"No, it's good advice," he said quickly, cutting in. He glanced at Nima, and the Motavian picked up the explanation at once.

"It isn't safe for you to come out into the open until we establish who tipped off SDE, because you might walk into the hands of the person who works for the wrong side. If you go it alone, you have no protection against the bad guys, while if you stay with us, you've got guards."

"While you retain the opportunity to collect the remainder of your fee."

Kemet shrugged, smiling wryly.

"The best deals are those that benefit both sides, dear lady." His sudden shift to the urbane, almost elegant speech pattern indicated that he was starting to relax, let go of his anger. The more emotional he got, the more he slipped into street argot. Isis, Redflare thought, was at least consistent.

The real benefit to the hunters wasn't financial, though. So long as Dumont was with them, the people working against the extraction would have to come in contact with the hunters to reach her. It would, with luck, lead the betrayer to make a mistake they could catch him or her at. Dace's actual killer wasn't important to Redflare, nor were the SDE executives that had probably sent out the death orders. That, as Dumont would surely have said, was business as usual--part of the expected risk of being a hunter. The sellout, though, was definitely not business as usual, and that was the person the entire crew wanted vengeance against.

"Come to think of it," Nima suddenly said, "it doesn't necessarily have to be SDE who's after us."

"I don't quite see what you mean," Dumont said. "Of all the possibilities, I thought it was certain that they would want to prevent my extraction."

The Motavian shook her head, ears twitching.

"No, I mean, of course they're after you now, or at least they will be once they discover that you're gone and that you've taken the project data with you. What I'm saying is that they aren't necessarily the ones who sent the gunjacks or arranged the ambush at the warehouse."

Redflare thought he was starting to see where Nima was going with this, and it reminded him of just how twisted the world of corporate intrigue could get.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that the one who sold us out might not have gone to SDE, but to somebody else?"

Nima nodded rapidly.

"That's exactly it. If this paratechnology research is valuable to Nakagaki, it might be valuable to their competitors, too. Global Envirotech, maybe, or Alliance Oil, or really any of the big corps could have a use for it. They could have cut out the people we were supposed to meet at the warehouse and set up the ambush."

"Also," Kemet noted, "there would be a much bigger payoff for selling the project to, say, G-Tech then back to SDE. If you're going to be a sellout, it usually tends to be for the most meseta possible. I think you may be on to something, Nima."

The Motavian girl looked a little flustered at the praise.

"There's another possibility, too," Redflare said as his subconscious finally deigned to tell him what it had been working out. "There may not be a sellout."

"You lost me there, magic man," Kem said.

"Okay, consider this scenario. As we see it, Nakagaki wants the paratechnology project data. Aghast at the 'breach of security,' they pull out of the deal with SDE. Then, a few months later, their scientists 'replicate their original research'--aided by the files Dumont has stolen--and complete the project. Result: Nakagaki patents the new discoveries and reaps the benefits. Then, some bright-eyed SDE sec-agent finds Ashlyn Dumont working at a corp that, if you follow the money trail far enough, happens to be part of the Nakagaki umbrella. SDE takes Nakagaki to court, and Nakagaki loses big face and lots of cash.”

"Now, how much neater would it be to take the files, slip them to their R&D; people, and render Dumont into a corpse? Then there's no tie to link them to the extraction, nothing to get SDE honked off at them. Safer all around."

Dumont scowled. It was obvious that she hadn't considered that possibility yet--none of them had. Her small fists clenched in her lap.

"It could be," she said slowly. "I didn't even think of that. All I thought of was the money I'd be making, the prestige of my new position with a much richer and more powerful corp. I never stopped to think about what a liability I'd be to them--more valuable dead than alive."

"Hold on a sec," Kemet noted. "Those gangers definitely wanted to take Dumont alive. Nobody was shooting at her until we made a run for it."

"That does not necessarily disprove Redflare's theory," Isis told her brother. "A cautious approach would be to interrogate Dumont to make certain that she did not have information other than that on the chips she was bringing, or had coded some kind of encryption that would make the files difficult to access without her assistance. Had she anticipated treachery, she could have taken such precautions to make Nakagaki live up to their side of the arrangement."

"Three possibilities," Redflare said with a sigh. "Someone selling out to SDE, someone selling out to a third party, or a betrayal by Nakagaki--and not enough information to pick out one of the three."

"We could start with the gang," Nima said. "If you can give me a good description of their colors, I can find out who they are and flag any corps or syndicates they have a known relationship with."

"What about the contact?" Kem threw in. "That blue-haired guy I shot. Damn, I hope he's dead; he was scary."

"He's alive," Redflare was forced to disappoint him, "unless he cracked the back of his head open when he hit the floor. He had some kind of armor on; your shots didn't penetrate."

The red-haired man cursed fluently.

"He's the one who really did(?) for Dace. That mindblast or whatever he hit you guys with left Dace a sitting duck for the knife. How the hell did he do that, anyway? It couldn't have been a tech, right? I didn't hear him say anything when he used it."

"It may have been a so-called skill," explained Dumont, who did, after all, have experience in the field. "Unlike the more refined power of techniques, skills can be highly individual, even self-taught. Alternatively, it could be a newly refined technique; breakthroughs in paratechnology happen regularly."

"And the invisibility, too; I've never heard of that before, either. Who knows what else he's got up his sleeves?"

"An enemy who commands unknown powers isn't something to toy with," Redflare agreed.

"Yeah, that's one skag I've got no desire to go up against."

"Unfortunately," Isis pointed out, "I doubt that will be feasible."

She was right, Redflare reflected. If they were going to find out who had betrayed them and killed Dace, it would seem that, sooner or later, they would come into contact with the blue-haired man and whatever deadly new techniques he possessed.

## Chapter 7

Redflare let the hot water from the shower head cascade over him, the steaming droplets pelting his body, helping him to wake up. He hadn't slept well, which was unusual for him. Part of it was that he'd lost the coin flip with Kem for the couch--which served him right for playing it honestly when a little sleight of hand would have insured a win, his aching bones told him--but mostly it was his inability to get Dace's dead face out of his mind. Repeatedly, he'd dozed off, then the slash of the laser knife and the spray of arterial blood would shock him awake.

Sighing, he killed the water and toweled off. Regrets didn't accomplish anything, but knowing that made very little difference. Redflare pulled on his pants and left the bathroom.

"Finally," Dumont said and darted in. A few seconds after the door closed Redflare could hear the shower start up again.

Nima was doing something with her computer, while Isis sat on the sofa, snugging her boots into place.

"Where's Kemet?" Redflare asked, reaching for the rest of his clothes.

"Predictably, he has gone in search of sustenance."

Redflare pulled his T-shirt on, then slung his off-white vest with its capacious pockets over his shoulders.

"I suppose we all have to eat," he admitted.

"Check it out!" Nima called excitedly. "I am the man!"

"You are?" Redflare teased. "Does it change like that for Motavians?"

The gridrider's ears twitched in embarrassment.

"Um...I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay; we get the idea. What did you find out?"

She spun back to her screen. The team must have set her up at the safehouse before the job; the downside to her computer's full-immersion VR rig was that it took up space and wasn't easily portable. Until that moment, Redflare hadn't even known that the thing had a keyboard for conventional operation.

"Last night I modified one of my search programs to hunt the datanet for anything it could dredge up on the gang from the warehouse. It turns out that they're called the Bane Spikes and are apparently a very nasty bunch with a habit of gravestoning people just to get their kicks."

"Nice people."

"Where is their center of operations?" Isis asked.

"That's the interesting part. They hang out in one of the rougher ends of Old Camineet."

Redflare blinked in surprise.

"Old Camineet? That's in the northwest corner of the arch', miles away from the warehouse!"

Criminals and corps could and did use street gangs as muscle for their shady operations. In fact, some of the better-off gangs formed permanent associations with various syndicates or corps. Redflare's WizKids, for example, had butted heads more than once with the Curse Kings, a rival tech-gang that had a deal to distribute metachems in their turf for the Green Ring.

What these groups didn't usually do was to recruit a gang from one part of the arch' for biz somewhere else. The Bane Spikes had been in full colors at the warehouse, and those colors would have been a red flag to other gangs as they crossed the city.

"I suppose," the magician said, "that there must be something special about the Spikes that made our blue-haired friend use them."

"That's what I figured," Nima agreed, "and just take a look at these files dug out of the DLE system."

"The DLE? You auto-programmed a search that hacked the Division of Law Enforcement?" Redflare marveled. "Nima, you wouldn't happen to go by the online name Angel Red, would you?"

Nima got embarrassed again at the mention of Palm's most famous gridrider, a legend whose name had given rise to all the angel slang used for hacking.

"It's not that big a deal, Redflare. I had an edge. A few months ago I had to hack the DLE on another job and I found a back door into the system. My engine just checks at that door and sees if it's open; if not, it goes home. The internal security's not half as bad as the external, especially on stuff like this which the agents and detectives are supposed to read. No big deal, not really."

Redflare and Isis glanced at each other over the Motavian girl's head, and the look in the redhead's ruby eyes echoed the magician's thoughts. No big deal...not!

"So what did you come up with?"

"The DLE keeps files on all the gangs they can, especially the ones that get ambitious." Read that: a possible annoyance to taxpaying individuals and organizations properly registered in the public database. "It turns out that over the past three months, there have been some pretty impressive changes in the Bane Spikes' leadership, activities, and methods of operation."

Redflare was still heavily impressed by Nima's hacking skills, but managed to kick his brain back on-line.

"Leadership? So a new guy takes over and immediately starts turning the gang into something else?"

"Right. According to DLE files, the leader's name is 'Gilfa' or 'Glefar' or something like that. I'll call him Gil for short. Now, before he moved in, the Spikes were a real piece of nasties, burned-out nihilist types that liked to do violence unto others--geez, I'm starting to sound like Kemet--just for the kicks. Sort of a 'life doesn't matter anyway, so let's have nasty fun' bunch."

"How appetizing," Isis murmured.

"Anyway, they pretty much hung out on their turf, which was a couple of blocks near the Ossale Court edge of Old Camineet, and made it unpleasant for anybody else. Nasty, but strictly small-time.

She tapped a few keys, calling up a text file.

"Ever since this Gil took over, though, the Bane Spikes have gotten more focused--and more mobile. They allegedly hijacked an arms deal between the Seven Circles and an eco-terrorist group called Neo Green, all the way over in Parolit. Then when, as you might guess, the Seven Circles decided to hit them back for having the guts to kick in where they're not wanted, the Spikes gave it to them again. Cost Deke Murrain a lot of face with his dad for screwing up."

That explained what a street gang was doing with vulcans and laser knives--serious weapons that were more commonly associated with the military and corporate troopers.

"They're also suspected in a couple of other interesting jobs. The first is a smash-up at the Camineet Historical Museum. Basically they ran in, shot up the place, broke stuff and swiped other stuff. Six people were killed."

"I'm surprised the cops took that lying down," Redflare marveled. The DLE might write off shootouts among crooks or violence in the slums, but something as public as gunning up a museum? No way. Bad for the public image--and when you tossed in that Palm had a computer for a chief executive due to rampant corruption scandals back a couple of centuries ago, it was no surprise that government organizations were very keen on looking good.

"They didn't. Four gangers were shot 'resisting arrest' and two more are on trial for their part in the killings. Don't you watch the holovid, Redflare? It was pretty big news a couple of months back."

"Sorry; must have been working on a new trick."

"Presumably the DLE was unable to bring charges against 'Gil'?"

Nima shook her head.

"Nope. With some other gangs, they'd catch some of the rest while scooping up the guilty parties, but not the spikes. Apparently they don't even give a damn about each other's lives."

"Fits with the nihilism. What was the other interesting job?"

"They tried to hit the Moirlen Auction House. Argus Protective Services was on security and drove them off."

Redflare frowned, trying to tie the jobs together. The best he could guess was that Gil had the gangers running errands for some corporate or syndicate boss.

"What does Gil look like?"

"Around six-one, black hair, the usual spike tattoo, according to the file."

"Then he's not the contact from the warehouse." That fit, though; apparently Gil hadn't been at the museum or auction house either.

"I suppose the DLE is not aware of whatever affiliations the Bane Spikes may have formed?"

"Sorry, Isis; they've been checking but haven't come up with anything."

The door lock clicked and the hunters spun, Isis reaching for her acidshot while Redflare started to draw upon power for a tech just in case it wasn't Kemet. They relaxed when the dark-skinned hunter came in, arms laden.

"Got it to go from the First Food Shop up the street," he said, putting the bags on the table. "Coffee, OJ, eggs, sausage, and toast."

Redflare helped himself to a coffee and two slices of toast. A heavy breakfast always made him feel sluggish, which was not how a hunter needed to be during biz. He supposed that was what he was now, a hunter, until the extraction was wrapped up. Like it or not.

"I don't know where you get the strength to walk around in the morning, eating like that," Kemet remarked. He knocked on the bathroom door. "Hey, corp-girl, breakfast is served."

The sound of the shower cut off and a moment later the executive emerged from the bathroom, a fluffy towel wrapped around her hips. Dumont's naked torso glistened with water droplets.

"Man, I'm starved," she said, and went straight towards the food. She was nice to look at, Redflare had to admit, but he would have appreciated the show more if he hadn't been aware it was a deliberate attempt at manipulation. Not only did it serve as a lure for the male members of the team, but it was a power move, too. Walking around in what was normally a vulnerable position while putting on a show of complete ease and self-assurance implied that the hunters weren't in any position to make her vulnerable--that, like a queen's body-servants, they didn't count because their relative positions were so far apart. Nima glanced at Isis and rolled her eyes.

"Nice show," Kemet remarked, "but we're a little busy for drooling, so why don't you put some clothes on and save the skin until we have time to show our appreciation properly?"

"You're cute, too," she said with a wink and headed into the bedroom.

"I'd have bet money she'd have given me at least a look that would have charred flesh," Kemet mused.

"Maybe she really does think you're cute," Nima told him. He raised one elegant eyebrow and shrugged.

"Whatever." He glanced over at Redflare. "So, oh wise and powerful magician, do you have any plans for a daring escape from this hole we're stuck in?"

Redflare tapped his fingertips on the table.

"We'll call Kail Garriner and set up a meet," he decided.

Kemet did the eyebrow bit again.

"Pardon me, but isn't the most likely choice in the 'who leaked our plans?' sweepstakes one of Garriner's people, if not the man himself?"

"Right, which makes him the one who's most likely to have some answers. Not to mention our best hope of eventually getting Dumont off our backs."

"How chivalrous," the corp manager said, leaning over Redflare's shoulder to pick up a cup of juice. This time, she was fully dressed.

"I'm still not sure it's a good idea," noted Kemet.

"In that case, perhaps a walkthrough would be beneficial," Isis said. "Assuming that Garriner is honest, he will be on our side. If one of his operations has been sold out, he will want to know about it. It would be in his interest to help."

Redflare nodded.

"Which is also something the betrayer has got to know, so if he or she finds out that we're meeting Garriner--"

"Which is likely, if it's one of his people," Dumont interjected.

"--then he or she will probably do one of two things: run like hell or call out the dogs."

Kemet made a face.

"I'm liking this less and less."

Neither was Redflare, but at this point all the options appeared equally unpalatable. Maybe that was an advantage to being a professional illusionist; it helped him keep the brain straight about what was reality and what just wishful dreams.

"How about if Garriner is dishonest?" Dumont wondered.

"Then we will be walking into an ambush," Isis told her. "By coming to him we will be providing him with exactly what he wants."

"So as I see it--and please correct me if I'm missing something here--one of three things could happen at this meet. One, someone in Garriner's organization bolts before it happens. Result: the traitor is identified and removed as an ongoing threat. Two, we're attacked, either to kill us or capture us for interrogation. Result: the source of the leak is located within the headhunter's circle of contacts and operatives, and we proceed from there."

"If we aren't all dead or on the rack by then. What's option three?"

"Three, nothing unusual happens. Result: the leak is located within the Nakagaki end of things, or the jump was a Nakagaki plant all along, and we move on to them."

"I suppose you don't have a nice, easy number four?"

"Don't whine, Kemet," Nima told him.

"Heaven forbid! I just want it known that my desire is to avenge Dace's death, not join him. Sending two people into a possible ambush does not strike me as the best way of doing things."

"Two?" Redflare asked.

"Someone has to babysit Dumont," Nima pointed out. "Honestly, Kemet's got a point; it's a little hard for two people to properly cover each other's backs."

"But," Dumont noted, "you need someone to make sure that your meal ticket--me--doesn't come down with a bad case of independence--or stupidity. You can't leave me alone, Nima will be isolated from the physical world running datanet overwatch, and since whom to trust is something of a problem at this point, you can't dump me on someone from outside the team."

"I'm officially against it," Kem concluded.

"We could leave you with Dumont," Isis offered.

"No way. Getting my friends and my sister gravestoned is hardly an improvement on my own death, you know."

Dumont walked over to the window, lips pursed thoughtfully, then turned around.

"What if all four of us went to the meeting with Garriner? That could give us enough people for some kind of reconnaissance, to keep an eye on the exits, and so on."

Isis looked as if she'd been poleaxed.

"You...are offering to help?" she said incredulously. Redflare was having a bit of trouble with it himself; the concepts of "Ashlyn Dumont" and "selfless offers of assistance" went together like a magman and a Dezolian snowfield.

"I'm volunteering to aid in getting my own backside out of the line of fire," the exec said crisply. "That seems more likely to happen quickly and successfully if I join in."

"Do you have any combat training or experience in security work?" Isis asked.

"Only SDE's basic self-defense program, and the firearms course I took when I purchased my sonic gun--and I do practice with it, I may add."

Which makes you more of a liability than an asset, Redflare thought. Dumont quickly provided a counterargument to that assumption, though--the same one that covered the magician.

"Don't forget, though, that I'm also a tech-user." She turned to Redflare. "From what I've seen, your techniques are largely of the non-lethal variety. Is that correct?"

"It is."

"Mine are not," she said succinctly. She didn't have to explain further; everyone remembered her Gigra saving them at the warehouse. Nor did she need to elaborate further; they all knew how useful battle techs--especially area-effect battle techs--could be to a hunter team.

Redflare glanced at the others to make sure they were all on the same page. Kemet, especially, was looking more confident.

"All right, then, you're in," he told Dumont. The five of them spent the next hour sketching out the rough details of their plan until Isis sighed and pushed back from the table.

"I believe that will be all we can prepare for at this time," she said. "Redflare, you had best go and make the call."

That came as a surprise.

"Me?"

"Your idea," Kem said. "Besides, Dace always made the contacts for us; he was the leader."

That's when Redflare got it. Maybe, once again, his subconscious was up on that well before his conscious mind, but either way he only came to the realization then. Ever since they'd gotten back to the safehouse, Redflare had been slipping into a leadership role. Why was that?

Well, a hunter team needed a leader, at least on the battlefield. They might make down-time decisions democratically, but for simple efficiency when guns were going off and techs were being slung someone had to be pointing the way. That had been Dace. Nima, Isis, and Kemet were used to being followers; they functioned that way, instinctively took up that role. Dumont was independent-minded, but there were dozens of bloody obvious reasons why she wouldn't be taking charge.

That left Redflare, and here, ironically enough, his part-timer status actually helped. Most of the time he ran his own life, called his own shots. That wasn't true when he worked with Dace's crew, but he didn't really do that all that often, maybe three or four times a year. He might not be used to leadership, but he was used to being a decision-maker. In other words, under the circumstances he was mentally more proactive, more likely to say "Let's do this!" instead of simply suggesting ideas.

Just what I needed, he groused mentally. Not only am I stuck in a trap, but it looks like I'm going to have to figure a way out.

The good news was, he had people who were much more competent than he himself was to back his play.

"Okay, I guess that's how it's going to be. Nima, can you block a trace on the phone?"

"Well, I won't insure you against Mother Brain or LIM ComSec, but I think I can stall out any standard trace programs."

"Great. Dumont, I presume you know how to get in touch with Garriner?"

"Of course."

It took Nima under fifteen minutes to crack the phone system and set up a multiple relay, essentially bouncing the call from point to point so that a trace had to follow a circuitous route to get back to the origination site. By her estimate, anyone but a gridrider who was a lot more skilled than she was would take a minimum of two or three minutes to punch through a trace; eight to ten was a more likely estimate.

Idly, Redflare wondered just how good Angel Red really was to be so much better than Nima.

Dumont's contact with Garriner was apparently a cut-out, the owner of the Wanton Mermaid bar. The visiphone rang six times before someone answered.

"Whatja want?" a sleep-slurred voice mumbled in response. The face of the Mermaid's owner wasn't pretty; she wasn't attractive to begin with and forty-two years of hard life and harder liquor had taken their toll. Redflare was spared the woman's counter-evaluations because he'd killed the vid pickup on his end.

"I've got a message for Garriner," he said. "Tell him I've got Dace Maxwell's package. If he wants to talk biz I'll be at C3-4555-6513 for the next ten minutes, so he'd better hurry."

The woman's expression had gotten dead serious right off, and why not? The pay she got for running messages meant a lot to her.

"C3-4555-6513?" she repeated back.

"That's right." This wasn't a "real" number; it existed only because Nima had created it. A trace attempt via phone company records would lead anyone who didn't get past her initial security shell to an address of 702 Windward Plaza--DLE Central HQ. The little Motavian had a sense of humor.

Redflare hung up. In the minutes that followed, he experienced the waiting game in all its glory. Had he been too pushy? Not pushy enough? Was ten minutes enough time? Or was it too much--enough for Garriner to arrange a counter-hack by his own gridrider? He was relieved when the phone rang seven minutes later and Nima gave him the sign that it was, in fact, a call diverted from the hacked number. The image of a sharp-featured man came into view. Redflare glanced at Dumont; she nodded and said, "That's him."

He keyed the command to turn on the video feed for Garriner's benefit.

"You're not Maxwell," the man said at once.

"You're right; I'm not. The milk run you sent us on turned into a damned hose-up and he can't come to the phone right now."

The headhunter's eyes narrowed.

"Perhaps you don't know me. If you did, you'd know that I don't appreciate being jerked around by skags I've never met. Nor do I like people who cut in on my deals. Word gets around the streets fast, but unlike most of the streetscum, I happen to know what was supposed to go down at that warehouse."

Redflare blinked in surprise. Then he got it.

"You think we took the package from Dace's team."

"Now how did you guess that? You've got guts, sworm-kisser, I'll give you that. Crashing one of my deals and expecting to sell the merch back to me means you've got some big brass ones. It also means you've got crap for brains."

Redflare was starting to get a bit ticked at Garriner's conclusion-jumping, added to the fact that he was already on edge.

"Wrong, Garriner, you're the one with no brains. We are Dace's team, and despite you throwing us into a situation that went way beyond untenable, we actually managed to get out with your precious package. I was calling you to give you a second chance to make good, but at this point, I think you're the kind of shoot first, think second wastecase who's just going to add to our troubles. Goodbye."

He moved his hand towards the disconnect key, making sure the movement was obvious to Garriner.

"Wait!"

Redflare paused, watching the anger on the headhunter's face start to be replaced by a more thoughtful expression.

"I may have been a bit hasty in my conclusions. I'm surprised to hear that your task was apparently successful, given that there's quite a bit of interest being stirred up on the street." That was about par for the course, with SDE, Nakagaki, the Bane Spikes, and possibly someone else entirely all interested in Ashlyn Dumont and her project files. "Apparently your team was well-chosen."

"You can save the compliments for another day. Your biz has turned out to be more trouble than it's worth."

"I'm aware that there were complications, of course." He was smooth, Redflare had to admit. Righteous anger one minute, "aware that there were complications" the next. "The fact that you gave Dace Maxwell's name to Hilda was one reason why, under the circumstances, I was suspicious of your intentions."

"I had to get your attention somehow."

Garriner smiled wryly.

"You certainly did that. After last night I half expected you to be dead, and if not, then on the run."

"We don't like to leave unfinished business behind us," Redflare growled, his tone of voice making it clear he wasn't talking about completing the jump.

"Perhaps," the headhunter mused, "given the unforeseen difficulties involved in this job, a bonus of some sort would be in order."

"I'll take that bonus in solid information, today."

"Oh?"

"I want a meet. If you can make new delivery arrangements, then--maybe--we can talk further."

"Fair enough," Garriner decided. "How well do you know the Down Zone in Ossale Court?"

"No," Redflare told him flatly. "Too private. Forgive my bluntness, but I'm not just ready to meet you in any dark alleys, considering last night."

Garriner's eyes narrowed, but he kept his voice calm.

"Where do you suggest, then?"

"Jacquez's, in Madore Park. Two-thirty."

The fixer thought about it, then agreed. He could tell Redflare was in a touchy state, and too much haggling could make the whole deal fall through.

"Very well; you have your meeting."

"I'll be there. Oh, and Garriner?"

"Yes?"

"Buy something to drink. You're going to be doing a lot of talking, and we don't want your throat getting dry."

## Chapter 9

He drifted in a sea of blackness, caught in dark dreams and shadowy visions in which long, clutching fingers reached out to claw at him, their razored nails passing through his flesh to rend at his soul. He didn't know how long it lasted, but with every passing second it seemed like more and more of him was being torn away, bit by bit. He wondered what would happen when the last piece was gone.

It was actually a relief when Redflare awoke to the mundane reality of pain that was purely physical. His leg throbbed from the laser burn, and the back of his head ached badly enough to make him nauseous, but he was still glad to have escaped the nightmare.

Is that pathetic or what? he thought ruefully. At least waking up meant he wasn't dead, which was something to be happy about.

There were new pains, he realized, to go with the old ones. His wrists ached; they'd been bound with plastic tape-restraints that were tight enough to bite into the flesh. His ankles had been similarly bound, but his socks kept that tape from hurting. A mistake: if he pulled down his socks he could slip his feet free in a matter of seconds. Presuming, of course, that he got the opportunity. Other assorted bumps and bruises came from being jostled around; Redflare had been tossed into the back of a landrover and dumped on the floor. As he regained his senses, he saw two men seated on bench seats that ran along the side walls.

"Welcome back to the living world, techhead," growled one. Redflare recognized him as the one who'd wielded the laser shot. That weapon was slung across his back, and a long-bladed sword like Dace's was sheathed at his belt. The hunter was around six-one and broad-shouldered, with rugged looks that no one would have called handsome. The man on the other seat was younger, around eighteen, small and wiry, and kept a small poisonshot not unlike Redflare's aimed directly at the magician. "Now, before you get any stupid ideas, allow me to point out that my friend, here, has a nasty little weapon on you and will fire if he so much as suspects you're going to use a technique. So, don't let the lack of plasmarings lull you into a false sense of security."

"I'll make a note."

"Pretty ballsy for a guy who can't shoot straight."

"You're not likely to let me go if I whine and cry, are you? So, why bother?"

The hunter grinned, showing broken and decayed teeth. Maybe the guy had a phobia about biosculpting, Redflare mused, considering the scar along with the mouth. Being a street grifter gave him an eye for things like that.

"How did you get on to us, anyway?" he asked. "I'd have sworn our connection was pristine."

"Maybe so, but when corpsec's got links between your Dumont and our late boy Garriner, it doesn't matter much," the one with the poisonshot chimed in. "We just tagged him and followed the trail to you."

"Shut up, Vick," the other snapped. He was the leader, apparently, or at least enough of one that Vick stayed quiet.

He'd at least said enough for Redflare to figure out that the hunters were working for SDE; the corp had done some after-the-fact detective work and put the finger on the headhunter. Unfortunately, they'd also gravestoned said headhunter, cutting off a key source of information as to who had set up the extraction and why. That wouldn't matter much to them--the move cut off Dumont from a possible source of rescue, making her easier for them to capture. It mattered a heck of a lot to Redflare, though, because Garriner's death firmly closed off the best source they'd had to try and learn who was screwing them over.

The rover swung around a corner and Redflare skidded hard into the side wall.

"That'll leave a mark," Vick chortled. Funny man, that Vick, Redflare thought.

"So what do you want with me?" Redflare asked. "I assume it's not for my witty conversation."

Vick glanced at his leader.

"Holst?"

Another name.

"Actually, smart boy," Holst answered, "your conversation is why we want you. We may have missed the grab at Dumont, but I figure that with you in our corner we'll be able to fix that problem."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"That really ain't the way you ought to be thinking right now, pal. Don't worry, though, you'll be changing your tune soon enough."

That was more or less what Redflare was afraid of. Physical courage wasn't his strong suit, and he'd hung with hunters often enough to know that anyone could be broken.

This was the depressing course his thoughts were on when the rover arrived at its destination. Holst shoved a blindfold over Redflare's eyes before opening the doors and dragged him out. The trip was short and went down a flight of stairs along the way, but other than the fact that he didn't hear any noises of people he had no idea where he was until he was dumped onto a hard concrete floor and his blindfold was removed. The complete lack of ornamentation, the twisted pipes with their valves and meters, and the dim yellow emergency lighting all screamed "basement," probably in an unused but not completely abandoned (or else the lights would be off) building.

How prosaic.

"Keel, get Yoshida on the phone," Holst ordered, and one of the hunters scrambled to obey. Redflare noticed that his captors had done some decorating of their own after all; a visiphone unit had been wired into the hardline exposed by a cut-away section of a wall conduit. It was a cute trick, confusing possible traces because the physical location of the call didn't agree with the signal being sent by the phone itself. It was enough to buy a few extra minutes' security against a standard trace, though a gridrider would see through it quickly enough. Depending on the skill of their electronics expert, other defenses might also have been added.

The thought gave Redflare an idea. He wasn't sure if he'd been searched, and quick pressure with his hands told him that if he had, it hadn't been well enough. Luckily, although Vick was still watching him, Redflare's hands had been tied behind his back, out of sight.

The visiphone lit up, and the harsh, angular face of a woman with almond-shaped lavender eyes and hair to match appeared.

"Yoshida," she said.

"Is this line secure?" Holst asked.

"Within limitations, yes."

"Ain't that always the way. Well, I'll chance it. We've gotten our hands on one of the team that ran the jump. We figure he makes a pretty good link to the target."

"I agree," Yoshida said. "May I ask why you are contacting me concerning this?"

"Hey, this is your show. Last I checked, we were the errand boys. You've got methods of persuasion that we just don't have access to, plus the authority to negotiate."

The woman inclined her head in a curt nod.

"I see. Your perception is most rewarding."

Redflare, his hands busy, understood that one. Yoshida was obviously the hunter's corp contact. Holst had been hired to bring in Dumont, and his pay was probably contingent on him doing so. Yet he was offering to turn his prisoner--his best lead to Dumont--over to corpsec because SDE's people had the best chance to make Redflare talk one way or another. In other words, he was putting the operation's ultimate goal ahead of his own meseta balance. The magician could almost see Yoshida making a mental note of it.

"I will be there in thirty minutes. Did you have anything further to report?"

"No."

"Good day, then." The "Call Terminated" message flashed onto the suddenly dark screen.

"Damn," the one called Keel swore. "You never told her where we are, but she's coming here?"

"I thought you had that line secured?" asked one of the three that Redflare didn't have a name for. This one he recognized as the man who'd gone down under Isis and Kemet's gunfire; apparently the hunters had gotten some healing meds into him before he termed.

"I did," Keel said. "SDE's a baby as corps go. They shouldn't have the resources to crack it so fast."

Holst chuckled.

"Keel, they're a damn R&D corp, remember? Their biz is to think up hot new stuff for other corps--and you can bet they're first in line to install whatever tech toys they think up for Luveno, IMVE, or whoever's paying the freight. Maybe they ain't got a private army on hand, but that ice-witch has all the latest gear."

Wonderful, groused Redflare mentally. That hinted at how the corp had linked Dumont and Garriner so quickly after the jump. It sucked enough to be hunted, but being hunted by opposition with tricks he couldn't counter was an all-new level of crap. It was like doing sleight-of-hand for an audience of Wrens.

Fortunately, he'd only been performing sleight of hand for Vick, who was a much less discerning audience. The only question was one of time.

Basically, Redflare knew that he had half an hour to learn whether he lived or died. It wasn't everyone who got to find that out with such precision.

Then again, maybe he didn't have that long, he reflected as Holst strode over to his perch. The hunter leader was smart enough to be aware of Vick's line of fire and not block it.

"Okay," he said, "looks like we'll be a while. Case, go ditch the landrover; it might get tagged by the cops. Then score us some new wheels."

The sole female member of the team slipped to her feet.

"I'm on it," she said, and was gone.

"Now as for you," Holst said, turning his attention to Redflare, "I'm sure a smart guy like you was listening to that call, so you know that in half an hour the hard lady from SDE is going to be here to take you off our hands. That's a valuable bit of property you and your pals ran off with, and they're not going to be nice in asking for it back."

"I've gathered that," Redflare said, forcing himself to keep his voice level. A show of weakness now would be like waving a lure to a fish. Never mind that he was scared to death and his only chance lay somewhere between "slim" and "none"; he wasn't going to give Holst any hints that some quick, direct action could break him.

"Now for me, it's just biz," the hunter continued. "Nothing personal--hell, we might have gotten the nod for the extraction instead of you if the ball had bounced differently. Yoshida ain't that way, though. She's one of those corporate honor types, and figures that when Dumont jumped it was an affront to the whole corp. She'll do whatever is necessary to find the lady and bring her back, no matter what the cost to you."

"That's about how I'd sized it up," Redflare agreed, drawing a chuckle from the hunter.

"You've got guts," Holst admitted. "Think about it, though. What's that woman to you? Is Dumont worth dying for?"

Belatedly Redflare figured out what was going on.

"You want to cut a deal?" he asked incredulously.

"Exactly. Once she gets here, it's out of my hands. You get just what Yoshida gives you. We make a bargain, maybe you don't have to be here when she arrives."

Redflare looked at him with a little grin.

"And of course," he said dryly, "you get the paygirl instead of me to show the corp."

Holst smirked.

"Doesn't work out too shabby for either one of us, does it?"

No, it didn't, if one didn't mind selling out one's friends, which wasn't exactly Redflare's routine of choice. Who knew? Maybe Holst was actually telling the truth. Stranger things could happen.

"Maybe. Or maybe Yoshida's going to bring back a higher bid, and you're trying to get in the way. It's as easy for her to pay me as it is for her to pay you, after all."

Holst's brow darkened, and Redflare was glad he was sitting down; his knees had turned to water and probably couldn't have supported him. Had he gone too far, pushed the hardboiled hunter routine too hard? No matter how mercenary they were, these were people, not robots, and if pushed emotionally would do things that weren't in their best interest.

The big hunter's fist made Redflare's head snap back, cutting the inside of his lower lip against his teeth.

"I've got to keep you alive and basically well for Yoshida," he said, almost amiably. "That doesn't mean I have to listen to your wiseass mouth."

Redflare spat out blood.

"Okay, how about this, and here's the holy truth: I'm not going to sell out my team, either for my freedom or for meseta." He just hoped that the reverse was true.

This time, Holst didn't get angry; he just nodded.

"Can't fault you for that."

Vick sniggered.

"Too bad it won't mean nothin' when corpsec gets its hands on you," he cackled. "Got lots of fun little toys up at SDE to make you talk, I bet."

Holst scowled at the man.

"Shut up, Vick."

The little man bounced to his feet.

"Why should I? Hotshot tech-user here, thinks he's better than us even though we took him easy." Vick wiggled the poisonshot at Redflare. "I saw you using one of these in the fight. Only difference is, I hit what I aim at."

He pointed up into the mazework of pipes.

"You see that gauge up there? Watch this."

Vick stuck the poisonshot back in its harness, prompting two of the other hunters to draw guns and level them at Redflare, just in case he got any ideas. Vick then snapped the gun out and shot from the hip, an even trickier stunt because his shot was almost vertical. Predictably, the globule of chemicals from the gun struck dead-on and started dissolving the gauge.

Actually, it wasn't a bad shot at all. The man could handle a gun. Even as a novice hunter, though, Redflare knew several reasons why showing off like that was a boneheaded play.

"Hey, Vick," one of the hunters snapped. "What is your bloody problem? You want to maybe shoot out a fire sensor and trigger an alarm? That'd be bright."

"I hit what I aim for, Zedd," the thin hunter snapped back. "Unlike this tech-freak here."

"I took you on for this job because you're a pal of Tev's," Holst growled. "He said you were trustworthy and good with a gun. He didn't say you were so damn stupid. Or did it ever occur to you that you were supposed to be watching this 'tech-freak,' and that if Tev and Keel hadn't been paying attention he might have been able to put us all down with a bloody Nazan or something like that?"

Vick flushed. From what Holst had said, Redflare was starting to get the picture. Vick was just some gunjack trying to make the jump to the big-time. He was full of brag and bluster, mostly to cover up the same kind of insecurity that Redflare felt whenever he joined Dace's team.

Dace. He hadn't meant to think of that.

"What's so hot about this guy, anyway?" Vick protested. "He's not so great. All I've seen him do is screw up one tech and shoot like a blind man. He's nothing but cheap trash."

Vick's foot lashed out, connected with Redflare's side, and sent him sprawling. Unfortunately, this did two things. The natural motion of his body caused his hands to fly apart, revealing the fact that the street magician had freed them. It also caused his porta-visiphone to spill out of his back pocket.

"What the--?" Holst grunted, and scooped up the phone. "I thought you frisked him, Vick?"

"I did! He didn't have a holdout piece or any other weapon."

"My own damn fault for trusting you. You know what this skag did while you were supposed to be watching him?" He held up the phone, so they all could see the little green light. "He made a damn phone call!"

## Chapter 12

The Nakagaki Corporation's mainframe was connected to the datanet so the public could access ads, media relations, tech support, publicly available financial records, and other things that consumers were interested in. Getting from there to more sensitive areas, open only to internal corporate eyes, required a person to bypass security. The office drones all linked from inside the system, so the "front door" was tightly sealed. Just finding the data channel had been difficult enough, but the two gridriders managed it, backtracking the flow of commands that updated one of the public sites.

The data channel was blocked by a shimmering grid of crackling red electricity, a fairly standard form of security barrier. The gridriders paused for a moment, and then Angel Red snapped her wings forward, releasing a shower of golden feathers. They floated into the grid, most of them sparking and vanishing as they struck it, but one did not. The grid opened up, the bars bending outward to form a hole in the center. Angel had snowed the system into accepting a false passcode.

They dove into the tunnel of gleaming light and followed it through the twisting channels of the data connections. Nima did a quick system interrogation and teased a location map out of it. On the way, they passed through several more security grids, generally at nexus points between different areas of the system. Most likely they were there to keep the wageslaves from playing in each other's areas--the finance people could do all they wanted in their area of the system but couldn't get over into, say, marketing without a passcode...or a hacker.

Eventually, they arrived in Human Resources. Security on the personnel files wasn't quite so passive, Nima soon realized as they entered what looked like a giant pyramidal room.

"We're in look-but-don't-touch terrain, now," Angel Red said. "We can access the files and review them, but any attempt to download or change will trigger the next level of security."

"Can we fight it off?"

"Oh, certainly, but the activation of auxiliary security will trigger a system-response alert, which will make things all the harder when we try for the big prize."

"Yeah, that would be bad."

The blue dragon opened its jaws and belched out a swirl of green-tipped crimson flames. The fireball, actually a search program, spun around Nima once and then started to skitter across the walls of the pyramid, which appeared to be made of obsidian blocks, each of which was a datafile. After a few seconds, the fireball burst in a flare, highlighting a file.

Even though the program was Nima's, and so had transmitted the search results to her, Angel Red was actually ahead of her, soaring up to the datafile and touching the block with one liquid crystal hand. Her sheer speed within the system amazed the Motavian; a VR interface made a computer user fast by narrowing the gap between the brain's commands and the time in which those commands were received by the machine, a gap which could be quite large in the case of a keyboard user, but it was almost like the neon angel didn't have any lag at all, her actions coming at the speed of thought.

Does she have some hot new interface, or is it just sheer skill? Nima wondered, and then stopped wondering and got back to the business at hand. Text and images displayed themselves in the block just as they would have been on her computer screen had she been sitting at a terminal. She adjusted her vision to zoom in and started to read. She couldn't copy the file without risking a fight with security, but there was nothing to keep her from making a memo file of the information--the digital equivalent of sitting at her desk, writing down what she read in the file with a pencil and notepad. Security wouldn't get triggered, because she wasn't doing anything to the actual datafile; the "notes" were all internal. The downside was that this method took time (during which she could be discovered, say by someone else checking up on Bright's file) and was vulnerable to user error.

Martin Bright, at least according to Nakagaki, was twenty-seven years old. He'd been born in a suburb of Eppi, excelled in school in mathematics, science, and creative writing, and had accepted a corporate scholarship to university. He'd interned during his summers before dutifully joining the Nakagaki fold after graduation. He'd worked in the main office in Eppi as a junior researcher, then was bumped up a grade and transferred to Camineet. Bright's intelligence factor was high, not quite genius level, and he also ranked highly in creativity and imagination, which was a good combination for someone in R&D. The most critical thing she could find was that he was something of a dreamer and it was recommended he be paired with a detail-oriented assistant to make certain that his methodology was not corrupted. His current work assignment was listed as Project R01073, at the Sarranas Development Enterprises research facility in Venadar.

"I wish we could tell what that project number means," Nima remarked, "but you can't access it from personnel files. We would have to crack the research section to get the data."

"It is an R&D; number, however," Angel Red verified. "Bright isn't assigned to security or any other section, and his file is here, unsealed, in the personnel database."

"It could be a cover for his real activities."

"True, though this file doesn't have any links or flags indicating a connection to something else, and I looked carefully. It feels like Bright is exactly what he purports to be. You're right, though; we can't know for certain without checking their shadow files."

"Yeah..." Nima murmured nervously. "Let's do it."

It was one of the incongruities of life in the corporate world that records would be kept of illegal activities, records that private parties could use for blackmail, other corps could use in a media blitz to cripple their opponents' stock price or at least force them to spend valuable meseta on a publicity spin, and the cops could use as evidence in court. Black ops datafiles had been the final spike in the coffin for Eppi Products, Inc. in 1266; what had then been the planet's number-three corp had seen many of its executives jailed and its subsidiaries snapped up by rivals at rock-bottom prices before its creditors moved in and finished the job.

The problem for the corps was that such records were necessary. A megaconglomerate like Nakagaki had more assets than a nation did before the advent of the unified system government. Records had to be kept so that the results of industrial espionage could be integrated into the rest of corporate operations, so whatever was gained by the illegal acts could be used productively. Even the shadow world of hunters and gridriders had to bow to the needs of the almighty meseta.

Since these files had to exist, and had to be accessible by various authorized parties, they were available via the datanet except in the most extreme cases. This made them prize targets for hunters seeking a juicy payoff, so the corps piled on their deadliest security, which usually worked. Nima's fears were not without good reason. At this point, though, she didn't have much of a choice.

Nakagaki's security people were smart enough to let the system architecture do their work for them, requiring anyone who wanted to access black information to pass through several layers of barriers and access gates to get to the right area. More than one of these were fairly tricky, and Nima could all but feel the heavy code ready to lash out at the gridriders if they made one false step. Finally, the last gate opened, and they were admitted into the data archive of the Security Division Confidential Research and Development Section. In other words, corporate espionage.

It was a good thing, Nima reflected, that an extraction was business as usual, a corp-sanctioned op. One type of illegal work that often didn't make it into the files was the private, unsanctioned project, one exec trying to get a leg up on a rival.

Apparently Nakagaki liked the pyramid imagery for its file archives; this one looked almost exactly like the one from the personnel records. There were two substantial differences, though: most of the blocks were covered with pulsing electric grids, and beams of light, cold illumination like a stage spotlight, swept through the room, likely security beacons. Nima started to move forward, but one of her companion's wings snapped up, blocking her path. In a moment, she realized why; the slight burst of motion she'd made before being stopped had caused the spotlights to deviate from their pattern towards her.

"Spot-checks," Angel Red said. "They scan activity in the archive to verify that users are authorized to be here. We'll have to take into account both their regular movement and their reaction to our activities. I presume we're looking for any reference to Bright in the archive?"

"Uh-huh, and also the names Ashlyn Dumont or the 'paratechnology project.'"

"That's going to be fun; it'll require limited penetration of all files, and you can bet that most of them are encrypted. Can your search routines do that?"

Nima shook her head.

"Not with any kind of speed."

"Then you'll have to be the decoy. Get those beams to chase you so I can work. Put up your best cloak in case they brush you."

"All right. Um... Angel?"

"Yes?"

"Wish me luck, okay?"

"Good luck."

I'm going to need it, Nima thought.

Her first step, as advised, was to call up a cloaking program to shield herself. The outlines of the dragon grew hazy and indistinct, and she knew that should she be hit by one of the searches the program would be doing its best to convince the computer that she was nothing more than a piece of innocuous data. It was a good piece of software, one she'd coded herself, but she wasn't sure that it would stand up to a corporate alpha-level scan.

Nima didn't start moving immediately. Instead she accessed another utility, and a different defensive program conjured up three more dragons. These were ghosts, electronic decoys which made a fair amount of "noise" as they crashed through the system, but had no reality. They couldn't take any action other than movement, and they fell apart at once, leaving no trace, if challenged by a security program.

She took a deep breath and moved ahead.

Nima used the first ghost to learn, advancing it slowly at first so that she could see how the beams reacted. Faster movements drew a faster reaction, and when she moved the ghost horizontally and vertically at the same time it somehow had more of an effect than straight vertical or straight horizontal motion.

When the ghost neared the wall--the datafiles--the spotlights swarmed it, catching it almost at once. It vanished into nothingness.

That's just about what would happen to me, she thought.

Nima wasn't quite ready to make her move, but the archive made her choice for her as the sweep of a scanning beam moved towards their location. There was no one spot, after all, which was left uncovered by the system; that was why she had to act as a decoy, get the security code to chase its tail following her so it didn't see Angel Red playing havoc with the data. Both gridriders moved, Nima quickly while the gold-winged angel just drifted aside.

As expected, the swift motion drew the attention of every security beam in the area. Nima sent the ghosts off at once, splitting them out in different directions. This drew the beams off, pulling them away from her as she slowed her own movement, presenting a less tempting target. It was almost like an online game, moving her two icons while trying not to be chased down, only the stakes were a lot higher.

Keeping track of her own position and movements while simultaneously controlling the two ghosts and tracking the patterns of the security beams wasn't an easy task, and Nima lost one of the ghosts quickly. That actually made her job simpler, and she was able to use the last ghost as a lure to keep the spot-scans occupied, adding a quick bob-and-weave herself when needed to relieve the pressure or open up a window for her decoy to escape through.

The problem with this was that well-designed systems contained failsafes. While the scans hadn't actually caught anyone, they had been moving around for some time outside of their usual patterns. There wasn't supposed to be so much system activity in the archive, and that triggered the next stage of the security. A glittering black needle, like a slim missile, arrowed down from the top of the spire.

Virus, Nima realized. Unlike the lights, the security program could, like Nima herself, scan the entire archive at once. She felt it probe her cloak, but nothing more. Apparently the defensive code had worked. Unfortunately, her concentration had been jolted by the virus's appearance, and she lost the last ghost.

Now, Nima's only decoy was to use herself, and she had to keep it up so that Angel Red could run the search. For a moment she tried to imagine what it would have been like to run this alone, doing everything she was already doing and trying to skate past alpha-level security to search the files at the same time. Her mind reeled, and Nima quickly snapped back to the business at hand. She ducked and dodged for what seemed like forever but which was probably no more than a minute of real time, until she finally made a mistake.

It wasn't a big mistake; the light only brushed against her, a graze that her cloak should have and did shrug off. The problem was that the cloaking program was already fighting the scan from the virus, and it wasn't quite good enough to do both at once, not to the level of security that was present in the archive.

The archive didn't bother with warnings or minor upgrades; it went into full-on alert mode instantly upon detecting an intruder. The "air" was suffused with a pulsing red haze as the needle launched itself at Nima. It moved faster than she'd ever seen a sec-virus move; it was on her in almost an instant. There was no time to dodge; Nima just threw up her best shield and winced as she took the hit. The needle had been a killshot, sent to attack her system, and the direct hit degraded the shimmering barrier around her by over nineteen percent.

More needles were filling the archive now, together with glittering sparks that glowed a poisonous green. The worst news, though, was what was forming in the center of the area. It looked like a jet-black version of Nakagaki's contribution to the robotic defense industry, the Van, a flying tank bristling with firepower.

That was no virus, Nima knew. It was a security gridrider.

She managed to twist away from one needle and destroy it with a blast of dragonfire, actually degrading it with a countervirus designed to break down security code. Another hit her, though, followed by two of the sparks--toxic code designed to eat away at her defenses rather than attack directly. Her shields went down entirely, and Nima barely flamed another killshot before it started ripping up her hardware.

That gave the gridrider time to act, though. He locked on to her and fired off an attack. The Nakagaki security hacker didn't bother with anything minor; the Van's main gun crackled with energy and an explosive blast of scarlet energy spewed at her. Nima tried to dodge, but the sizzling bolt tracked her. Without defensive shields, her only hope was offense, so she attempted to destroy the blast as she had the killshots, but the enemy gridrider was ready for her. The Van's auxiliary cannons rattled out their message of destruction, snuffing out the dragonfire with their own counterviruses.

Nima couldn't be sure if the corp gridrider was actually better than she was in a fair fight, but this fight wasn't fair. She was an intruder on his home ground; she had to force the mainframe to let her act while the system helped her opponent. On top of that, he was equipped with all the hardware and cutting-edge programming that the world's fourth-largest conglomerate believed their most sensitive data was worth using to protect.

She didn't have a chance.

Then, at the last moment, salvation came. Angel Red darted between Nima and the attack code, using her own "body" as a shield. The charge hit the neon angel squarely and burst into a consuming inferno that enveloped her form completely in a holocaust of electric fire. Nima identified the attack; it was an alpha-level brainburner, and it had gone off without being blocked by any shielding. The best a hacker could hope for under those circumstances was a quick death instead of being reduced to a vegetative coma.

Except, when the fire died, the angel was still there. While the corporate gridrider was trying to figure out what had just happened, Angel Red spread her wings, a shining point of golden light at the tip of each one, and ten beams of energy impaled the Van, blasting it to nothingness.

"W-what are you?" Nima babbled, stunned.

"Come on; we have to get out of here!"

A hacker couldn't just "unplug" in the midst of a hostile system because it left a brightly-blazed trail even the most amateurly-programmed trace code could follow. Nima had shielded her access point to help prevent that, but Nakagaki's traces were hardly amateur.

"Grab on and hold on to your stomach!" the angel cried, extending a hand. Nima grasped it with one forepaw, and a barrier of golden light that she couldn't see through at all sprang up around them. There was the sensation of dizzying, gut-wrenching motion, of direction changes at impossible speeds, and then all of a sudden the barrier was gone and the two hackers were floating free in the open space of the grid.

"Nice eject code," Nima said, glad to be back on familiar ground. She had a program like it herself, which threw up the toughest shield the machine could handle and yanked her out of the system by autopilot, for last-resort escapes.

"Thanks! I upgraded it a bit from IMVE's Freefall. It looks like we picked up a trace, though. Let me take care of that." She made a gesture, and a sphere of pale blue light phased into being. Inside it, a dancing yellow spark appeared, becoming visible. "Too many people get burned by not sweeping their backtrail after bailing out. That's why I never eject directly out of the system." The liquid crystal face was too stylized to have discernible lips, but Nima could almost see the smile anyway as Angel Red actually giggled and added, "That was your Official Older Gridrider Being A Pompous Twit Lesson of the Day, by the way."

With a flick of her hand she sent the trace spark flying off into the datanet.

"Where did you redirect it to?" Nima wondered.

"Oh, the Pure Palm Society. I thought they'd appreciate a visit from Nakagaki sec-agents if the tracers don't catch on." Since the Society was a racist group dedicated to removing all Motavians and Dezolians from the planet, she didn't mind at all, though it did make her wonder if Angel Red knew Nima was a Motavian.

"Yes, I think their offices could use some creative redecorating." She paused, thinking, then decided to pull the conversation towards serious matters, regardless of the potential cost.

"Angel," she asked, "how did you survive that brainburner? You took that full-on, unshielded, but...it didn't even touch you!"

"Oh, that." She giggled again. "I admit, I was showing off a little, there. That Nakagaki sec-hacker will have a good story to tell at the water cooler, though."

"But how did you do it?"

"Hardware, Nima. The brainburner can't affect me. I don't use a full-immersion VR interface."

Nima boggled at that. The idea that Angel Red could be that good while only using a headset and data gloves was astonishing, but it was the obvious explanation. Brainburners and mindtraps couldn't hurt someone who wasn't hooked up to hardware capable of biofeedback.

"Did you find out anything about Bright?"

"Nothing."

Nima sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry. I guess I couldn't hold off the security for long enough."

"No, no!" Angel Red quickly assured her. "You did fine! I was able to convince the archive to run the search for me. I meant that those names never came up in the files."

"But...but that's impossible!" If Bright was the contact man for a Nakagaki extraction of Dumont, whether or not they intended to make good on the offer, there would have to be some kind of record.

"I'm sorry, but it's true. I checked carefully. None of those names appeared at all."

Bewildered, Nima tried to figure out what had happened. The best she could think of was that Bright had been a spy for some third party, probably another corp, inserted into the project to learn as much as possible, then destroy the data.

"Was Bright's personnel file tampered with?" she asked. "Could it have been inserted by a gridrider?"

"I don't know. I didn't see any signs of tampering, but I wasn't looking for that, either. Once the system alert dies down, I could go back and run a more intensive search just to be sure."

"I'd appreciate it if you could. Bright's the right man, but if he's not working this job for Nakagaki then I need to know whose pocket he's really in."

## Chapter 13

Executive Director Kendrick looked across his desk at the two division chiefs he'd summoned into his presence. He was not particularly happy with either of them.

"I called the two of you here for a status report on the Ashlyn Dumont situation." His gaze swept back and forth between Reiko Yoshida and the R&D chief, Paul Herrod. "Reiko, where does your investigation stand?"

"We have identified the team of hunters responsible for the extraction. Dumont is presumably still with them because her contact, Kail Garriner, has been eliminated. Our operatives were able to take one hunter into custody this afternoon, but the rest of his associates managed to rescue him. Apparently, Dumont took an active part in the rescue, verifying her presence with them at that time."

Herrod's eyebrows rose sharply.

"Ashlyn Dumont is supposed to have taken part in a fight between a hunter group and our people?" he asked.

"I agree that it doesn't fit her psychological evaluation," Yoshida admitted.

"Honestly, this entire business seems at odds with--"

"You'll have your turn, Paul. Reiko, please continue."

Her face appeared drawn and tight.

"That's all we know at this stage, sir. We have been unable to identify which corporation commissioned the extraction, and we are still pursuing Dumont's current location."

"I see. So, at this point you have a good deal of information but have been unable to complete the task. What opinion do you have as to your prospects of future success?"

"I believe that we have a good chance of locating her if we act swiftly. We know whom she is with, and until she can make a new connection with her prospective employer Dumont and the hunters will be isolated from support. That gives us a window of opportunity to find them."

"I see. Paul, what about the status of the paratechnology project itself?"

"Needless to say there was some concern among the research staff when I shut down the project for the day. I attributed it to a computer maintenance situation, which isn't wholly inaccurate, but the usual rumors are starting."

"The 'usual' rumors?" Kendrick said mildly, but it was clear he was not amused. Herrod, conversely, gave him a wry smile.

"That gridriders had hacked the system core, or that hunters had staged an attack on the site, or that SDE was feuding with Nakagaki at the highest levels, or that the government suspected that the whole thing was some sort of treasonous conspiracy." He smiled again and added, "Those are only the least exotic of the suggestions I've heard. I suppose a fertile imagination is one of the major qualifications for being a skilled researcher, but they do seem to have a positive talent for gossip."

Kendrick sighed.

"So long as they don't start bringing Nakagaki down on us, their gossiping won't do any harm. In fact, it may buy us more time, if they keep from focusing on the mundane world." His face settled into a tight mask. "The project overseers from Nakagaki won't be as easily put off. Sooner or later, they'll demand answers, and I'll have to give them."

He rose from his desk and walked over to the window. Herrod and Yoshida glanced at each other behind his back, unaware that he could see them reflected in the armored glass.

"Reiko," he asked mildly, "why didn't you tell me that your assessment of Dumont as a flight risk had been countermanded by Paul, and that this was the reason your security watch on her was minimal at best?"

Yoshida was embarrassed; he could tell. She didn't blush, but that tight, borderline fuming expression she'd had before was even more pronounced now.

"The decision to keep security levels at a minimum was mine, as was the responsibility to keep key SDE personnel from defecting as well as protecting our electronic systems from penetration. There was no need to attempt to shift blame onto others; to seek to do so would have..." She broke off, not wanting to describe that course of action in strong language because it would sound self-aggrandizing to announce that she had not chosen dishonor. Yoshida, Kendrick reflected, could be like that on occasion.

"I am not talking about shifting or accepting blame, Reiko. I'm talking about withholding information from me, information about the decisions my senior staff are reaching and how those decisions affected the whole corporation. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Continue your efforts to track down Dumont; I need to speak with Paul."

She nodded once, sharply, then left the office. Kendrick turned away from the cityscape to face Herrod.

"Don't be too hard on her," the junior executive advised. "You know that code of honor she lives by; securitywise she's the captain of the ship and therefore responsible for whatever happens. At least, that's how she sees it."

"And you, Paul?"

Herrod shrugged.

"Since she did it to benefit me, I can't really give an independent opinion. It's true, of course. I convinced her that Dumont wasn't a flight risk, that it would be a waste of corp resources to put a sec-net around her and that it would probably tick Dumont off to be treated that way, maybe even create a problem where one hadn't existed before. If we'd had her tagged, she couldn't have walked out the way she did."

"Extractions occur often enough despite security, but yes, I see your point."

"So in that respect, it's my fault she's gone. I made a bad judgment call and it cost us."

"The question is, how much?"

Herrod looked at him quizzically.

"Come again?"

"Damage control. You're the division chief; you know our R&D capacity better than anyone. If we don't get Dumont or the files back, how much of the paratechnology project can be saved?"

Another shrug.

"I can't say. The backups have been deleted, as you know. We still have the research staff, who could recreate their work from scratch, but that would take time. You can't reinvent something like this from memory; we just don't have the background knowledge."

Which, Kendrick reflected, was hardly unusual. SDE was a think-tank whose major asset was in its scientific personnel being able to forge ahead into new ground. Most of the time, they licensed or sold their discoveries outright to other corps, who turned groundbreaking theory into hard-core profit.

"In other words, this is so cutting-edge that if some rival gets it, Nakagaki will pull out because they'll be too far behind the curve. Instead, they'll wait until the technology is introduced and try to improve on it in the marketplace, which will leave us out in the cold, whether they seek reprisals or just pull out."

There was no middle ground. Either SDE recovered Dumont and the project files, or the corporation faced disaster.

\* \* \*

Wulfeburne screamed. He'd been screaming for a long time, long enough that his vocal cords would have been reduced to emitting a soundless rasp, except that the forces that tore his body apart were simultaneously knitting it back together, keeping the injuries fresh and new. Worst of all, though, were the tickling fingers in his mind, tendrils that plucked at his consciousness as if his will was the strings of some exotic musical instrument.

The brain possesses a survival instinct; faced with stress, it tries to adapt. Constant pain causes it to go numb, dampening the sensations, or to seek surcease in madness. The expert torturer was forced to vary what was done in order to make the subject feel as much as possible. Wulfeburne's mind, though, could not seek any kind of relief. His master kept him focused upon the agony being inflicted, so that he was unable to ignore even the slightest impulse of the excruciating pain that wracked his body.

His tormentor seemed to drink it in, his suffering, as if it fed upon it and drew strength from the nightmare. Perhaps this was literally true. There had been other victims to feed its unholy need for pain. Their agonies had ended, occasionally, with death.

Wulfeburne's, however, did not.

Had it been minutes, hours, days? He did not know. All he knew was that it had ended, freedom coming like a slash of winter air pure and clean through him.

"You have failed me once," Wulfeburne's master said. "Should you do so again, I will not be so lenient with you."

## Chapter 15

Martin Bright turned out to be a very cooperative man, so far as tracking down his location went. He had a visiphone number, a home address where he actually appeared to live, and a credit report. He'd published a paper in the Journal of Paraphysics (published by Aoi Palm Press, a Nakagaki subsidiary, natch) two years ago on the analysis of technique energies involved in multiple-target versus single-target healing techniques. On the surface, he appeared to be just what he seemed, a corporate research scientist assigned to a project that was in his field.

Maybe that was all he was, Redflare pondered. Maybe he'd been forced to hire the hunters through blackmail, or maybe he'd been a recent recruit into whatever was going on. The plant inside SDE might have brought him in only after the paratech project had begun.

As for things that were less speculative, Bright had a liking for very retro-style jazz, and Nima's dig into his finances showed a click on his Kodama Bank (another Nakagaki subsidiary; can't have the employees keeping their cash with someone else) card twenty minutes ago for sixty meseta at a Downtown club called, simply, Nick's Place.

"I've heard of that club," Kem said when Nima relayed the information. "'Nick' is Nick Densmore. He's a gambler, supposed to have hit it big and bought the club. Street buzz says it's strictly legit, but also that Nick's got ties to the Jeweled Arc syndicate, who use it as a kind of meeting place, home turf for civilized biz negotiations."

"Is that reliable?"

Kemet shrugged.

"Maybe. Most of the big-name clubs get hooked up with some mob in the rumor mill even if there's nothing to it, which there usually isn't. The guy who fed me this bit's pretty solid, though, so I'd say, maybe seventy percent it's on the up-and-up."

"Good enough for me," Redflare said. "The last thing we need is to get yet another pack on our tails, so violence is out."

"Bright won't want to talk without some kind of incentive," Dumont worried.

"Right, but we'll have to get him to come with us without shooting him, beating him up, or otherwise making trouble in the club."

"The soft touch," Kemet mused. "How are we going to handle that?"

"We'll offer him something that he wants, and thereby get him to come to us. Once he's in our power, away from the club, then we can get some answers."

Kemet nodded.

"Yes, the bait approach could work. What do we have to offer?"

Redflare grinned broadly.

"Here's a hint. Bright lives alone."

That drew a cackle of laughter from the hunter.

"Oh, no, not the old poisoned fruit routine. A research nerd ought to go for that one like a sworm after garbage." He stopped laughing and glanced over at his sister. "Hey, Isis, why aren't you complaining yet? Most of the time you can't stand being the bait."

She smiled back at him.

"Evidently you have not adequately reviewed the intelligence my contact delivered about Mr. Bright."

"What?"

"Bright doesn't go for girls, Kem," Nima caroled between peals of laughter that nearly made her fall out of her seat. "You're the bait."

"Me?" Kemet yelped. "Why not Redflare? He's the professional performer."

Dumont smiled thinly and got into the act.

"Even I know that a plan like this requires the maximum physical beauty to catch the target's attention, and between the two of you, Kemet, you qualify."

Kem sighed.

"The things a man has to do to earn his meseta and save his life. Okay, what do I wear?"

The planning session was fast and largely took place during the drive over, because the team couldn't afford to have Bright slip away. They didn't know if he liked to pop into Nick's Place for a quick drink or a whole evening's entertainment, and every second counted. Redflare took advantage of the time to call up one of the few true street contacts he had, not the grifters and wannabes that hung on the fringes where the magician himself usually plied his trade.

"Time is meseta, chum; lay it out for me. Oh, hey, Redflare, how's it hanging?"

"It hangs, Max."

"Yeah, and if some of the buzz I've been hearing has any basis in reality, you'll be hanging soon."

"The word's out on the street, then."

"Gunter Holst's been spreading it looking for you, or actually that team you run with sometimes. Them he's been asking for by name, and enough people know you're in with Dace's crew that they've been able to kick in your handle as well."

"That's bad. Any news on who's backing him or what kind of finder's fee he's offering?"

"What, thinking of turning yourself in for the cash?" Max joked.

"Max, I'm serious."

Max sighed.

"Yeah, I know. He's been flashing one K for your current whereabouts, less for tips that point him in the right direction. No word on where he's getting the cash, but there's one interesting thing."

"Oh?"

"This Holst, he doesn't have a regular team like your buddy Dace, but when he gets a job he signs up the talent he needs from the same pool of ten or fifteen hunters. Jimmy Breeze recognized one, a lady named Case who does wheels, but he also said that Holst had a couple of hardcases backing him who looked like troopers."

"Secmen?"

"Yep. I don't know if you know Holst, but he likes to go it alone most of the time, without his clients looking over his shoulder while he does his thing. Working hand in glove with corporate goons just ain't his style."

Redflare could have explained that, since it had been his rescue that had thinned out the ranks of Holst's hunters. Should have killed him when we had the chance, he thought. They hadn't been hardnosed enough to make sure of him after the fight the way Dumont had dealt with the 'jack in Ossale Court, and it had cost them. Now SDE knew their identities.

Moral principles could be so inconvenient sometimes.

"If I were you, magic man, I'd give serious thought to a change of address. I hear the weather is nice in Abion this time of year. I can work up something if you like, passport, cover ID, the works if you need an out." Max was a fixer, sort of a one-man black market who hooked his clients up with the gear they needed, whether it was forged documents, weapons, armor, gear, or talent. Those pieces of equipment which Dace hadn't given to Redflare he'd gotten from Max; the magician knew the importance of having a trustworthy source. Too much of the combat equipment on the underground circuit was crap offered up for the nullheads who didn't know the difference.

"Sorry, Max. Much as I'd like to take you up on that, I've got things to do here."

"Your funeral. So, if I can't help you save your life, what are you in the market for?"

"Knowledge is power, Max."

The fixer grinned at him, showing off a gold-capped front tooth in an otherwise ordinary smile.

"I'm not sure they meant knowledge of pithy quotes when they said that. I figure it's information you're after, though."

"Right. You've got feelers out in the gang circuit?"

"Some of them talk to me when they want something more than the usual street garbage, and I know a few people who do regular business with them. Most gang hookups are syndicate, though. You know as well as I do the best way for any gang to move up from just being a rat pack is to get signed on as somebody's footsoldiers."

"That's the problem I've got. I need to find out whose footsoldiers a pretty nasty bunch are."

Max gave him a curious look.

"What's up with you today, Redflare? You're not sounding like yourself."

"I'm not?"

"Nah. All of a sudden, you're all biz. Serious. You take up that hunter gig permanently?"

"Maybe having somebody gunning for my head is making me concentrate a bit more."

Max shrugged.

"No skin off mine. Who was it you wanted scoped out?"

"A bunch of sworm-kissers called the Bane Spikes. They're out of Old Camineet, but they've been spreading their talent around lately, and I'd like to know whose idea it was."

"Okay, I'm on it. Usual rates?"

"Fine by me. Keep your head low."

The teeth flashed as Max chuckled.

"No problem with that, Redflare. I don't want to catch any part of what you're into."

The fixer signed off, but Redflare kept looking at the blanked-out display for some time. He had sounded something like a hunter on the phone, not really like himself at all. The idea bothered him. He wasn't a hunter, didn't want to be. It wasn't the kind of life he wanted to lead, then or ever. He wanted something more, something cleaner than freelancing for corps and syndicates and people who valued human life at an amount--any amount of meseta.

And yet, the paradox was that if he wanted to get both himself and his friends out of the mess they were in, he'd have to think like a hunter or he wouldn't be any help at all.

Redflare put the visiphone away. Life, he reflected, wasn't always about making the best choice. Sometimes it was just a matter of doing what one had to do to survive.

They reached Nick's not long afterwards. The club was understated, its only flashy display the simple word "Nick's" over the door. Since Dumont was waiting at the safehouse with Nima, Redflare and Kemet would be going in while Isis stayed with the vehicle. Redflare's job was to keep an eye out for trouble and watch the big picture while Kemet moved on Bright.

They'd discussed wiring the two of them up with some kind of unobtrusive communications gear, but that suggestion had been vetoed. While it would have been useful to be able to stay in contact with each other and Isis, people who carried microphones into syndicate hangouts were usually DLE agents. "Bug detectors" were more than likely in place to insure the patrons' privacy, a fact Isis was able to verify from the street outside by using a scanner. Likewise, they went in unarmed. The weapons detectors had been built into the doorframe, tastefully subdued, and Kem hadn't wanted to check his firepower with the bouncers because he wasn't likely to have a chance to pick it up again.

The club itself was a pleasant surprise for Redflare. Instead of chrome, mirrors, brilliant lights or unrelieved black, the predominant theme was highly polished wood. The carpets were burgundy, the dance floor looked to be parquet, and the lighting was relatively bright, more at the level of a fine restaurant than the borderline darkness of a dance club.

As advertised, the music was classic jazz, from a hundred and fifty years ago or more, and rather than being played electronically was provided by a live quintet who definitely knew their stuff. To the left, opposite the bar, was the lounge area which not only featured tabletop-model electronic games (with headsets so their music and sound effects didn't disturb the patrons) but an actual green felt pool table, the soft click of the balls forming a counterpoint to the lead saxophone.

Completing the image of the club were the patrons themselves, men and women dressed with understated taste. There was very little flesh and certainly no street leathers, no fiberdenim, no body-hugging stretch fabrics or revealing clothes on either sex. Redflare was glad that he'd stopped to borrow an outfit from Kemet before setting out; his own clothes would have been woefully out of place, probably enough that he'd have been denied entry. As it was, he felt a shiver of nerves as he passed the two large bouncers in their dark carbonsuits and slotted the cover charge. How many of the men and women in their fancy dress would dismiss the real him as street garbage?

Stupid, he told himself, worrying about things that didn't matter. You're just afraid that you're in over your head again, and it's making you feel low.

The fact was, when he wasn't thinking about the job, Redflare found that he liked Nick's Place. It felt homey and quaint, a place to relax and unwind, not to rev up and party harder than he worked during the day. He could imagine himself seated at a table, performing sleight-of-hand tricks across the green baize.

He didn't have much time for pleasant daydreams, though, because the here and now was upon him.

"That looks like our boy," Kemet said. The man they both assumed to be Bright was sitting at the bar, a tumbler of something pale lavender in color on the rocks by his elbow as he watched the band and the dancers.

"Looks like you're on."

"Are you sure you don't want to do this? I feel like a cheap thrill."

"Look at it this way, Kem. Any thrills they let into this club definitely won't be cheap."

Redflare drifted towards the lounge area, keeping an eye on Kem as the redhead moved in on Bright. Whatever his complaints, the hunter was a good actor; he slipped onto the bar stool next to the researcher and struck up a conversation. Bright turned and responded, and Redflare could see the gleam of interest in the man's expression.

Then, in an instant, everything changed. Desire was replaced by recognition, then fear in the researcher's eyes. He jumped to his feet, almost falling in his attempt to get away from Kemet, and bolted for the back of the club.

So much for playing it subtle.

## Chapter 16

Neither Redflare nor Kemet went charging off after Bright; they didn't want to put themselves in the middle of a scene. Unfortunately, Bright was making one all by himself. He stumbled at the edge of the dance floor, crashed into two people, and bounced away, staggering. More than one yelp of protest came from dancers thrown off-stride, and then it happened. One man, whose girlfriend had been knocked sprawling by the fleeing scientist, reached out one large hand and grabbed Bright by the shirt.

"Hey, buddy, when you blunder in and a lady gets hurt, you apologize. You don't go running off."

Redflare crossed the club smoothly, not hurrying. People's eyes were on their own business or on the scene on the dance floor. They weren't on him as he drifted up against the wall and pointed two fingers at Bright.

"Rimit," he commanded, firmly but not shouting, and for once the magician's luck was in. Bright's eyes rolled up in his head and he went limp, the suddenly dead weight of his body pulling him out of the dancer's grip.

Kem reached them then and clucked his tongue.

"Poor guy. Shouldn't have had anything here after those strikers at home. I'm sorry he blundered into you," he told the woman Bright had knocked down. "Guess he thought I'd be mad he went out for a few extra."

"He got a problem with the booze?"

Kemet shrugged.

"Not usually, but when he's under a lot of stress at work...well, you know how it is."

"Well, maybe I do."

Kem bent and pulled Bright up off the floor, slinging one arm over his shoulder.

"Hey, could somebody give me a hand? I've got to get Marty home."

Redflare took this as his cue and stepped forward. He and Kemet managed to get Bright out to their transport and tossed him inside.

"May I ask what happened?" Isis asked as she started the engine.

"He bolted, so Redflare hit him with Ye Olde Reliable Paralysis Tech and we did the drunk friend routine." With considerably more efficiency than the late, unlamented Vick had shown, Kem frisked the prisoner, removing phone and palmcomp, then locked Bright into technique-numbing plasmarings.

Isis frowned as she pulled out into traffic.

"Bolted? Do you mean that he resisted your advances?"

"No, I mean that he ran at the sight of me. I didn't think I was that ugly!"

"You were made," Redflare said. "He was scared; he knew your face."

Kemet blinked.

"That's impossible! He's never seen me before. He hired us through Garriner--that's half the reason there are fixers, to keep the veil of anonymity between client and hunter if they don't need face-to-face to do the job. I know I've never met the guy."

"He definitely wasn't the guy at the ambush, and he wasn't one of Holst's crew," Redflare mused thoughtfully. Idly, he spun a coin across the back of his knuckles, and something clicked in his brain. "Wait a minute. Garriner said that your team was specifically asked for by Bright, remember?"

"Yeah...oh. You mean that Nakagaki's little pet here might have had more information about us than merely names and rep. He, or his friend at SDE, might have had full dossiers, including holo-images or complete descriptions."

The thought made Redflare's skin creep. One of the few benefits of a street life was anonymity, that his life wasn't all laid out in some datafile for anyone to pick up and review. The idea that someone might have that information--especially someone who wanted him dead--chilled him to the core.

He could only imagine Kemet and Isis's reaction. As professional hunters, they had even more to lose, even if they got through this job with their lives.

"There are some very disturbing implications to what you say, Redflare," Isis pointed out. "If our client requested us by name and went to the trouble of obtaining complete information on us, it implies that there is some greater purpose behind it."

"They knew they were going to put us down," her brother said. "It could have been research to make sure they did the job right. Nah," he contradicted himself almost at once, "that won't fly."

"Why?" Kemet's statement sounded more like wishful thinking to Redflare.

"It's too complicated. No one is going to pick out a first-rank team of hunters--and we are a first-rank team, even if I do say so myself--by name and do a full-on investigation of us just to give them an edge in killing us later. It's a waste of manpower and resources. It'd be lots easier just to hire people who aren't as competent. I mean, let's be fair, we weren't asked to do anything particularly difficult."

Redflare nodded. The hard part of the job hadn't begun until after they'd started running for their lives.

"Well," he suggested, "why don't we ask the man himself, here."

Rimit wasn't the longest-lasting technique in a techmaster's arsenal; the fact that it was Redflare's best didn't improve that truth. Its other downside was that the paralyzed victim remained conscious.

Kemet nudged Bright in the side with his toe, not very hard.

"Okay, Marty, you heard the man. It's time for some explanations."

Bright's eyes opened, looking back and forth between his captors with a theatrical expression of terror on his face, a shudder running through his body.

"P-please," he stammered. "I'm a corporate executive. I can pay you for my release!"

Kem glanced at Redflare.

"You're the professional. What do you think?"

The street magician clucked his tongue.

"Overacted," he decided. "The eyes are okay, but the tone of voice really can't carry it. Scientific types just don't have the training to lie very well. I give this performance...two stars."

Redflare caught just the barest flash of anger in Bright's gaze. The fear was real, he decided, as it should be. He'd been captured by people he'd helped set up to be killed; only a fool wouldn't be scared in his position.

They'd already agreed not to take Bright back to the safehouse; Redflare's own experiences had showed just how easy it was for something to go badly wrong, and it would be a lot easier to abandon the vehicle than to find a new hideout. Especially with Holst, SDE security, possibly Nakagaki, and the ubiquitous "X" on their tail. Having a base of operations was vital. Losing it could mean everything.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gunter Holst had to admit that he was a man of the streets. He was born and raised in the arch', in the shadows cast by the corps and the slick, shiny facilities created by Mother Brain's government, but more than that, he liked it there. The grit, the grime, and the desperation were like a familiar tune playing over the audicast, the comfortable background music of his life.

Even though his team had been shot up, some of them being men he'd worked with in the past and liked, even though SDE's ice-witch was none too happy with his performance, the streets reached out and comforted him, drawing him in, calming his worry with their familiar sights and sounds. As the evening passed on he was spreading the word around, working his contacts, in his element. Sometimes his questions got blank stares, other times surly grunts. From these he moved on quickly; there was no point in wasting his time.

On other occasions he got glints of cupidity in a gaze, the greed of his fellow men. A bartender in a dive, a fixer in a corner booth, a dancer at a low-class strip joint. Holst weeded out the ones who knew something from the posers trying to make a cheap score off a sucker with the deftness of a predatory animal navigating its native environment, scenting its prey's spoor from among the many others in the terrain.

The break came from a weaselly little man in Neroton who was wrapped in a battered green canvas jacket, whose grimy hands shook and who licked his chapped lips almost constantly. A metachem addict, Holst decided, one who hadn't had his fix in a bit too long. A man who would sell his mother for the meseta to buy two little yellow pills of StarFlare, that chemical concoction which allowed a man to float among the secrets of the universe.

Also, however, a man who would lie to get those same two pills. Holst would have to be careful.

"Birt," he said, using the man's name. "Birt, look at me."

Birt half-turned from the fire crackling in the steel barrel he'd been contemplating. Holst could smell the stench of it, wondered what had been thrown into the can as fuel.

"Birt, I was told you could help me."

"Who-who-who says that?"

"Daxy down at the Purple Dream."

"Daxy's a friend-friend-friend," Birt giggles, then leered at Holst. "She dances real good."

Holst didn't bother with a comment on the quality of a dancer who took her clothes off in a club that a man like Birt was able to frequent. He wasn't so far removed from those days in which he'd twisted arms in such a place just to pump his ego.

"Daxy says you might know something that might help me." He showed the addict three twenty-meseta coins in his palm. Enough for two hits if the dealer didn't jack the price from Birt's desperation. "I'm willing to be friendly to someone who can help."

Birt's eyes lit up like twin suns at the sight of the money.

"You-you-you name it, it's yours," he said with pathetic eagerness.

Holst closed his fist around the coins.

"Two days ago, you saw some people around here. A Motavian, for one."

"Yeah! Don't get many fur-fur-furballs around here."

No, they didn't, Holst knew. Little Mota was halfway across town, and the Motavians who didn't live there either moved upscale to Downtown, Skyhaven, or one of the corp enclaves, or they bled across the district edges into Steeltown, Parolit Central, or the fringes of the Parolit Industrial Sector.

"Who was with this Motavian?" Holst asked.

"Guy," Birt answered. "Two guys."

"What did they look like?"

Somewhere not too far away, the evening was split by the scream of a siren. Holst's ears identified it as a medskimmer rather than the DLE. Cop sirens were deeper, more threatening in pitch.

Birt's face fell.

"It was two-two-two days ago!" There was the problem with addicts; their memories couldn't be trusted. His face suddenly brightened. "Red!" he exclaimed. "One was red, like this star, like the u-u-universe being born!"

Dream imagery, but Holst's heart jumped anyway. The most striking thing about Dace Maxwell's crew were the dark-skinned, red-haired twins, Kemet and Isis. Their hair caught the eye, even the bleary eye of a metachem user under the influence of his drug of choice.

"What else?"

Birt grabbed two handfuls of his greasy lavender hair and twisted it in frustration, as if trying to pull-start his abused brain. It was comical and gut-wrenchingly pathetic all at the same time.

"Cases!" he exclaimed. "Cases-cases-cases! They were carrying them--big, black, and hard!" Birt shuffled his feet in a kind of dance. "Does-does-does that help you?" he whined.

Holst smiled. Dace's team definitely included a first-class gridrider, and neon angels of that rank used VR rigs. That meant not only computer equipment but also the interface itself and all the attendant paraphernalia. Two or three cases' worth, at least.

He wondered if the Motavian was the gridrider; he hadn't known about the furball until he started asking around. In the anonymous world of the datanet, a gridrider might be anyone or anything.

"Where did you see these people?"

"Just up the street there, at Mama Russi's flop!"

Holst smiled at the man, opened his fist, and poured the coins into Birt's dirty hand.

"Thanks for the assistance," he said, though he doubted Birt even heard him, so lost was the addict in contemplation of the money. Holst strolled off, away from the boardinghouse Birt had named. About a block later, a long, broad skimmer glistening with too much fake flash glided up beside him. A door popped open, and he slid into the back seat. The vehicle belonged to SDE, local color for security ops. The female hunter, Case, was at the wheel, and three sec-troopers were the cargo.

"Okay, here's the deal. Guy says he saw them moving into Mama Russi's up the street a couple of days back, and he gave enough details to make me figure it's the straight stuff. We need to move on it now, before anything happens."

He surveyed the team. The troopers wore black carbonsuits with titanium armor and headgear. Each carried a combat shotgun for suppressive fire, a heavy sonic gun for single-target accuracy, and a ceramic knife if it came down to hand-to-hand. Intelligently, they'd removed their Sarranas identification, but they were unmistakably soldiers, not street thugs. Stealth was out as a strategy.

"Here's how we'll do it. Kurt," he nodded to one trooper, "will cover the rear alley and watch the kitchen door. If they try to make a run for it, tail but don't engage unless you can take them down," he instructed the secman.

"Got it."

"Bryson and Luke will go through the front door with me. I doubt we'll have trouble in this neighborhood. Case stays out front with the car. If they get by us, call it in. If they get in a vehicle, follow."

"All right."

"Let's make this clean. Remember, Yoshida would prefer to get the corpgirl back alive but she ain't insisting on it. We shoot first and ask questions later, because these people are too dangerous for games."

They moved out. The presence of armed troopers on the street raised eyebrows in interest, but not enough to get anyone scurrying to call the DLE. In Neroton, you didn't interfere in business that wasn't coming down on your own head. There was no reason for anyone to get involved, and Holst counted on that.

The trooper that had ducked down the alley to watch the back door, though, had different ideas. When he reached his position, he switched his commlink over to visiphone mode and made a call.

"Boss? That you?"

"Yes." The voice was most definitely not that of Reiko Yoshida.

"Holst found them. He's about to move in." He gave the address and summed up the tactical situation in a couple of sentences.

"Very well."

"What are you going to do?"

"That's not your concern. Just remember that your bonus depends on them escaping alive. I would advise you that your marksmanship should not be particularly notable."

## Chapter 17

Redflare scowled down at the figure of Martin Bright. A frightened prisoner, he looked pathetic and weak. The magician didn't like putting anyone in that kind of position. He needed to be strong, though, in order to make it through the tangle he'd ended up in. Scared or not, Bright had set them up to be killed, and was one of those responsible for Dace's death.

The latter thought made his sympathy wither and die like a leaf in a drought.

"Don't try to insult our intelligence, Bright. We know who you are. We know what you've done, and we know that you know we're the ones you did it to. Nobody here is going to appreciate the 'oh-me-oh-my-I'm-just-a-poor-little-scientist' routine, and if you try it we're just going to get more annoyed with you."

"Since our annoyance level is currently bordering on homicidal," Kemet added, "I'd really advise you not to push it.”

Bright didn't start whining, which was something at least, but he did fall back on the second most predictable response.

"If you, as you say, know who I am, then you also know that I work for Nakagaki Corporation. Do you really think that they'll take this kidnapping lying down? They'll root you out of the shadows where you hide and make sure each and every one of you is either arrested or killed."

Redflare glanced at Kem.

"It sounds like our friend here has comedic aspirations."

"Well, you know how it is. Marty probably figures if he can teach the lab rats to laugh at his jokes, he can do the same for people."

"This is hardly a joke--" Bright began, but Redflare interrupted.

"Of course it is. Right now, I'm in a better position with Nakagaki than you are. You've undermined the paratechnology project, which they've sunk a fair amount of capital into. You've also thrown their name around in connection with illegal business which they had nothing to do with. You're undermining their working relationship with SDE and given them a black mark in the underworld. You're a blot on their corporate honor and red ink in their account books. The only reason they'd take you away from us is because they might want to punish you themselves."

"Right now, though, our sense of humor is a little stressed out," Kem said, "so why don't we cut the crap and move on?" He smiled and patted Bright's cheek. "It might keep your pretty face intact, Marty."

"I wouldn't be so sure of yourself if I were--"

Bright was interrupted again, this time by Kemet's boot connecting with his breastbone, knocking him over onto his back. Kemet kept his foot in place, pinning the man to the van floor. The hunter's sonic gun was in his grip in a move so fast it could have been one of Redflare's sleight of hand tricks.

"My team leader, my friend, is dead because of you, you little sworm-kisser!" Kem snapped, the gun barrel shaking a little as his hand trembled with rage. He looked up at Redflare. "I say we gravestone him here and now, put him down and pick up our info from someone further up the food chain."

"Please try to restrain yourself," Isis contributed from the front seat. "Mr. Bright's information is, over the long run, more valuable than the benefits to be gained from revenge. In addition, bloodstains are extremely difficult to remove from automotive-quality carpeting."

Redflare noted that Isis's academy-professor voice was quite good for delivering threats. Everything was presented in so logical a fashion that it was eminently believable.

"What's the point? Sure, he knows stuff, but he's not telling us. All he's doing is running off at the mouth."

"Perhaps he merely failed to realize the seriousness of his position."

Kemet snarled down at the prisoner.

"All right, Marty boy. You heard the lady. You can either talk now, and I do mean right now, or I pull the trigger and save us all the trouble."

Bright's face was beaded with perspiration, his eyes consumed by fear.

"Look, all right, you've got me, but I can't tell you what you want to know, really!"

"Well, that's just too damn bad for you."

"No, really, please!" Bright squealed.

Kem pressed the gun to the prisoner's forehead.

"All right!" Bright screamed. "Look, you're right, I'm not doing this for Nakagaki. I only told Garriner that so the deal would look good."

"Who are you working with?" Redflare asked. "Who's your contact inside SDE?"

"I...I can't..."

"So we're back to that again?" Kemet said.

"Look--okay! Okay, I'll--"

Redflare's eyes widened. Bright's entire body seemed to have taken on a hazy aura, a shimmering not unlike what the magician had seen at the warehouse before the gangers had appeared. His back arched upwards off the floor, a strangled noise issued from his throat, and his eyes rolled up in his head. Then, the prisoner's body relaxed, and he sagged limply to the floor. His skin had turned a dull, pasty hue with strong grayish shadows throughout.

"Bloody hell!" Kemet cursed, checking Bright's pulse. "He's dead!"

\* \* \* \* \*

To say that Ashlyn Dumont was bored would have been an understatement. She did not consider herself a particularly restless person, but all her life she had been one to take action in her own interests. She was not one of those who waited passively, hoping that things would turn out all right. Unfortunately, that was exactly what she'd had to do. Nima was plugged into the datanet, lying back in her chair as if asleep. Not only was she working to try and save them, but in such a way that she was effectively as removed from the safehouse as the rest of the hunters. For all intents and purposes, Dumont was alone.

In truth, she was doing an important job, physical overwatch for the gridrider, but this job simply was not mentally compelling. Sentry duty never was, which was what made it so easy for too many sentries to be ambushed.

Ironically, though, it was a position of trust she'd been placed in. If Dumont had been intent on betrayal, she could open the door to enemy troops, call them up and try to strike a deal, or--if there was a reason to--simply take out her Executech and shoot the helpless Motavian. She'd known the hunters for less than a day, every one of them had formed the initial impression of her as a manipulative, cold-blooded corporate witch, and yet here she was, with the life of their most vulnerable member in her hands.

The feeling was extremely unusual.

Dumont wasn't exactly sure if it was a good or bad thing, and she was turning the matter over in her head when a phone beeped. It wasn't her personal visiphone, which she'd powered down anyway to prevent its location being triangulated by an SDE security gridrider hacking the PalmaCom network monitors. No, it was the room's unit, a cheap phone/holovid/audicast combination which flashed "Incoming Call" on its undersized holoscreen.

The thought twisted Dumont's stomach. None of the team would call the room phone; if someone was listening they could trace the physical location of the safehouse. They'd instead use their commlinks to talk to Nima via the datanet. The gridrider could easily set up a shell node to fool traces, or use one of any number of other sneaky measures.

There was only one way to find out. She deactivated the vid pickup and answered the call.

"Yes?"

The screen was as dark as the one her caller was looking at.

"You are in grave danger."

"I think you have the wrong number. We didn't order any crank calls."

"Ms. Dumont." Damn! He recognized my voice! This is bad. "I am not playing games. You have been located by SDE security forces. They are moving on your position even as we speak. If you wish to get away, I suggest you leave immediately. Take the back way; it's your safest route."

The screen flashed the ubiquitous "Call Terminated" icon. Dumont swore loudly and fluently, then looked over at the still-recumbent form of Nima.

"How am I supposed to wake you up?" she asked the Motavian, whom she expected couldn't hear a word she said. She could simply tear off the electrodes and other data connections, but not only could that lead to unexpected consequences on the datanet but there was also the possibility of triggering a dangerous biochemical reaction from the sudden loss of the VR stimulus.

"That's okay; I'll be with you in a second." Nima's face had flashed onto the phone.

"You hacked the phone."

"It's the closest thing I could get to a set of eyes and ears in the room...well, ears now that you've got the video feed off."

"Then you heard everything?"

"I did. It looks like we have a problem."

"The question is, how many problems?" the corporate executive mused, her mind following the twists of possible plot and counterplot. "The caller knows we're here. That's one problem. If the warning is real, it's two problems. It could just be a trick to try and herd us somewhere. Can you hack building security to see if there's anyone here?"

"I'm sorry; there isn't any that we know of, and if there are cameras that Dace and Isis missed, they're not accessible via the datanet. Wait a minute; I'll try the front desk phone."

\* \* \* \* \*

The boardinghouse lobby was small and shabby, barely ten feet square with a fake wood desk against one side, a threadbare carpet, and stairs going up. The desk was manned by a parody of an overweight, motherly woman, a broad mechanical body in dented blue-finish steel with a metal frame of "hair" supposed to resemble a cloud of curls but which looked more like a sawed-off globe. It wasn't an android; they were much more advanced in design as well as far too expensive for a dump like this. Some cheap joints used these low-end Luveno or Scion-Colesburg models as receptionists or bartenders who could work 24/7 and also act as bouncer. It was especially popular if the owner wasn't a sole proprietor but a small corp that owned several similar places, because they had the cash to buy the bot in the first place and make up the cost in later savings.

"Can I help you?" it asked in a tinny voice.

"Five people have a room here. One's a Motavian. Which room is it?"

"What makes it your business?"

Holst figured the bot was programmed to use mouthy responses instead of something like "I am not authorized to disclose that information." It probably played better for the clientele.

"If you tell us, we can go up and see the people we're after. If not, we'll have to start kicking in doors until we get the right one."

Holst wondered if the bot's AI was sophisticated enough to recognize and respond to threats.

"Don't make me come out and crack your skulls."

Apparently it was.

The two secmen drew their shotguns and leveled them at the robot.

"That ain't gonna happen. One last time, what room?"

Robots did not include self-preservation as a motive for action. Even androids and other independent AIs did not put it very high on their personality priorities. The threat wasn't "comply or die"; it was "comply or we'll destroy management assets and screw with this fleabag's cash flow." Again, the key question was whether the robot was capable of analyzing and processing the concept.

If it wasn't, well, that was why the sec-troopers were armed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nima and Dumont didn't get to see how things turned out at the desk. In fact, they hadn't even waited to see it start. Nima had hacked the visiphone behind the desk and rechanneled its vid pickup to the room phone. Dumont had recognized Gunter Holst's face from when they'd rescued Redflare, and Nima had logged off at once. She packed up her computer and interface rig with a quick efficiency that spoke of long practice; the cables were unhooked, the power disconnected, and the unit folded and stored in the three cases designed for that purpose in less than two minutes. There wasn't much else to pack. They were leaving behind fingerprints, genetic data, and other material, but that didn't matter--the enemy already knew their identities and certainly weren't collecting evidence for a court case!

Two of the cases were soft-sided, with shoulder straps. Nima gave one to Dumont, slung the second over her left shoulder, picked up the third case, and headed towards the door.

"You don't have a weapon?" Dumont asked.

"No; I don't usually carry one. I don't go into the field with the team."

"Here." Dumont took out her sonic gun and handed it to the gridrider, who clenched her furry fingers around it.

"What about you?"

"I have techniques that will hit harder than the gun, and I can't use both at once." She didn't mention that tech use took a moment's concentration to focus the energies and that sometimes a gun was more efficient. It was hard enough to convince herself to give up the weapon without saying the arguments against it out loud.

"Either way, we're in trouble against those troopers. Let's bail."

"Do we believe the tip about the back way?"

"The caller was right about SDE finding us."

"It could be a double-blind, guess we were aware of them and get us to run into a trap," Dumont countered.

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"Good point."

The boardinghouse didn't have a fire escape on each window, but there was a flight of stairs which led to the alley out back. The two women cautiously moved into the hall. Nothing was happening, though they heard shouting from downstairs, so they hurried to the door to the back stairs. Nima hustled down the empty, uncarpeted concrete steps with Dumont on her heels. The Motavian threw her weight against the door bar, pushing it open. She led the way into the dim and dank alley.

The armored trooper waiting there seemed almost as surprised as the women were. At least, he gave a sudden jerk as he saw them, which caused the blast of microflechettes from his shotgun to go high.

Nima brought up the Executech, fired once, then again. Her shots missed wildly; she had not been lying when she'd claimed not to be skilled in battle. The attack served a purpose, though. Realizing he was facing armed enemies, the secman flung himself aside, and his second shot missed as well.

"Foi!"

Dumont's fire technique did not miss. The burst of flame exploded against the trooper's armored chest and knocked him over onto his back.

"Run!" she told Nima, and the Motavian obeyed, turning away from the secman and dashing down the alley as fast as her short legs could carry her. Dumont was right behind her. The laserlike Tsu technique did more damage than Foi, but it lacked the explosive force of the fire tech. The trooper got his wits about him quickly, due most likely to his armor protection, and the throaty boom of his shotgun sent a sick fear through her. The flechettes spanged harmlessly off the pavement behind the fleeing women, though, and in another moment they were out of the alley and into a side street. Nima reflexively turned to her left, away from the street out in front of the formerly-safehouse, no doubt wary of anyone that might have been left on guard out front. Part of Dumont expected to see the sleek shape of a corpsec skimmer blocking the narrow street, but there was nothing there but the dingy pavement, a few passerby assiduously minding their own business, and the litter that accumulated in Neroton groundways.

The lit icon of a Metro-Link terminal caught both women's eyes at once. They headed for it, and in minutes they were off the street, onto the train, and completely out of the district.

Two people had found them, Dumont thought nervously. Holst had, and so had the anonymous caller. If they could both do it once, how long would it take for them to do it again?

## Chapter 18

"This doesn't make any sense!" Kemet exclaimed, looking wild-eyed at the corpse of Martin Bright. "How can he be dead?"

"Do you think it could have been a heart attack, brought on by stress and fear, or some manner of brain trouble--a burst blood vessel, an aneurysm, or the like?" Isis wondered.

"This guy was barely out of diapers--yeah, yeah, I know, age isn't a barrier to poor health. Still and all--"

"I don't think it was natural causes," Redflare contributed.

"How come?"

Isis rounded a turn, and Bright's head lolled to one side.

"When the attack struck him, I saw something." He told them about the shimmering in the air, and how it reminded him of the ambush at the warehouse.

"I didn't see a thing," Kem said. "Then again, I didn't see anything at the warehouse, either."

Redflare looked at the hunter curiously.

"You didn't see it?"

"Nope. Then again, you're the techmaster around here. Tech-wise, I'm a ziphead."

"Do you believe Bright was killed by a new type of technique?" Isis asked.

Redflare nodded, a useless gesture since she couldn't see him.

"Yeah, I do. The guy at the warehouse was throwing around all kinds of new techniques, ones none of us have ever seen. That's our link to the paratech project, after all. Dumont's team was studying new uses of mystic force and that's exactly what we're seeing from the other side. Maybe they've come up with a technique that works on the mind. It stays dormant until you start to talk about a certain subject, but when you do it goes off, protecting the tech-user's secrets."

Kemet joined the brigade of nodders.

"It makes sense, at least. Kind of like how some hunters wear a cortical detonator. If they flatline, the detonator blasts their brain to jelly so someone can't grow an active-memory clone off the corpse and interrogate it about what the hunter was doing. I've never heard of anything like this new technique on the streets, though."

"That just ties it more firmly to our enemy, though," Isis pointed out, "since we know that is exactly the type of capability he possesses."

"It does tell us where Bright stands in the food chain, though," Redflare deduced. "Either he works for the SDE insider, or they both work for some third person, but he wasn't calling the shots."

"No, the boss doesn't usually need insurance to keep his mouth shut."

"That's kinda how I saw it. He's a front, probably sent to Garriner because he gave a layer of credibility to the whole thing. It doesn't work unless the headhunter buys it."

Kem put the gun away and dropped into a seat.

"There is one thing I do not quite understand," his sister observed.

"Only one?" he tossed back. Redflare had to suppress a grin, which given the fact that they were traveling with a dead man was a testament to the adaptability of his psyche. As, for that matter, was being able to think about the psyche at all, he realized.

"Why not simply hire someone to steal the project files? Why go to this extreme?"

They'd tossed that question around once before, Redflare recalled, and came up with answers that, thinking about them now, weren't too satisfactory.

"Could be too much datanet security, or maybe just that Dumont had an easy in to the computers." Gunter Holst aside, even Redflare was aware that a think-tank like SDE would have its best security on the computers. Especially if it was tied in with Nakagaki, who had cutting-edge encryption and viruses to provide a business partner for the protection of their mutual efforts. All Dumont had to do, by contrast, was to input her company passcode and the data was hers for the taking. That almost held together, Redflare decided.

Almost.

"I think we're still missing something," he said. "When you get down to it, this guy asked specifically for us." He indicated Bright, nudging the body with his toe. "He knew Kem on sight. There's something about us, the team, that's somehow important here."

"They wanted us dead at the warehouse," Kemet pointed out. "Maybe the one behind this wanted to link us to some third party. You know, leak files that we worked for so-and-so, making SDE and Nakagaki think that, say, IMVE ran off with the file while it was really going to Luveno?"

"Could be. You'd need pretty complete dossiers to pull off a stunt like that, right?"

"Certainly," Isis said. "The lies, moreover, would be best sheathed in as much verifiable data as possible--names, career notes, skill packages--in order to best sell the disinformation as fact."

"So that could be it. It wouldn't be that we were important, then, just that the other side was able to obtain information about us rather than some other team."

It had possibilities. At least it offered something of a solution. Redflare brushed the matter aside, though, almost at once instead of chewing it over further.

"Look, we've got other problems. We need to hook up with Nima and let her know what's going on, ditch this body somehow--"

"There's a couple of chop-shops I know that would take him, no questions asked."

Redflare winced.

"That's grotesque, Kem."

The red-haired hunter shrugged.

"Hey, not everyone can afford to have replacement parts cloned from scratch, especially on the shadow side where guys like that operate. Street docs ain't exactly swimming in Trimate to regrow stuff, either."

"I didn't say it didn't make sense, just that it was a little...well, nauseating."

"We've got to lose the body somehow, and it isn't like this is somebody's mother. He's the skag who set us up and got Dace killed!"

Redflare supposed that if a grisly posthumous revenge was all Kem could get, then that's what it had to be.

"Kemet? Redflare?" Isis interrupted their debate over practical street morality. "We have a problem."

"What now?"

"I've been trying to reach Nima over the commlink."

"And?"

"She isn't answering."

\* \* \* \* \*

"They're clear," Kurt said over his commlink. He'd already relayed the information to Holst and the other members of the hunter's team. The reply had been a curt, "Every unit's got a weak link. Looks like we found ours." The comment had made Kurt's blood boil. After all, he was sure he could have gravestoned them both, battle techniques or no battle techniques, if he'd actually tried to. The irony escaped him that as a traitor he was even more of a weak link than Holst believed. That fact could not pierce his armor of self-righteousness, though. Only anger was left as he made the call.

"That's good."

"Only two of them were here, the furball and Dumont. There was no sign of the rest."

"That made our intervention even more vital, for which I thank you."

"Yeah, well, the next time you've gotta 'intervene,' how about passing on that I'm not trying to kill them, okay? Sworm-kissing tech-user tried to fry me!"

"Are you alive?"

"Duh, yeah," Kurt shot back sarcastically.

"Uninjured?"

"Only thanks to my armor! It took most of the blast."

"Then what are you complaining about? SDE is paying you to take risks as a secman, after all. Just as I pay you to follow my orders instead of theirs. Or would you prefer that I terminate my arrangement with you?"

Kurt snarled, gritting his teeth.

"Don't get smart with me! I could tell plenty about you if I had to."

"Oh?"

"I'm sure Yoshida would love to hear about it."

The voice at the other end of the connection grew hard and tight.

"In the spirit of friendship and cooperation, Kurt, I'm going to forget that you ever said that."

"Don't get all--"

"In a confrontation between Yoshida and myself, one or the other of us might win, but I guarantee that you would lose. In truth, you have suffered no injuries except to your pride, and you are being well compensated for that. Therefore, I hardly see what you have to complain about."

The link disconnected. Kurt was at least bright enough not to call back.

Besides, he's right, the smug bastard. All I got was low-rated by that hunter trash, and the two K waiting for me are worth that at least.

If any part of his feelings were due to his guilt over accepting a bribe to be his contact's inside man, he wasn't admitting it. Especially not to himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now what do we do?" Dumont asked Nima as the Metro-Link car rumbled through the city. They'd changed cars twice, paying cash for their tokens. Luckily, Camineet wasn't like some cities, which required transit passes linked to a citizen ID. Dumont's ID would no doubt raise a red flag for datanet pursuers if she was stupid enough to log it into any of the public usage databases. Which she wasn't.

"The others are going to be going crazy with worry if they try to raise us on the commlink. I've got to get back online so I can access the wireless net and talk to them."

"Except to do that, we need a safe place where you can access the datanet. A public data terminal won't do."

Nima brightened at once.

"What did I say?" Dumont asked.

"If we need to hook up, we can just make a phone call!"

Sometimes, Dumont thought, it was the obvious solutions that were the best.

"So what's Redflare's number?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The vibration of his ringing visiphone startled Redflare. The last thing he expected was a call. He half presumed it would be more bad news, some SDE skag saying, "We've got your friends and the data; have a nice life." Luckily, it wasn't. Nima's blue-furred visage appeared as soon as he went to video mode.

"Thank goodness!" he exclaimed. "We've been worried sick. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, we got out just in time, both of us. We managed to save my comp, or at least most of it, and Ashlyn has her purse." Meaning, Redflare assumed, that the project files were still in their hands instead of the bad guys.

"What happened?"

"Holst tracked us down at the safehouse, together with a squad of sec-goons."

"SDE's troopers?"

"They weren't advertising, but I figure so. You haven't heard the bad part yet, though."

"It gets worse?"

"We only got out because somebody called the room and warned us. The caller knew Ashlyn's name and specifically identified the troopers as SDE secmen."

"Bloody heck!" Redflare cursed mildly, drawing a surprised look from Kem (whether at the expletive or the choice of words he didn't know). The magician's language tended to be a bit more temperate than his fellow hunters. "You know who that was, don't you?"

"She didn't recognize the voice."

Redflare shook his head.

"Nah, he could have been using a voice-mod or just be an errand boy. I meant the one sending the message in the first place. It's our mysterious X. The SDE insider. He or she was monitoring the security team's progress somehow and doesn't want them getting us before he or she does."

"How did things go with Bright?"

"Ugly," he summed it up. "We got nothing, except that they know way too much about us. If you guys have any old hideouts, I wouldn't use them. The Bane Spikes might end up knocking on our door."

"Okay; you find somewhere and we'll check back in."

"Actually," Redflare said, "I think I have an idea, someplace we can go."

"I thought you didn't want to risk any of our old safehouses."

He flashed the Motavian a wide, toothy smile.

"That's just it. It's got nothing to do with anything we've ever done together, any shadow biz at all."

Sometimes, there were benefits to not being a professional.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wulfeburne's master glared at him balefully.

"You assisted them. Two-thirds of my desire was within your grasp, and you assisted them to escape."

He could not suppress the shudder of fear that ran up and down his spine like the brush of a cold knife-point, but he shook his head in contradiction anyway.

"No, master. I helped them to escape from Gunter Holst and Yoshida, not from us."

"Explain yourself."

"Holst works for Yoshida. His record suggests that, once bought, he stays loyal until the job is completed or if he discovers that he has been betrayed by his employer. Yoshida is incorruptible, a modern-day knight who serves her liege with honor even if asked to commit dishonorable or criminal acts. Our inside people lack the corporate authority to remove Dumont and the files from Yoshida's custody. XD Kendrick will insist on re-installing the files on the mainframe, besides, which will put us back at square one in that respect."

Wulfeburne's master gave a hissing sigh.

"Ahh, I see then that you have been thinking your actions through, indeed." It was as close to an apology as Wulfeburne knew he would get.

"Now, instead, they're back out on the streets, running scared. My call will generate confusion and fear. So, too will the fact that Holst was able to locate them. They will act fast because of it. They'll have to, because time isn't on their side." He smiled darkly, an expression which delighted his master. "They'll make mistakes because of it, because they can't think things through, and it will make them vulnerable."

"Fear always does." The master's gaze transfixed Wulfeburne with its inescapable intensity. "You have, it seems, divined the nature of this situation. However, I have not yet heard from you what steps you intend to take to pursue our quarry."

"I plan to do nothing."

He'd expected to have to justify himself, but instead his statement was received with loud, cackling laughter.

"Excellent, Mr. Wulfeburne. You may yet prove to be a fit servant after all."

## Chapter 19

Redflare hadn't just been blowing smoke when he talked about the advantages of not being a professional hunter. Whomever had hired them for this jump obviously had solid intel on Dace's crew. That might extend to him as a part-timer, but of all of them his life, and specifically that part not associated with his hunter work, was the least likely to be in the hands of their adversaries. Particularly, he thought, since even if they did know what he did in his spare time the bad guys would be less likely to associate it with what the hunters might do in a crisis. Likewise, Holst and his SDE allies would be less likely to hunt him up. A whole different set of people had useful knowledge about the life of Redflare the magician than did about the team of hunters, so it would take time for them to reorient their thinking.

Of course, this was all dependent on Redflare being able to come through with a crash pad.

He didn't head for his own apartment. That would have been too obvious, and was the most likely fact about his personal life to show up in a datafile. Instead, he went to a location about two blocks away from it. The front window was dark, the door closed and locked, but that didn't turn him away. He took Isis and Kemet around back and knocked on the rear entrance. No one answered, so he hammered on the neowood again. This time it creaked open.

The guy on the other side was roughly as big as a Cooley-61 mining robot but not half as pretty. His electric yellow hair was cut in a shaggy mop, and his jaw sported a five-day stubble.

"Evening, Palkk," Redflare said easily, ignoring the scowl.

"Redflare." The smile broke into a wide grin. "Ain't seen ya in three, four days."

"Life's like that. Look, my friends and I need a place to crash for a day or so."

"A day?" He frowned. "That ain't so easy to arrange."

"We'll pay double the going rate for a crib, and since we're not here professionally, the boys upstairs get the whole take without the thrill's cut."

His brows narrowed.

"Ya ain't gonna bring trouble wit' ya? Word's out, ya know."

Redflare looked him in the eye, then shrugged.

"We won't make any for you and your guests. As far as any following us home, that's a different story. It's the last thing we want, though. Trouble for you means trouble for us."

"That ain't so easy," Palkk said, frowning thoughtfully--not the easiest look on a man with his facial type. He glanced from Redflare to Kemet to Isis, then back to the magician.

"I wish it could be, but I'm not going to lie to you and say it's a milk run. There's one other thing; we'll need a datanet jackpoint."

Palkk's scowl grew deeper.

"Hell, we owe ya, Redflare. Toni's still boss here 'cause of what ya did. Can't go back on that. I gotta tell her, though."

"That's all right." Toni wasn't a pal like the bouncer was, but she had a mostly-trustworthy sense of honor.

"Okay." Palkk stuck a paw out and Redflare paid over a full day's charge, doubled, in advance. No use looking like he couldn't keep up his end of the deal. Isis had given him the cash on the way over; if he was doing the talking it looked better if someone else didn't have to pay. Palkk let them inside, handed them a key tube for a cheap lock Isis could bypass in thirty seconds, and pointed them to a staircase leading up. "Room Eight."

"Thanks. I've got two more friends coming. One's a Motavian girl and the other's corporate. Just send them up, all right?"

"Yeah. Take it careful, pal."

"I wish you'd told me that three days ago."

They headed up the stairs, which like the walls were cheap imitation wood veneer. The soundproofing was rudimentary at best, so it was clear what was going on behind the doors of most of the six rooms on each of the two upper floors.

"Is this a favorite hangout of yours?" Kemet asked dryly.

"Funny, Kem."

"You do seem on pretty friendly terms with the bouncer," he said, white teeth flashing in the dim light. Room Eight was on the building's third floor; Redflare inserted the tube in the lock and opened the door.

"Downstairs, Kemet, not upstairs."

The room contained a bed, a table, two chairs, and a visiphone/holovid unit. Nothing was expensive, but the place was kept reasonably clean and free of any obvious stains or spills. The carpet, drapes, and bedspread were all a rich red, and the table topped with a better quality of fake wood veneer than the walls.

"Is there a casino in the basement?" Isis asked after shutting the door behind them.

"Uh-huh."

"How did you know?" Kem asked his sister.

"The bouncer had two scars in an X pattern in the saddle of his right hand, between thumb and forefinger. That marks him as a member of the Cross Scar syndicate. A syndicate would not go to the trouble of disguising a brothel behind a fake front of shops, especially in this neighborhood. There had to be another reason for the concealment, and an illegal gambling parlor seemed to be the most likely. It would go together with prostitution as a way to get back some of the money the house loses to winners."

"Very logical, and you're right."

"Thank you. I was unaware that you possessed syndicate connections, Redflare."

The magician dropped into a chair and sighed.

"I don't--at least, not in the way you mean. One of this place's dealers was running a three-card monte scam on this street, and I scammed him right back. He called out the heavies, but they were more impressed by the way my sleight-of-hand had fooled the dealer than they were interested in denting my spine. I figure they weren't too happy with him for risking their operations with petty street crime."

"So why did that guy say they owe you?"

"They brought me in, and had me check their casino out, because they'd been losing a bit much. I spotted the scam and saved the Cross Scar a few thousand meseta a week because of it. I have a feeling it also kept Toni, the manager, out of trouble with the higher-ups. So, she owes me more than what the job was worth."

Kemet shrugged.

"Well, it's basically anonymous, and if the goon squad does try to break in they'll have to go through Palkk and whatever syndicate gunjacks are around, so it looks like a good idea. Nice work."

Nobody said much of anything else until there was a knock on the door--two short, two long, and two short, apparently an "it's okay" message among the team--and they opened the door to admit Nima and Dumont. The latter wrinkled her nose as she walked in.

"Redflare, you know the most charming places."

"My apologies, fair Ashlyn, but you are not the first to mention that fact."

"Or in other words, we already did that bit," Redflare translated.

"Rats," Nima chirped. "I'd have liked to hear how you have connections with one of the bigger syndicates." She gave the phone unit and its data connection the once-over, then started unpacking her computer gear. "Oh, well, it's probably better that you catch us up on what happened to Bright."

"You know almost as much as we do," Redflare explained. Dumont and Isis took the other two chairs while Kemet sat cross-legged on the bed. "He recognized Kemet almost as soon as he was approached, but we caught him anyway without too much fuss. Only, when Kem managed to convince him that it would be in his best interests to talk--"

"In my own inimitable style, thank you."

Redflare marveled once again at how the red-haired hunter could switch back and forth from street argot to the flowery dialogue of a holovid romance hero, then continued.

"--he died. The best guess we have is that it was some kind of new technique which kills a person when they're about to reveal certain information."

Dumont shook her head in amazement.

"I wish our project had come up with that technique. Corporate security divisions would be lining up to purchase the method for it. We'd have made a fortune."

Redflare stared at her, wide-eyed.

"Ashlyn, you're a genius!"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?" she replied, a wry smile dancing on her lips.

"It's the corporate attitude. We don't have that. We're all coming at the problem from the street perspective, but you aren't. You may have jumped, but you still think like an R&D exec."

Nima looked up from the computer components she was wiring up.

"Could you make that a little clearer, magic man?"

"Okay. What's the most obvious fact about our enemy? The brand-new techs we keep seeing. Like Ashlyn said, though, these techniques would be worth a heap of meseta on the open market. That's why Nakagaki is willing to sink cash and talent into the paratech project, because they figure it will pay them back in profits. Syndicates operate the same way, for money. Our enemies aren't corp or organized crime, not if they're hoarding all this power for their own use instead of selling it."

"That makes sense," Isis reflected. "Our enemy's motivation does not appear to be primarily financial."

"Which ties in with what Nima found about the Bane Spikes' recent activities," Redflare went on. "If we assume their current client is still in control, that's a direct link with magic and techniques, from historical artifacts to the most modern new research."

"We covered that link before."

"Yeah, Kem, but we didn't think about what it means."

Dumont crossed her legs.

"If I understand correctly, you think we're facing, what? A terrorist group with an Esper fetish?"

She made it sound like an overgrown tech-gang, which Redflare supposed was essentially what he'd been thinking of. The WizKids hadn't been about the money from their crimes, not even about protection from the Court's predators and a sense of belonging like most gangs. It went beyond that, a way to live life in a different way, to go beyond the dirty streets, shadowed alleys, and crumbling tenements of the urban jungle. Wasn't that what terrorists wanted, too, only by taking proactive steps to change the world to suit their particular obsession? Like Neo Green, who wanted to level the archopoli and return Palm to an agrarian society where the ultimate expressions of technology were the lever, the wheel, and the pulley?

"Basically, yeah, that is what I mean. I don't know what their political ends are, but it seems clear that they're seeking mystic power--and developing it as well, to judge by the new techs."

Nima tapped a couple of keys and her screen sprang to life.

"I had to leave the straps back in the safehouse, so I'm just going to try standard access without VR for now. I don't need to get fancy just yet." She looked up at Redflare and said, "Does that get us anywhere, what you're saying?"

"Probably not, but I think it points us in the right direction."

"It does help to establish precisely who wants one dead when trying to prevent it," Isis concurred.

Nima's fingers, meanwhile, were flying over the keyboard, which was ergonomically designed for a Motavian's thicker fingertips. The computer gave a happy beep, which it never did when she used the VR rig.

"Good news?" Redflare asked.

"Yes! Angel finished digging up that extra background on Bright for me. Let me just...ah! There we go. File retrieved. Let me just link up to the visiphone and I'll...there!" The visiphone screen flashed on, showing a duplicate of what was on the computer's display. "It feels so weird doing things this way, in the real world."

"Just so long as it works. What have we got here?"

"Well, most of Bright's personnel jacket is pretty standard, and conforms to what's in non-Nakagaki databases, nothing there. Angel flagged his phone records for me, though, so..." She made a few keystrokes and a window popped up. "The key data is about three months ago, here."

The screen scrolled down; Redflare saw the point almost at once. Before the three-month date, the average number of calls on Bright's home unit was almost double what it had fallen to. Several names were flagged in bright yellow.

"Why are those names marked?"

"For nearly a year prior to the three-month date, these were the most common numbers called, except for food orders. Hm, he liked Motavian cooking; I can't fault his taste. Anyway, after the three-month point, nothing. Not one call to these numbers. Angel jammed with the phone company records, and guess what? The exact same thing happened to all of these marked people on their records."

The unusual always excited Redflare. Sometimes it was flash, to distract, but sometimes...

"Who are these people?"

"Suits, one and all. Peter Gaffney of Nakagaki. Jason Wulfeburne is with Daisho Investments, part of the Daisho Palm-Mota Combine. Arlayne Corliss is the token female; she's on the Board of Trustees of Camineet Academy and is a former employee of Sarranas. Bright we know, of course. Then there's Adam Bainbridge. He was with Greenvale Expedition and Research, which is kind of like SDE but instead of being independent is owned by Alliance Oil. He's dead now, and guess when?" Nima's ears twitched.

"The same day three months ago that all the phone calls stopped?"

"It must be magic. According to Angel Red, the DLE classifies this death as a homicide, currently unsolved."

"That's too big a coincidence to ignore, but I still don't see how it links to our current problems."

"I was saving the punchline for last," Nima admitted. "There's one more name on the list."

"Do tell," Kemet said. "Keep us not in suspense."

She made a growly-click noise deep in her throat which Redflare suspected was something akin to blowing a raspberry or giving someone the finger.

"Save the flirting. The last one is from SDE, and not just anyone. His name is Paul Herrod, and he's--"

"Research and Development Division Chief," Dumont finished for her. "In other words, my former boss."

## Chapter 20

"The head of the R&D division." Redflare shook his head in amazement. "We knew the insider at SDE had to be highly placed, but it's still a shock."

Dumont smiled wryly.

"You're telling me. Herrod has complete access to any of the R&D projects. He could have copied the files and erased them from the system as easily as I did. Why bother running me through all this and setting us up?"

Isis tilted her head thoughtfully to one side.

"Perhaps a scapegoat was needed. Certainly by now, Sarranas would not suspect anyone but you of stealing the project files."

"A diversion," Redflare mused. "That's good, Isis. In fact, if I was Herrod, I'd have made myself a fresh set of copies before Ashlyn could get to them. That way, even if something unfortunate happens to the file copies we have, he still has a set to deliver."

"For someone who isn't a hunter, you seem to have a tight grasp of corporate intrigue," Dumont remarked approvingly.

"I don't. It's basic magical theory." He held up a coin and spun it across the back of his knuckles. "Keep the audience, in this case SDE security, focused on what one hand is doing, and by the time the diversion is over..." The coin suddenly disappeared; Redflare opened his hand, showing that it was empty. "No one has any notion what your other hand's been up to."

He raised his other hand. Dangling from his fingers was Dumont's wrist chron. Redflare dropped it into her palm.

"The principles of street magic seem to apply quite well to this kind of business."

"It's all about controlling deception, how to make people think one thing while you're doing another. The only thing is, the corps do it for money and power, and I just do it to entertain."

"I see." Something enigmatic seemed to flicker in the depths of her gaze.

"So," Kemet chimed in, "since we seem to have spotted Herrod slipping the card up his sleeve, what do we do to make sure nobody applauds?"

"We go after him. Ashlyn, is there anything we think the SDE insider has done that Herrod doesn't have the capability to pull off?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing. He'd have the authority to lower security on me. He's certainly in a position to judge the value of the project and to evaluate how I'd react to an offer from Nakagaki. A good manager has to know those working under him and Herrod is definitely a good administrator. Likewise, he could find out what sec-agents were being assigned to aid Holst and influence one." She frowned sourly. "Our escape seemed a little too pat. No wonder the caller knew that the back would be clear; that trooper must have been paid to miss."

"Dace or Kem probably would have known right away just from how the guy fought," Nima remarked sourly. "We didn't have a clue."

"We're not trained fighters."

"That's why we've got a team. Everybody brings their own skills to the table," Kem encouraged.

"It wasn't Herrod's voice on the visiphone," Dumont remarked. "I'd have recognized him almost at once."

"He'd have known that and used a voice-mod, which would be easy enough to apply over a digital signal," Isis deduced. "Or, he might simply have had an underling make the call."

Something flickered in Dumont's face, and then she cursed.

"Damn it!" exploded from her lips. "I do recognize the voice. It was the bastard from the warehouse, the tech-user!"

"And that ties it all up in a nice, neat package," Redflare concluded. "I wonder if our blue-haired friend is one of the six? Bainbridge is dead and Corliss female, so he'd have to be either Gaffney or Wulfeburne. Can we check them out?"

Nima's head bobbed.

"Oh, sure. These are all nice, upstanding citizens, who will have citizen and corporate IDs on file, with pictures. There's a dozen perfectly easy ways to get a picture of someone like that if you have a name or identification number." Her paws rattled over the keyboard. "In fact, it's even easier that that. Angel appended their public data to the file: height, weight, age, address, and picture. This one's Gaffney."

No one recognized the lean, ascetic face, though even in the file image the burning intensity of his eyes suggested fanaticism. All of the hunters could tell that anyone with that much passion about anything was dangerous.

"And this is Wulfeburne."

Contact. Recognition was instantaneous for everyone except Nima. They all knew him as the tech-user who wielded new and powerful abilities, the man who'd overseen Dace Maxwell's death. Jason Wulfeburne. The name burned itself irrevocably into four minds, a symbol of everything they had lost at the hands of these manipulators.

"Oh yeah," Kemet said. "That's him."

"It all holds together," his twin added. "Bright to Wulfeburne to Herrod."

"I don't exactly have an MBM," Redflare stated, "but if I've got my corp rankings right, Herrod's the senior man, isn't he?"

"Ostensibly," Dumont agreed, "although on occasion someone's position is out of line--high or low--from their status. Especially when we start talking black ops and under-the-table interests."

"How about age?"

Nima consulted the datafile.

"He's 54. Bainbridge was the next oldest at 46. None of the others are out of their thirties."

"Senior in age, senior in position. Sounds to me like a good candidate for the boss of this little group."

"Maybe," Kemet grunted. "With terrorists and their kind, you can never really tell what drives them."

Dumont shook her head.

"You're right, but I think Redflare is too. Herrod is the kind of man who delights in being in control, and to give him his due, he's good at it. He's one of those people whom everyone just tends to trust, a natural leader. Sooner or later we assumed he'd wind up as an XD, if not at SDE then somewhere."

"Maybe that's his in. Whatever he and his little group are up to, he's got the top slot."

Kemet got to his feet in a sudden, spasmodic movement.

"Who cares what he's doing? The guy to go after is Wulfeburne, right? Hell, Redflare, you were Dace's friend since you were kids. You ought to be the first one in line to take this skag out!"

"Kem..." his sister began.

"Don't give me that look, Isis. Nima's pal came through with the name and address of Dace's killer for us, and nobody cares! Redflare and the corpbitch just shrug it off and keep playing the who's-in-charge game and analyzing the other bastard's psyche. Who gives a damn? Let's take the sworm-kisser down and if there's other biz to mop up later then so be it."

His gaze swept back and forth between Nima and Isis, trying to draw them in to what he was saying.

Redflare slid out from behind the table and rose to his feet, a fist clenching in his gut. He hadn't realized there was such anger building up inside Kemet. Had he somehow missed the signs? He was sure that he must have; the red-haired hunter was volatile, not repressed. It had been right there in his treatment of Martin Bright. Belatedly, Redflare understood that Kem had not been playing "bad cop" but had been completely serious. Was he getting so used to looking for deception and illusion that he couldn't see truth when it stared him in the face?

And, his conscience tickled him; was he getting too close to Ashlyn Dumont since she'd helped rescue him from Holst's gunjacks? Was he really starting, because of that one action, to view her in a different and unjustified way? Or was the mistake Kemet's, for clinging to his first impression of her?

"Look," he told Kemet, holding his hands up placatingly, "we all want vengeance here--"

"Do we? I don't bloody think so. If you really gave a damn about your friend, you'd want to make sure his killer pays instead of worrying about the job!"

There were probably a number of sane and sensible things that Redflare could have said to settle and calm the hunter. Kem wasn't the only one who was wound tightly, though. Redflare had lost a friend, been turned into the prize in a corporate fox-hunt, and had a leadership role thrust upon him, none of which he'd been prepared to deal with. He'd been maintaining control, but when Kemet pushed, he pushed back.

"And if you gave a damn about the lives of your sister and the friends you've got left, you'd stop and think about what you're doing instead of trying to get them killed, too!"

They say that the hand is quicker than the eye, and in the case of someone as fast as Kemet it was certainly true. Redflare didn't even see the fist clench before it crashed into his jaw, sending him bouncing off the wall. Stars swam in the magician's head, more as a result of striking the wall than from the punch. Kemet grabbed him by the vest and shoved him hard up against the thin barrier between rooms. He was shouting something in Redflare's face, but the magician couldn't be sure of quite what. Dumont and Nima actually leapt to their feet, pulling Kemet off Redflare bodily. The hunter twisted away and would have gone for him again, but Isis blocked her brother's path, standing between the two of them.

"Stop it!" she snapped, her scarlet eyes flashing, her beautiful face curved into a snarl of anger. She looked like a representation of a pagan warrior goddess from a fantasy holovid. "You two are acting like fools! We are being hunted by corporate security as well as by whatever resources the conspirators possess, and you choose to butt heads like male sphinxes in mating season! Men can be such idiots!"

Isis took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Redflare, explain why you think pursuing Wulfeburne is a bad idea."

"Isis--"

"Shut up, Kemet!" she ordered her brother.

Redflare spat out blood; he'd cut the inside of his cheek on a tooth when Kemet had hit him.

"He's not the one we want."

Kem was about to say something else, but Isis glared warningly at him and his mouth snapped shut. Dumont grinned wryly at the sight.

"The one who actually killed Dace was a ganger. Wulfeburne's technique knocked him out, but one of the Bane Spikes actually used the knife."

"No one gives a damn about that," Kemet cursed. "We want the one giving the orders. Those gangers were just Wulfeburne's tools to do the job with."

"Yeah, and Wulfeburne was just somebody else's tool. The big man doesn't do his own assassinations, right? He sends his flunkies. Wulfeburne is middle management, a field commander over the bodyguards and gangers, but he was taking orders from somebody else. It's the one giving the orders I want to make pay. I want whomever woke up one morning and said, 'Let's sacrifice a team of hunters to make this job work.' What's more, we're all five of us in major trouble here. Revenge won't mean anything if we're all dead. Taking out flunkies won't get us out of that trap. We have to derail their entire operation and then find a way to get SDE off our backsides. If we could figure an easy way to take Wulfeburne off the board without jeopardizing the rest of our goals I'd say, do it--with his new techs he's dangerous.

He met the gazes of Kemet and the three women in turn.

"I just don't see that easy way, so I say skip him and move on to Herrod. Herrod may be the leader, but even if he isn't he has a lot of information about what went on inside SDE. If we can get it out of him without him dying on us."

"It won't be easy," Dumont remarked. "Herrod has a luxury condo in Skyhaven. Not only is there private security, but the DLE also cares about what happens in that part of town."

"That's all the more reason to skip the sideshow. If we don't, we're pretty well out of chances. Holst's already managed to find us twice, and our six-now five-friends once." Redflare held Kem's gaze, ignoring the others, even though it was Nima and especially Isis who would really make the decision. He'd included them before, but now was just for himself and the hunter. Keep the audience in, but when you work with a volunteer, that's the one to focus on when you give him his part. It was astonishing, really, how many basic lessons of magic applied to being a high-grade technomercenary. "I don't know how this usually goes, but that seems a few too many times for me."

"It is," Isis said. "We're lucky to be alive now. The warehouse, the park, and Mama Russi's. Three separate times we've mananged to slip away, and we lost Dace on the first and had you captured on the second."

"Part of it is that we're a good team. Another part is that Ashlyn is pitching in usefully, in a big way." Redflare didn't spell out that she'd been why they'd escaped Wulfeburne and the Bane Spikes, or that she'd been vital in rescuing him from Holst. Reminding Kemet was enough; there was no need to rub his face in it. "There's also been a lot of luck involved too. SDE and our 'clients' will correct for the first two factors, and we can't push our luck forever. We have to act quickly and decisively, before someone else does. And," he emphasized, "we can't take the time to let side trips get in our way, or we're all dead. That's why I say, we move on Herrod and forget Wulfeburne for now."

The two men looked at each other. Did he have Kemet, Redflare asked himself? Or was he staring at someone who thought the magician was full of it?

Isis didn't wait to find out.

"Redflare is right, Kemet," she said flatly. No equivocations--but then, Isis was about as unequivocal a woman as there was. "If we are going to make vengeance a priority besides mere survival--and I agree with you that we should--it needs to be the one at the top who pays. We do not need to expend our limited resources on a person who lacks decision-making authority."

"Yeah," Nima agreed. "What she said."

Kem sighed.

"Okay," he admitted. "You've got a point. Odds are, Wulfeburne's just a high-grade flunky, like, well, us."

He returned Redflare's gaze, measure for measure.

"Guess I owe you an apology, magic man."

Redflare rubbed his stinging jaw.

"I guess you do. That's a nasty right you've got."

"Hell, I made a complete idiot of myself, didn't I?"

"Pretty much," the magician agreed. "I didn't realize you were that stoked for payback."

"Dace was a friend, but he was more than that. Isis and I've run with his crew for six years now. That's bloody forever on the streets. She was always tops, but me, I'd be one of those skags you went around with back in Ossale Court if we hadn't made the connection. It's 'cause of Dace I'm more than just a muscleboy. What's more, he's pulled us all through a bunch of tough spots, more than I can count. We didn't make him the boss just 'cause he looks the part, after all. I've got a major jones for gravestoning the bastard who put him down. Especially because we were sold out, and it wasn't some cop or sec-guard just doing their job."

Redflare nodded, but kept his eyes on Kemet's. They still had something to settle.

"So what's your problem with me?"

"You've got to ask? You may have been Dace's bud from way back, but you ain't one of us. Ever since Dace went down, you've been making the calls, giving the orders, and you aren't even one of the team."

"That is because we were all too stunned by Dace's death to select an original course of action, and you, Nima, and I are all used to the role of the follower," his sister explained. "In a crisis, we acted reflexively, turning to another for direction. Redflare had the role thrust upon him by our inaction, not because he sought to usurp it."

Kemet held up his hands.

"Hey, Isis, I know that. I'm just talking about how my gut feels, not whether it's right or wrong." He turned back to Redflare. "Honestly, you're doing a good job. You're not the same guy now that you used to be, or at least you don't sound like it. Hell, you're picking up on stuff that's going right over my head."

He shook that head ruefully, looking down rather than up.

"Just try and tell my instincts that, though. All they see is a guy who isn't even a full-time pro telling me my biz. Fact is, though, like Isis said, you were right and my gut was wrong. I just wanted Wulfeburne 'cause he ran the show when Dace got gravestoned. I wasn't thinking about it. I just wanted him dead."

"And here I was, a street magician, telling an experienced hunter like yourself how to handle your own revenge."

"Yeah. You and Miss Corp here." He jerked a thumb in Dumont's direction. "Basic rule of a jump is you don't take orders from the package, they take orders from you if they want to get where they want to go without getting taken out by corpsec."

"Except," the blonde remarked, almost gently, "this isn't really a jump, not anymore."

"Yeah, I know."

"There's no need to apologize for what you said earlier, though. I've always prided myself on being a cold bitch. Professionally, that is."

The laughter was instantaneous, although it had a nervous edge since no one could be sure how much of what she said was meant to be funny. Still, it did a good job of breaking up what tension had been left over.

"Look," Kemet said to Redflare when they'd regained their breath. He ran a hand through his hair and started again. "Look, all I know is if I take the time to think it over, you've been on your game in a bunch of ways that I haven't. If you say Herrod is the guy to go after, then let's do it."

He stuck out his hand and, after a second, Redflare took it. Isis nodded approvingly, maybe at one or the other, maybe at both.

"There's just one thing," Kem added.

"What?"

"If we're going after Herrod, let's get his backside! I don't want to have to admit you're right enough to try him twice."

## Chapter 23

Breaking and entering was an art form, one involving not merely technology but quick thinking, guts, and planning. The fact that Nima could make the Fairlane Building's security sit up and dance the pao-pao if she wanted it to was a nice advantage but hardly the end of the war. Witnesses and armed guards were not subject to hacking, and if a Wren saw Redflare and the crew engaged in illegal activity it wouldn't matter if the alarms weren't flashing. It would shoot first and repair the sec-system later.

For example, it was entirely possible that Nima could insert names into the sec-database, allowing the team to walk in through the front door. That plan had three flaws, though. There were bound to be witnesses, who might remember them later, or who might recognize Redflare or Isis as the phone company workers. Second, they wouldn't be able to carry obvious equipment like commlinks, heavy guns, or combat armor through the front lobby without raising eyebrows. Thirdly, it was entirely possible that Herrod had stationed people in the building to watch for Dumont or the hunters. He knew a lot about them, and it wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine them making a move against him if they learned his identity.

For all I know, Redflare mused glumly, someone saw and recognized us this afternoon. There was no chance to bail out now, though. They'd just have to hope.

The blue-white sparks from the laser cutter in Kemet's hands testified to the alternative method of entry they'd chosen: up through the floor through a utility access panel.

"I'm surprised that no one's ever tried this before," Dumont murmured.

"Oh, they have," Nima told them happily. "In 1271 a B&E team did exactly this, and walked right into the arms of a DLE unit. The floor is rigged with heat and pressure sensors that could pick you up seconds after you started cutting."

"In that case, thanks for shutting them down," Kemet answered. He powered down the cutter, then disengaged the suction clamps that had kept the section of flooring from falling onto his face while he worked, and lifted the circular steel plate up and into the basement. Making as little noise as possible, he slid it aside, then squirmed up into the room, followed by Redflare, Isis, and lastly Dumont.

The basement had changed little from when Redflare and Isis had visited it during daylight hours. This time, though, Nima had a complete three-dimensional model of the building in her computer and guided them effortlessly to a staircase which, unlike the one they'd used before, connected to the upper floors.

"We've got to go up seventeen flights?" Redflare verified.

"That's right. The suite is number 1706."

"Why can't the bad guys ever live on the ground floor?" he muttered, then pulled the door open.

For the next couple of minutes all they heard was the rhythmic pounding of feet as they proceeded up the stairs. This wasn't a race; they didn't sprint as fast as they could but took it slow and easy. Redflare and Dumont both appreciated it, neither being in combat-honed condition. At last they reached the seventeenth floor.

"The door's locked," the magician reported. "Looks like a card key is needed. Can you pop it for us, Nima?"

"Sorry; it's not wired to the system."

"Come again?"

"The sec-system sets off an alarm if the lock's broken or forced, but the operation itself is strictly local, and the system can't cause it to release."

"That's whacked," Kem concluded. "If the elevators fail, the residents could be trapped in their fancy digs."

"The lock is only on your side of the door. It's to prevent exactly what we're doing, not to stop emergency access. That's why there's no lock on the first floor--only."

"Well, then, my faith in architects has been restored."

Isis stepped in and went to work on the lock. Without the threat of triggering a security alert to worry about, she soon convinced it to give up its prize.

"It's unlocked," she announced.

"Hold on a minute," Nima told them. "There's a woman coming out of 1707. She'll see you if you come out now."

They waited tensely, hoping the woman wasn't the type of person who walked up and down stairs as a fitness boost. The door wasn't soundproof; Redflare actually heard her walk past with a soft shuffle of feet on an undoubtedly carpeted floor.

"All right, she's at the elevator..." Nima updated. "There's the door--good service around here, I must say."

"I'll keep that in mind if I'm ever shopping for a home among the rich and corporate."

"Are all magicians this mouthy?"

"Pretty much, yes. It's a witty and outgoing profession."

"Witty in your own mind, maybe. Anyway, you're clear."

They pushed open the door, emerging into a nicely outfitted corridor with wood trim--real wood--on the walls and a soothing burgundy carpet. Following Nima's directions, they went to their right, then around a corner to come to the door of suite 1706.

"Do you know if Herrod is home?" Redflare asked.

"I'm sorry; there aren't any security cameras inside the suite itself."

"What about the main desk log?" Dumont suggested. "It should track the coming and going of residents and their guests."

"That would drive me nuts," Kemet said, "some computer tracking my coming and going, not to mention what friends I see."

"All part of the appeal of a high-security building," Dumont told him dryly.

"I'm checking it now," Nima reported. "The log shows Paul Herrod arriving at 9:53 P.M. He's got company, too. Arlayne Corliss is logged in at 10:02."

"Three hours ago," Kem muttered. "Could Mr. Herrod be up to another scheme, or is he mixing business with pleasure?"

"Let's find out. Isis?"

"I'll do my best."

She took a bit longer on the suite door than she had on the stairs, but it was still a matter of less than two minutes before the indicator turned green with a happy beep.

Kemet went in fast and hard, commando-style, his sonic guns flickering into his hands. The others followed, ready to provide covering fire with weapons or techniques. The foyer was empty, lit by soft light providing a minimum of intrusion while still affording visibility. The hall beyond was the same, but they could hear voices from beyond, music and speech together which meant some kind of broadcast, a holovid maybe. The hunters slipped cautiously through the main living area towards an alcove set up with a first-class entertainment system. A large sofa faced the holoscreen, away from the rest of the room. Two figures were entwined on the couch, the man's arm around the woman's shoulders.

The twins moved instantly, pressing their guns to the base of each person's skull.

"If you so much as raise your voice without permission, we will kill you and be happy about it," Kemet threatened. "Now, stand up slowly, turn around, and come out to the center of the room."

Sensibly, the two obeyed. As they turned, Redflare could see that they were in fact Herrod and Corliss. Both wore only robes in a satiny black fabric that shimmered in the low light as they moved.

"So," Herrod remarked, his manner cool, even suave despite the sonic gun pointed at his skull, "you've decided to return to the fold, Ashlyn? Though I must say that your method of doing so is hardly designed to inspire confidence in--"

"Spare me," she said dryly. "I'm quite aware of what you did."

Herrod just smiled.

"Are you?"

Arlayne Corliss spoke for the first time. She had light green hair spilling across her shoulders, a sharp contrast to the robe. Her face showed character, lines beginning to take shape at the corners of her eyes and mouth; she looked her age. Apparently Corliss had eschewed biosculpting--not really a surprise, as the scientific professions were still inclined to favor a public persona of age and wisdom. Her body, though, was curved and tight beneath the clinging fabric. There, Redflare guessed cynically, was where technology had assisted nature.

"Paul, we shouldn't play games with these people," she warned her lover.

"It's a little late for that advice, don't you think?" Redflare asked mildly. "After all, games are exactly what we've been getting so far. Deadly games, but games nonetheless." He looked at Herrod curiously, trying to get a fix on the man. "You've had us all running in circles for your amusement, you and your friends. You entice Ashlyn to defect by offering her a nonexistent job, using Martin Bright to convince Kail Garriner and so add credibility to your scheme. You stage-manage us right into a trap led by your friend Wulfeburne. It all looks like it's a big corp-war operation, industrial espionage at its cliched best, while really it's you and your five friends--well, now you and your three friends--and your pet gangers that are pulling the strings."

"So, you've deduced the existence of the Circle."

"How cute, your little group has a name." Kem pulled a face as he said it. Redflare flicked him a quelling glance.

"We know you have access to new and experimental technique forms," he went on, "and that the paratech project was pushing in the same areas. We know that the Bane Spikes got shockingly interested in mystic history and legend three months ago, right when you lost your first member."

Herrod's sangfroid didn't crack in the slightest. It was actually starting to bother Redflare. Yes, he expected the duplicitous exec to maintain control and not break down blubbering. The things he'd done demanded a calm, rational brain, capable of facing trouble without fear. Still, it wasn't natural for him to be so completely at ease.

This was a man holding an ace or two up his sleeve, Redflare thought grimly. He'd have to keep a close watch.

"You don't lack for imagination, I'll give you that," Herrod remarked. "Tell me, though, if you 'know' so much, then why are you here?"

"You're going to fill in the blanks for us, Herrod," Kem advised. "You'll tell us everything about your twisted little scheme and why you jerked us around."

"Or?"

Kemet blinked in confusion.

"There is generally an 'or else' clause appended to statements like that," Herrod explained with mock gentleness. "I can save you some time. I have no intention of telling you."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"Because you'll kill me if I don't? Really, Mr...let's see, you're the one they call Kemet, aren't you? I'm not a complete fool, after all. You've gone to a great deal of trouble to come here, and no doubt vengeance is burning in your heart to avenge the wrongs you feel were done to you. What good would it do to explain precisely how wronged you were? That would only make you angrier. If your suspicions are borne out, you will execute me as soon as I am done talking. No, a death threat is meaningless in this situation."

Rage erupted across Kem's face, the mercurial young hunter exploding into movement. His forearm crashed into Herrod, knocking the SDE exec to his knees. A second blow sent the man sprawling onto the elegant carpet. Anger suffusing his expression, Kemet's boot launched out, caught under Herrod's ribcage, and flipped the man over onto his back. Kem dove at him, ramming the barrel of a sonic gun up under Herrod's chin.

"Murdering bastard!" he swore. "You'll tell me everything--what you did and what you hoped to gain--or I won't kill you, no matter how you beg!" His ruby eyes burned.

Herrod just smiled.

"Good. Very good," he said.

"What?"

"Anger...fury...the profile suggested that you'd be the most hot-tempered of the hunters. It's too bad that you're not one of the ones we want. It would make it easier if you were."

It crashed through Redflare's consciousness like a thunderbolt, a piece at last falling into place.

"That's what it's about," he realized. "That's why you hired us, specifically, for this job. You weren't just after the project data. You want what one of us, as a person, has."

Herrod chuckled softly.

"Indeed. Then it seems, does it not, that you did not know quite so much as you believed that you did."

"What's this game about, Herrod," the magician demanded. "What makes us so important?"

"Why don't you wait and find out? They say that patience is a virtue, after all. Don't they, Jason?"

"I believe so."

The answering voice came from one of the back rooms of the condo. As its owner stepped into the dim light, none of the hunters had any trouble recognizing the blue-haired killer, Jason Wulfeburne.

"Then again, Paul, I doubt either one of us would be, just now, a particularly good authority on virtue."

## Chapter 25

"Not to complain about being rescued from certain death," Redflare groused as Dace freed him from the plasmacuffs, "but what are you doing alive? The last I saw of you, a Bane Spike was doing a creative rearrangement of your internal organs with a laser knife. Or," he added as a thought struck him, "are you one of those active-memory clones?"

Dace chuckled dryly.

"Nope, nothing but the one-and-only original material here--thanks to my new friend."

He nodded at the mantled man, who bowed amiably. The tech-user looked to be in his twenties, with an air about him that suggested an older man who had aged very well or had some biosculpting work done. Redflare doubted it was the latter, because the man's face wasn't particularly handsome, being thin and ascetic, its narrowness heightened by the way his indigo-blue hair was pulled back off it in a tight ponytail.

"This sounds like it should be a heck of a story."

"It is," said the tech-user, "but I think it's one best suited for another forum. While Dace assures me that you will have found a way to negate the alarms the broken window would otherwise set off, our melodramatic entrance caused us to descend past several floors from the roof. One of the residents there might have noticed, or some passer-by might see the broken window from the street below at any time."

He snapped his fingers over the sleeping twins.

"Arows!"

The awakening technique took effect at once, banishing the unnatural sleep. Kemet sprang to his feet, then realized that circumstances had changed greatly since he'd been incapacitated.

"Dace? Dace! What the--?"

"We did that bit already," Redflare observed, rubbing his wrists to restore circulation.

"I presume that an explanation will be forthcoming?" Isis suggested.

"Right, but first, let's bail. Sec-guards and cops really cramp my storytelling style," Dace said.

"Let me talk to Nima," Redflare asked Isis. She handed him her commlink, and he slipped it on.

"Nima, can you hear me?"

"Redflare! I've been so worried--and did I hear Kem say something about Dace being there?"

"You did, and we're all as eager as you to learn what's going on, but we'll have to get out of here first. Did you catch the alarm from the broken window?"

"Of course. I knew you were in trouble, so I kept things stifled."

"Thanks. Are any guards on their way up?"

"No."

"Perfect; we'll need a clear run to the stairs."

"You're good to go now, but hurry."

Dace bent and scooped up the limp form of Dumont, who although conscious had yet to shake off the paralysis.

"Okay," Redflare announced, "for those who couldn't hear, Nima says we can get back to the stairs. Let's move--unless Dace and his new friend have a better plan?"

"On the contrary," replied the tech-user, "we were hoping that you might be able to assist us in that regard. And you may call me Julian."

"It works for me."

They slipped out of 1706 and down the corridor, then hurtled their way down seventeen flights of stairs to the basement level, where they were confronted by another lock. Unlike the service stairs, whose only entry point was the closely supervised door on the first floor, the management didn't want just anyone to be able to access the basement through this route.

"This will not take long," Isis said, reaching for her tools.

"Don't put yourself to the trouble, sister dear," Kem responded. "Since we don't need to worry about people on the other side hearing us..." He pulled out a sonic gun and took some of his frustrations out on the innocent lock.

"Effective," Redflare noted.

"I just wish it was Wulfeburne's skull."

Nobody said much of anything else until they were safely back at the Cross Scar's "entertainment complex."

"Nice decor," Dace murmured. "Where did you find this place?"

"Blame the magic man and his taste in friends," Kemet joked.

"I can see some explanations are in order on your side as well." He looked at Dumont sharply. "And just when does the cargo on a courier run go on a field mission?"

"Since we learned there's no real job awaiting me at the far end--but oh, yes, you wouldn't know about that, since you were dead at the time."

"Take it easy, Ashlyn," Redflare cautioned her. "Dace has missed out on a lot of what's happened." Specifically, he'd missed the corporate tech-user's steady transition from a not-well-liked problem to an albeit temporary member of the team. Now was not the time to have them take up old battles that had already been fought out in Dace's absence.

Anything else either of them might have said was interrupted as Isis got Nima free from the impromptu VR restraints they'd put together. The Motavian girl all but flung herself across the room, catching Dace around the midsection in a crushing hug.

"Dace! I'm so glad to see you! What happened to you? How did you manage to survive?"

The swordsman grinned and ruffled the fur between her ears.

"Take it easy, Nima! Give me a chance!"

Julian, meanwhile, smoothly swept his mantle behind him and sat down in a chair. He waited placidly for the hunters to work through their reunion and set the pace, but there was a tension in his expression that suggested his calm was more a function of personality than situation. He was worried, and Redflare would have agreed that he had a good right to be. Dramatic rescue and the apparent resurrection of a companion aside, the raid on Herrod's condo had been an unmitigated disaster.

Hopefully, Dace and his new ally had something to offer by way of a plan, or the blue-haired hunter's rebirth would be strictly temporary.

Dace seemed to realize this as well, as he extricated himself from the Motavian and held up his hand.

"Okay, it's clear that I owe all of you an explanation, and believe me, it's a doozy--but it should also shed some light on what we've gotten ourselves into and what's behind it all. The first question is, why am I not dead? You all saw me go down under that ganger's knife. Hell, you had a better look than I did. The truth is, apparently I was dead."

That announcement drew from everyone but Ashlyn Dumont the shocked gasps and explanations one would expect.

"Julian, here, is the one who brought me back. Obviously I owe him big, but that's not why he's here with me. He knows some of what we're up against and how the skag with blue hair--"

"Wulfeburne," Redflare provided. "His name's Jason Wulfeburne." He said it almost absently, most of his attention still tied up in the died-and-came-back-to-life part.

"--can do some of the things he can."

"Just how is it," Dumont asked, "that Julian can raise the dead?"

"He's an Esper."

The surprise that had greeted Dace's first announcement was nothing compared to that which the second drew. If he'd brought in a dog that could walk, talk, and sing Jinn Krystal's greatest hits while accompanying himself on the synthesizer he couldn't have gotten a more stunned audience.

"That...can't be," Kem stammered.

"I thought that the race was rendered extinct after the Esper Rebellion on Mota," Isis said.

"That is what the government believes, and while it is not far wrong, it is not completely true," Julian interjected. "While the Rebellion ended with the purging of all Espers from Mota, it did not extend to Palm. Espers were here as well, and while the paranoia of that time led to widespread Manxham genetic screening, some of Palm's populace was able to avoid the searchers, especially as the Manxham test is not one hundred percent effective. A small number of Espers escaped, and went into hiding."

"So why come out of hiding now? Not that we're ungrateful, but what makes us important?"

"We aren't, Kem," Redflare answered the question for Julian. "The Circle is. Wulfeburne and Herrod and their new techniques."

"Yes," Julian continued, "but also no. It was, in fact, their activities which caught our attention and which I was sent to investigate. Three months ago, they conducted a magical ritual of some sort, the effects of which were unmistakable. Think of it as a stone thrown into a pond: the ripples flow outwards and can be felt by anyone on the water. In this case, the 'water' is the magical energy of Algo. Their efforts were made even more noticeable by the fact that they were unschooled in magic use, clumsy and crude in their methods. Skilled Espers could have dampened both the range and intensity of the effect."

"Magic use...are you saying that what Wulfeburne is doing isn't a set of new techniques, but real magic?"

"I am."

"This, I've got to hear."

"The potential to use magic is a genetic factor, not one single yes/no switch but a number of combinations of gene pairs. That is all it really means to be an Esper. In truth, we are not a race apart the way some legends would have it, but merely the possessors of a certain genetic trait, like red hair or brown eyes. There are Espers among the Palmans, the Dezolians, and even the Motavians. However, without training, that ability is generally irrelevant. Am I making sense so far?"

"I think so," Redflare said. "Are you suggesting that Wulfeburne and the Circle were Espers without training?"

"Yes, or in the alternative what we refer to as 'latent Espers,' those with the genetic ability to manipulate magic but lacking the power within themselves to fuel that ability. During the Rebellion, those who went into hiding took with them much of our knowledge, but there have been Espers in Algo for millennia. There has been considerable lore recorded and passed down. A diligent search might uncover a fair amount of that lore--and, as Mr. Herrod's home indicates, the men and women of his group had the funds for such a search."

"They're the WizKids," Redflare groaned. "Rich and powerful, but other than that, they're the bloody WizKids."

Julian looked at him curiously.

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"It was a tech-gang I ran with as a kid back in Ossale Court. We all wanted to be Espers like in the fairy tales. It sounds to me like the Circle is the same damn thing, just made of corp suits instead of street kids."

Julian nodded solemnly.

"I would not be surprised if that was exactly the case. Only, unfortunately, these men and women were successful. You see, in addition to the quick spells of battle which you have seen employed, there are other magics, rituals which can last for hours or days."

Isis, always interested in the technical aspects of things, asked Julian what the point of the rituals was.

"There are several purposes," he explained. "The most simple is that it allows magical power to be drawn from the environment instead of only using that within the spellcaster. This would permit a latent to take that power and cast a spell, for example. In essence, it is the same process employed in technique use, only techniques are a much more elegant system of accomplishing much the same thing. However, rituals also have other purposes. One is to allow a number of Espers to combine their abilities. The other is to amass sufficient power to accomplish tasks which otherwise simply cannot be done. In this case, I believe the latter is what has happened."

His expression grew dark, and there were hints of fear in it.

"There is an evil," he continued slowly, "a dark force which lurks beyond our physical universe. It is a corrupter, a destroyer. Throughout history, the foolish, the misguided, and the twisted have sought this evil out, hoping to gain power by compelling its service or through worship of it."

"Black magic?" Nima asked, a bit theatrically.

"That is exactly my meaning," Julian told her--without a hint of levity. "One of the paramount duties of any Esper worth the name is to seek out and put a stop to the use of this evil power when it is detected. The ones you call the Circle are employing this power; it is unmistakable to a trained Esper."

Kemet held up a hand.

"Wait a second, there. It's weird enough to talk about a bunch of suits playing around with myths and fairy tales--but a black magic cult? That's holovid horror stuff."

"Kemet is right," Dumont agreed. "I've worked under Paul Herrod for years. It's hard enough to imagine him exploring ancient magics for personal power, but slinking around with robes and candles chanting hymns to demons and all that? I can't believe it."

Julian shook his head.

"You misunderstand me. I doubt they had any conception of what forces they were tapping into or that there were malign beings waiting for them. Ignorant or not, however, they clearly contacted something, and were rewarded with power. You've felt it yourselves. Whether the Circle was forcibly enslaved by the dark or became willingly corrupted does not matter. They serve it, for if they did not they would be slain."

"Like Adam Bainbridge, maybe," Redflare said. "He was one of the six, and he dies three months ago, when everything started to go wrong."

"So how does all this tie in with Dace coming back from the dead?" Kem asked, arms folded across his chest. No doubt he didn't buy half of the fairy-tale stuff being handed to him.

And meanwhile, my childhood dreams are coming true right in front of me, thought the magician.

"As I said, I was sent to investigate. I've been observing the activities of this Circle as best I could, gathering information on their plots and preparing to strike. I had been following Wulfeburne when you fought him at the warehouse. After he and his gang left, I went to inspect the battle site to see if there were clues."

"What he found was me," Dace contributed.

"Mr. Maxwell was clearly not of the Circle nor their lackeys, the Bane Spikes. I suspected that he could tell me much of what their activities involved."

"And raising him from the dead by magic would place him under a fairly large obligation to help you," Dumont said.

Julian nodded in her direction.

"That was precisely my reasoning."

"Unfortunately, by the time he was done winning my confidence and we'd compared notes, you five were already off and running. We've been trying to catch up ever since," Dace concluded. "We saw Redflare and Isis at Herrod's building, so I figured you'd make the run tonight, so we were on hand to step in if you got in over your heads."

"Which we did," Redflare said glumly.

"You shouldn't feel ashamed," Julian quickly urged him. "There was no way you could have anticipated the type of power you were facing."

"Such as being able to teleport in a half-dozen or so people for an ambush without having them show up in the building's security logs. Yeah, I get that--but the fact is that hunters have to cope with tech-users all the time. Maybe the particular spells Wulfeburne uses aren't what we're used to, but we've taken him on before, and there was nothing especially overwhelming about what he's hit us with. No, I got overconfident, didn't plan well enough."

Dace looked a bit surprised at that. Probably he didn't know Redflare had ended up as the de facto team leader.

"It's not important, though, not until we start planning the next round," the magician shrugged it off as he knew he'd have to. "What I want to know is, what are these people after? It's not industrial espionage, it's not the paratech project files, but they do want Ashlyn for something, and apparently they want me, too. Why?"

"I believe that I can answer that. Undoubtedly, the Circle will seek to bring more and more people within its fold, amassing power here on Palm for its master. To do that it needs more agents, more devotees. They no doubt wished to corrupt the two of you into servants of darkness. By arranging this method, they avoid the risk of investigation into their activities. If they'd kidnapped Miss Dumont from her apartment, say, then there would certainly be interest on the part of the DLE and corporate security. You, Redflare, lack official support but certainly have competent friends. This charade of an extraction would, if successful, have buried the entire matter in the shadows forever and kept the Circle out of anyone's spotlight."

"But why us?" Dumont stressed.

"Because in all probability, the two of you are, though untrained, Espers."

## Chapter 27

"SDE will have its own comp-security people working against me," Nima's voice emerged from the phone. Her body, only a few feet away, made no sound, as the Motavian was once again lost in the virtual world of the datanet. "I can give you two minutes, but no more without a trace being almost guaranteed."

"I understand," Dace said. He glanced at Redflare. "This was your idea. Sure you want me to do the talking?"

"Definitely. Negotiating with the clients is your job. Between you and Ashlyn, you can handle things quite well without amateur me butting in."

Dace shrugged.

"Okay; your call. Nima, let's do it."

For those expecting fireworks, disappointment was in order. All that happened was the phone dialed an outgoing call. It was picked up on the second ring.

"Yoshida."

Redflare got his first look at the sec-chief. Her sharp features and lavender hair swept back from her forehead as he expected, but the fierceness in her eyes was more aggressive and emotional than the cold corporate soldier he had expected.

This was a good sign. She was under pressure, and a solution would therefore seem all the more attractive.

"You can call me Dace. I hear that you've been having some trouble with our mutual annoyances, the Bane Spikes. Fortunately, I'm in a position to offer help."

"Why would you make such an offer?"

"The best reason of all--it's my job. Here's my employer."

Dace beckoned, and Dumont stepped to his side so they would both appear on Yoshida's screen. The effect was astounding. A look of absolute fury crossed the sec-chief's face and vanished, like a passing wave, to be replaced by a frozen mask. It obviously took some effort for her to maintain her calm in the face of her righteous anger, as the slight tremors that ran along her jawline indicated.

How can anyone feel such passion and loyalty towards a corporation, of all things? Redflare couldn't help but marvel. A corp just wasn't his idea of the subject for a Holy and Righteous Crusade.

"Ashlyn Dumont. The hunter would, of course, be Dace Maxwell. I should have recognized the name."

"Hello, Reiko. I'm sorry for the bother, but it couldn't be helped," Dumont said coolly. This was, after all, her element. Negotiation. Deal-making.

"My time is short. Come to the point."

"I have the evidence I need, and I'm ready to come in."

"The evidence?" Yoshida immediately pounced on the single out-of-place line.

"Against Herrod. You didn't think I've gone to all this effort for my health, did you?"

"What is your point?"

"It's simple. Herrod made extra-corporate alliances for a private group he calls the Circle, siphoning our research for their own use. I found out about it, but I had no hard evidence, so I hired these hunters to obtain it. Unfortunately," she added with a scowl, "Herrod clearly decided that I was a risk and plotted to have me discredited or simply killed. I deleted the paratechnology project files so he couldn't obtain them, after making copies so that we wouldn't lose the data. That night he tried to kill me while I was meeting with my team in a warehouse in the Southern Industrial Sector, sending in the Bane Spikes to do his dirty work."

"You claim that the Bane Spikes are Paul Herrod's lackeys?"

A timer flashed on the screen, showing a countdown from thirty seconds. Nima's way of telling them how much time they had left, of course.

"Herrod and the Circle's, yes. It didn't take a genius to realize that I'd been marked as a corporate defector by them, which put me in an uncomfortable position."

Yoshida put in a scowl of her own.

"And what of your association with the late Kail Garriner? He was known to be a freelance headhunter."

"Known to you and known to me. He'd tried feeling me out in the past; I turned him down--but it did mean that I had his name, and he was in the position to help me find a first-rank hunter team to work on Herrod. For a fee, of course, but that's the definition of what a fixer does."

"Here's the skinny," Dace cut in. "I'm about to download to you all the info we've dug up on Herrod and his pals. Get a file ready because it's coming your way. There's a number at the end of that file that'll be good only from three-thirty AM to three-thirty-five. Call that number if you like what you see."

Yoshida paused, readying her own unit to accept the data transfer.

"All right. Send it."

Dace tapped the Send button, and the machine uploaded the files Nima had stored on chip while he and Dumont had been working out their lines.

"Got it? Good. Think it over." He disconnected as the timer hit 0:01. "Well, that's that. It's out of our hands now."

"Do you think Ms. Yoshida will accept your story?" Julian inquired. The Esper had largely faded into the background while the hunters had planned their course of action.

"She should," Redflare said. It was his plan, after all, and he felt obliged to stand up for it. "We're giving her everything she wants--Ashlyn back, the project files back, and the opportunity to clean up the rat inside SDE."

"Yeah," Dace agreed. "You could tell, talking to her. She feels like she's under the gun."

"She probably is," Dumont noted. "SDE isn't big enough that it can afford to hack off Nakagaki and get away with it. Even if not, though, being faced with this problem and not having an easy out has her corporate honor in a twist. Like the ancient knights, it's 'Victory or Death' for Reiko."

"Preferably the former for us and the latter for the Circle," Isis got in the last word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Taran Kendrick leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers as he looked across his desk at his security chief.

"Do you believe her?"

"About Herrod? Yes. I've reviewed her file and verified the incidents referred to therein."

Kendrick allowed himself a faint smile at Yoshida's formality; the hour was late and the pressure they were under should have swept away some of the boundaries. But then again, no doubt Yoshida felt an emergency situation should only heighten the need for protocol to keep the chain of command running smoothly.

"So, Paul is a traitor, then?"

"Yes. I was further able to establish that there had been communications between him and one member of the strike team assigned to Holst during the operation. Undoubtedly Herrod attempted to deflect our search for Ashlyn Dumont through infiltration and when that proved impossible simply eliminated our field team." She bit off each word sharply, revealing her anger at such blatant disloyalty.

"Then it is Dumont you have doubts about."

Yoshida nodded crisply.

"Her story is not directly disprovable, but it does not fit her personality profile. I do not see her as putting herself at personal risk for the sake of the company. Money, power, or prestige would be her principal motivation, not corporate loyalty."

"What about revenge?" Kendrick asked mildly.

"Possible, if the affront was severe enough."

The XD tapped his fingertips together.

"I think this one might have been. Paul was, after all, the one who had Dumont's security-watch status downgraded. Without it, she could never have accessed the computer, copied and destroyed the project files, or vanished into the shadows. Knowing as we do now that he was a traitor, why would he do that?"

Yoshida frowned.

"She was working for him," the sec-chief concluded.

"Was being the operative term. Possibly he manipulated her into believing that her actions were appropriate, and Dumont later learned the truth. The alternative is that they were accomplices in Paul's scheme--whatever its ultimate goal was--and later had a falling-out. Perhaps he double-crossed her."

"Those two extremes make a great deal of difference. In one, Dumont is a loyal employee who was duped. In the other, she's a traitor who is squabbling with another over the course of their treason."

"Or the truth may lie, as it so often does, in the broad gray area between the two." He banished the thoughtful, relaxed tone from his voice. "The question is, can she deliver what she promises?"

"She stole the project files in the first place. Undoubtedly she can return them."

"Then we should negotiate with her. SDE's future could be at stake." The XD smiled thinly and added, "If additional measures must be taken later to properly compensate Ms. Dumont for her actions, then I am sure they can be attended to at a later time."

Chapter 28

At precisely three-thirty-two, the phone rang again, shunted from the artificial node Nima had created in the visiphone system.

"We are willing to negotiate," Yoshida said, omitting any preamble.

"Good," Dace replied. "Here's the situation. Is your line secure?"

"As secure as our computer security experts can make it."

"We'll trust you, then. The bottom line is, we're going to hit the Bane Spikes' home nest and take out whatever gangers are there along with the Circle members with the bad taste to be on-site. Since there's only three of them left, we figure they'll be sticking close to plot their next move. Our problem, as demonstrated by the late Mr. Holst and friends, is that the Circle has gone out of its way to arm those skags with some nasty artillery, to say nothing of their new research into technique development."

Yoshida's nod told the hunters that she had scanned the file and the carefully edited information they'd provided about Wulfeburne's capabilities.

"You wish us to contribute our security forces to your effort," she concluded.

"This is an SDE corporate problem, isn't it?" Dace countered. "We're hired guns, and one of the things we weren't hired for is to walk into the kill zone without our backsides being damn well covered. Gunter Holst would be here today if he took that advice."

Yoshida's scowl returned, though whether at Dace's disrespect or his implication that she hadn't sufficiently supported Holst, Redflare couldn't say.

"Why insert yourself into this matter at all?" she asked, a hint of derision in her tone. No surprise there, Redflare thought; vassal knights who served a liege lord and mercenaries who worked for pay had never gotten along in the feudal era and it was no different in the modern world.

"Because that is what we were hired to do," Dace snapped, then seasoned the lie with some straight truth. "When we're hired to do a job in good faith, we stick it out until the end. Risk is an occupational hazard." Of course, the key was that "in good faith" phrase. They hadn't been hired in good faith by the Circle; instead, they'd been set up to be killed so Wulfeburne and his buddies could make more nasty little Espers.

"Look, here's the pitch. You work with us and you get a valuable employee back in the fold, you get your project data back, you get a corporate traitor out of upper management, and you show the street that amateurs that screw with SDE ops get what's coming to them. You don't work with us and you don't get the files, you don't get Dumont, you're forced to take Herrod out yourself, your attitude gets infodumped on the streets so good luck hiring talent in the future, and that all may be irrelevant after Nakagaki wrings their investment out of your corp's bottom line. You've seen our evidence; the ball's in your court now."

"What do you propose?"

"We're running out of night and good jobs aren't planned in the short term. You get your strike team ready; somewhere around ten people and don't stint on firepower. We RDV tomorrow evening to combine intel and coordinate plans, then we hit it. Are you in?"

"It would be in my corporation's interests to do this, I concur. However, a sign of your good faith would be appropriate. Return the project files and we have a deal."

Dace, long experienced at this kind of negotiation, just chuckled.

"I'll give you this, lady, you've got guts asking that with a straight face. No, you get the prize when we're standing over the bodies, not before."

"And what is to keep you from double-crossing us and vanishing into the shadows once the operation is over?"

Dace laughed again.

"Three things, Ms. Yoshida. Not counting honor, though, there's the fact that if the op succeeds, you've received part payment on our offer even before we give you the data, while if we fork it over up front we've got nothing. Also, let's be practical. You've got a hell of a lot more resources to hold us...accountable...for a double-cross than we do if you put the knife in our backs. It's easier to extend trust when you don't have to be looking over your shoulder at the other guy, wouldn't you agree?"

She inclined her head slightly.

"I accept your point--and your terms, Mr. Maxwell."

"Good. We'll be in touch."

The screen went blank.

"Okay, team. Let's bail," Dace said, clapping his hands. "If those gridriders of hers are even halfway competent, they've traced that call by now. Maybe she'll play it straight, but on the off chance she won't--or if Herrod's still got eyes in the system--we don't want to be here."

Of course, they'd been prepared for that even before Dace had taken the call; everyone except Nima was packed and ready. She and Isis broke down the computer rig and stowed the components in under two minutes, though, and they were gone.

The team had found its new safehouse through Julian. Since the Espers had, after all, been viewed as terrorists to be exterminated during Mother Brain's purge of Mota, they had gotten quite good at hiding themselves. The apartment he took them to was one of their boltholes, similar to how the hunters had used Mama Russi's before Holst had found them out.

"I assume that it goes without saying that you will not reveal this location to anyone," Julian said as he led them inside what appeared to be an ordinary, middle-class residence.

"If that's true, then why did you say it?" Kem quipped.

"In all seriousness, this residence is the property of our order of Espers. Since two of you are possible Espers yourselves, it should be a legitimate use, but it is still a matter of secrecy."

"Hey, you saved Dace's life," Nima chirped. "Trust me, that buys a lot of cooperation."

Julian nodded.

"Now that you have Ms. Yoshida's agreement, I presume our next step will be to formulate a plan of attack and gather intelligence on our target?"

"No," Dace told him, stifling a yawn. "There'll be some of that later, but right now the top priority is rest. That's why we make the strike tomorrow night. We're all worn to the core; you and me are probably the best off since we've been running the least. Everyone else has probably gotten what, three or four hours' sleep?"

"If that," Redflare noted.

"Exactly. The body needs rest. Push too long without it and reflexes slow, the brain gets sluggish, the body gets clumsy. This phase of the op has that whole 'final battle' thing written all over it. I'm not making the main strike with a team thinking more about taking a nap than taking out the enemy. Everyone in this room gets eight hours, minimum, before we go.

Julian nodded.

"I see. Another example, I daresay, of the importance of letting the trained fighters make the tactical decisions."

"It helps, yeah. So get this place locked down, set up the sec-systems, spy eyes, magic wards, or whatever you need to, so we can get that rest."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Things are rapidly spinning out of control," Herrod accused. "Your trap at my condo was a complete failure, and now Corliss is dead--another one of the Circle lost. That is the second one that has fallen during this operation due to your bungling."

The echo of Jason Wulfeburne's shoes striking the concrete floor stopped as he ceased his pacing and rounded on the former leader of the Circle.

"The trap," he snarled, "worked perfectly. They arrived as we planned and our targets were captured. The only reason they escaped was the addition of an unknown element. Or perhaps you were aware that one with a command of magic had joined their side. Surely you must have been, since you are so confident that your master plan would have accounted for his presence."

Herrod tried to flinch away from his superior as well as from the implications of Wulfeburne's logic, but found both inescapable.

"N-no, I didn't know; I couldn't know! I wasn't holding anything back!"

Wulfeburne spat at the man's feet.

"Then curb your petulant whining. I am not in the mood to suffer through your character flaws--your puerile resentment of my new position and the death of your strumpet."

"Corliss was not--" Herrod found the vigor to respond hotly, but Wulfeburne's voice sliced effortlessly through the retort.

"I speak not of the woman but of the way you chose to regard her. There is nothing in your mind but the aggrandizement of Paul Herrod. For once, do try to get past that and help us find a way to get our hands on Dumont, Redflare, and that new one, that Esper."

The low-pitched chuckling of their master interrupted the debate.

"Why put yourself to such trouble?" he inquired, almost with amusement. "Once more, they will walk right into our clutches. They cannot help themselves. Like moths to a flame, they are drawn in by their desire for revenge and their craving for what they see as justice, and like the moths will be destroyed if they come too close to their goal."

"We've tried that before and lost," Wulfeburne dared to say.

"No; we have never lost. They have been able only to escape from us, once by desperate efforts and once by outside intervention unexpected even by them."

The master's gaze swept them both, extending to the gangers beyond.

"This time we will be ready. We shall call forth the entire force of the Circle, not merely a portion of it. Through this power, our foes shall be crushed, once and for all."

Wulfeburne, somehow finding the courage to contradict his leader, spoke up.

"All the force of the Circle? How much can that be? Most of us lack any true power, and we've already lost Bright and Corliss."

Something about the answer he received chilled the blue-haired man to the core.

"Exactly."

## Chapter 29

Predictably, Redflare couldn't sleep. He dozed on and off for about four hours, but despite his mental and physical weariness alike, slumber was never able to take a firm hold. Giving it up as a lost cause, he slipped out of bed, tiptoed past the sleeping Dace, who was crashed out on the bedroom's couch, and went out into the main living room.

The lights were off, but dawn had come and the bright, sunny day outside gave more than enough illumination to see by. A pensive man might have sat and thought, or stared out the window at the city, but Redflare was a more restless soul. Coins and cards flicked into his hands, deftly turning and twisting across his fingers as he ran through the sleight-of-hand moves of several tricks. Magic was the kind of thing one had to practice diligently to be any good at, and Redflare hadn't had much time to keep sharp lately, what with all of the people shooting at him.

"The gold six goes on the black seven," Dumont's voice contributed.

"Cute," Redflare said. "What goes on this, though?" He laid the seven down on the coffee table, turned it face-down, tapped its back, and turned it over to reveal a completely blank card.

"You're actually quite good at that," the corporate woman said, coming to stand behind the couch where Redflare sat.

"I ought to be. It's what I do for a living."

"Yes, I know. Maybe that's why we're the ones awake. The professional hunters are all blissfully asleep, getting the rest they need for this strike on the Circle. I suppose shoving down nervousness and taking rest when it comes is a job skill for them."

"Could be," the magician replied. He recalled, dimly, that he'd been thinking about that very point when they'd driven out of Ossale Court that very first night. That was back when he still thought all he'd signed on for was a simple extraction. A whole different world, he thought. One before betrayals and black magic and Espers.

Dumont slipped onto the couch beside him.

"Do you think Julian was telling the truth, about us being Espers?" she asked pensively.

"I don't know why he'd lie." Redflare paused, then added, "You're very good with techniques for a suit."

"A suit? I'm being reduced to wardrobe status now?"

Was that actually a suggestion of humor in her voice?

"You know what I mean. You're corporate. The sixty-hour work week, before that an extensive education. There's very little about that schedule which gives a lot of time to study and develop your technique potential. Most corp types know only one or two techs if that, for basic self-defense, unless they're in security work or covert ops. You, on the other hand, have shown some distinct talent in that area, especially given that you've been able to bring Gra up to its second rank."

She understood his point at once.

"So you think that my skill at technique use comes from natural talent? An Esper's talent for manipulating mystical energies?"

"It's a thought."

"Yes, I suppose so. Redflare--" she began, then stopped. "All right, that's it. 'Redflare' is a fine name for a street ganger or a holovid show, or for a stage magician--'Redflare the Remarkable' or something like that. It isn't something I would call an ally or a business associate."

"As a matter of fact, it is a street name, from when I was a ganger in the Court," Redflare told her, a bit tartly. He didn't recall submitting his name for her review.

"Maybe so, but you're not a ganger any more, are you? Dace, Nima, Kemet, and Isis all have real names. Even our mysterious Esper friend does--though whether it's his real name is a different question. So how about you? What's under the mask?"

Redflare sighed. Somewhere in there Dumont almost had a point. Why had he clung to his old WizKids handle? It had been easy enough to do, like a good two-thirds of the inhabitants of Rendak and Ossale Court his birth had gone unregistered in the citizen database and therefore his "legal" name was whatever got put down on the false credentials he was carrying. On the other hand, it would have been equally easy to jettison the name along with the rest of his past when he turned from Esper wannabe to street magician. So why hadn't he?

He didn't even recall asking himself the question before, come to think of it. On the streets, "Redflare" was as good a nickname as any, and like even Dumont had said, it suited him as a magician. Those who had known him from his Ossale Court days, like Dace, knew him as Redflare and called him by it. But he'd never thought to change it, even though he had a perfectly good name given to him by his parents.

Family.

Something he'd lost long ago. He'd been nine when his parents died. He'd been eleven when his big sister, his only other remaining family, had been left dead by a client who took his erotoasphyxiation fetish a bit too far. He'd joined the WizKids at twelve after four months of petty theft and crashing in the streets had convinced him that he'd needed a change if he didn't want to finish Death's sweep through the family.

That was how Rick Denton had lived, staggering from crisis to crisis, a kid tossed around by powers outside his control. Redflare the magician was different. He controlled his own life, his own choices, gave pleasant illusions of a magical world of wonder to paying customers instead of being subject to those illusions himself.

Which, as this particular piece of hunter biz had pointed out more times than he could conveniently count, was all a load of scorpion spew. Redflare wasn't in control of anything other than his own personal choices, and even those got filtered through his subconscious perceptions. He was still just as vulnerable as he had been at eleven to life reaching out and smacking him silly.

He figured Paul Herrod had thought the same way as he did. Herrod's wealth, corporate power, and the sense that he was "in on" a secret reality most of society ignored or disbelieved would have convinced him he was powerful, untouchable--and now he wasn't even in control of his own little group.

The illusion of immortality was usually thought of as an adolescent trait, but it wasn't. It was a human trait that everyone of every age risked falling prey to. Redflare realized that he had fallen and fallen hard.

"Hey, Redflare, I'm sorry; I was just teasing," Dumont said, surprising him with her apology. By now, it shouldn't have, he realized. It was fairly obvious that for her, there was one face to show business associates and a completely different one for friends and companions. It wasn't a matter of "double-dealing," just that when it came to biz she was icy chill and efficient, but didn't carry it over to her personal life like she was some Wren-type. At first, he and the other hunters had been hired employees, strictly biz associates. Now, they were a good deal more, allies in the same struggle.

"Nah; it's not you," he told her. "I'm just tired, and it makes the brain start wandering off into places I'd rather it didn't go."

"Ahh. Places like, 'if I hadn't been such a greedy, ambitious bitch I wouldn't be in this fix'?"

Redflare nodded.

"Yeah, sort of like that. Though as far as that goes, remember that they had us both marked, however they managed to pull that little stunt off. If you didn't bite on the Nakagaki job offer, I'm sure Wulfeburne would have had a Plan B ready to slot right into place."

"I suppose so. I would have."

Redflare wondered fleetingly, despite his earlier thoughts, what it would be like to be able to use himself to predict what underhanded sneakiness his enemies would be up to.

"I just wish I hadn't had to expose my friends to this," he said. It wasn't the first time that thought had hit. "They got sucked into this and it wasn't even them the Circle wanted. Dace was even killed--temporarily, yes, but you get the idea--just because hiring his crew was a convenient way to get their hands on me."

Dumont shook her head.

"I hope this isn't too blunt, but you've got it all wrong."

"How do you figure?"

"Did you do anything to get your friends in trouble? No. Did you even know there was something special about you that would make you an attractive target for anyone to pursue? No. It's not like you're, say, the kid of some exec or government official, who should know that their parent's enemies may go after them. Knowing what you knew then, could you have done something differently that would have kept this situation from happening? No. You're a magician, Redflare, not a soothsayer. You've done nothing to feel guilty about."

She stopped, thinking, then added, "I doubt that'll sink in all at once, so try this on for size: we're nowhere near out of the woods, and if you choose to wallow in misplaced guilt, your attention won't be on the job. If you don't keep your end of things up, then you really will have something to feel guilty about."

"That's a pragmatic approach."

"I try."

She laid her fingers lightly on his arm.

"The last thing we need is to lose our leader on the eve of what may be the decisive battle."

Redflare turned his head to look closely at her.

"That's not my job," he pointed out. "I was only borrowing the spot, anyway. I had no intention of taking it over on any kind of permanent basis; I'm not a hunter, after all. When this disaster was over, that was it. And, now that Dace is back, the whole point is moot. The real leader is--"

"You," she interrupted.

She looked sincere, which surprised Redflare immensely.

"Ashlyn, where do you get that idea from? I'm not even a regular member of the team."

Dumont smiled wryly at him.

"True, but I've watched you in action, both in the field and at a variety of safehouses. I've even joined you hunters out there more than once--and I try to observe what's going on around me. Having as much information as possible is a basic negotiating technique."

"Then you probably should have observed that this is Dace's crew."

She shook her head.

"No. Dace is the field commander. When people are shooting at you, or in less violent confrontations like negotiations with Yoshida, he takes charge. He executes the plans--but they're not his plans, they're yours. Analyzing the situation and suggesting a strategy is your job. You fell into the role naturally, and everyone turns to you when you do, especially Dace. He just did it again when you laid out our current strategy. The bottom line is, you tell him what to do, and he leads everyone, including you, in carrying it out. Isis and Nima get it; Kem's the only one having trouble with getting his directions straight from the top without Dace's filter in between. I'd bet everything I own that's exactly how it goes on every job you work with them."

Redflare scowled, rejecting her suggestion.

"Don't be silly. I wouldn't dare try to usurp Dace's position, not that I'd even want it. The fact is, most of my ideas so far have crashed and burned. Garriner was killed by Holst and I was snatched in the process when we tried to meet him. We tried to bait Martin Bright and he spotted it at once. When we managed to catch him anyway, he died without telling us anything useful. All our move on Herrod's apartment did was nearly give the Circle complete victory in a nice little gift-wrapped package with a bow on top. If that's what you call planning strategy, I'm not surprised that the Circle wants to sign me up for their side, since I'm doing more for them than I am for us."

"Whereas Dace's sole strategic decision was so brilliant that it got him killed," Dumont snapped back. "When are you going to wake up and face reality? The truth is, you didn't have enough information to account for the true situation. All of your ideas were fine as far as they went. The downside was that we didn't know what we were really dealing with--we couldn't know, until we put all of the pieces together. Even a high-level Wren-type's logic can't pull up a perfect analysis without the correct data to reason from."

When are you going to wake up and face reality?

The sentence echoed in Redflare's thoughts. It was so close to what he had been asking himself just a few moments ago about the course of his life that it startled him sharply. Was his perception about his place with the hunter team only one more misconception?

Hunters were pawns, after all. Although independent--on no one's permanent string--they were employed by others to carry out jobs. Usually they did not know the ultimate significance of those jobs; they were cogs in the wheel. Maybe his firm refusal to identify himself as a hunter was nothing more than an attempt to reject that role and preserve the illusion that, as a magician, he was a free agent controlling his own life.

He shook his head in sheer amazement. There was no other reaction that fit, unless he was going to opt for suicidal depression, and Redflare wasn't geared that way.

"Just how is it that you can see so clearly?" he asked Dumont. "You're cutting through years of first-class self-deception here. I never knew just how much of a talent I had for it until you came out and scattered it all." Did she know how deeply she'd cut, Redflare wondered, then shrugged it off--the point was moot.

"It's a talent that we heartless corporate bitches have perfected. By seeing everything with crystal clarity, we make it possible to manipulate people to satisfy our boundless ambition and greed."

She was trying for flippancy and not quite managing to achieve it. Too much bitterness was leaking through.

"You sound like that bothers you."

"It bothers me a lot, Redflare. I might joke about it, but that's how people see me. Even Reiko Yoshida comes off as having more passion, if only because she's so loyal to the company. I've worked hard at being professional, and while it may have gotten me the promotions and opportunities for advancement I wanted..." Her fingers tightened on Redflare's arm, clenching hard. "Damn it, Redflare; I'm a person too, with my own dreams, my own fears. Yes, one of those desires is success, money, and a better life, but that's not all of it. Not even close to all--but it's all anyone sees, all anyone ever thinks. Damn it," she repeated, "do I feel cold?"

She reached up, grabbed the lapels of his vest, and jerked Redflare towards herself, turning him at the same time. She didn't have to pull him down to her; she was a tall woman and when her lips crushed against his she hadn't even had to tilt her head up.

She didn't feel cold at all, he thought. Dumont's kiss was scorching, part hunger and part fury, but none of it cold or calculated. This was one more sudden shock, one more sharp change of perception in a morning already top-full of them. Redflare's brain reeled, logic and analysis impossible. Emotions took over, surfacing, and deep in his belly a need for her awoke--a need that had been there, he realized, sleeping inside him since Ashlyn had stormed into the abandoned factory to help rescue Redflare from Holst's hunters.

Now it wasn't sleeping. Like a dragon, it uncoiled sinuously and arose, filling him with a fire, a craving that matched the energy of her kiss. Redflare's arms came up, encircling her, and he gave himself up to it.

## Chapter 30

Afterwards, little was said. Neither one of them was good at reducing feelings to words, and in truth there were no words that would suffice. So they sat, silently holding each other, savoring this new closeness and not wanting to disturb the moment. Such moments were fleeting, however, and as morning wore on, reality intruded, recapturing their interest.

Nima was the first one of the others to wake; she wandered out into the living area as Redflare was wrestling with a coffeemaker that had more functions than the average home computer, much to Ashlyn's amusement. He had just succeeded in extricating the jammed filter from the spigot when Nima poked her head into the kitchen.

"Hey, what's going on? I can hear you laughing all the way down the hall."

"Redflare is demonstrating that magic and technology don't mix," Ashlyn said, chuckling.

Nima shook her head.

"Men just don't have mechanical aptitude," she teased. "Can I help?"

"You'd better," said Redflare, knowing when he was overmatched, "if we want to have coffee sometime before noon." He returned to the stove, where the bacon (actually veron-meal imitation) was doing nicely. He turned the strips in the pan, and by the time they were done, Nima had coaxed a full pot of medium-roast coffee out of the LIM Electronics MegaKaf. The aroma tickled his nostrils pleasantly.

"Thanks for coming to the rescue."

"Oh, any time."

He flipped her a Rainbow Berry-flavored nutribar, which the little Motavian started nibbling, her beak nipping off pieces small enough to swallow. The two races' nutritional needs were surprisingly similar, but their methods of consumption had a fair number of differences.

"Hey, not bad. Maybe I'll make this my new standard, since G-Tech dropped Wild Fruit from the line."

"I've always wondered why fruit flavors are never named after actual fruits."

"They probably would be, if there was any actual fruit content in the product," Ashlyn said. "I think I'll check the refrigerator to see if our Esper friend stocks any."

She struck gold--or at least a melon--and soon the three of them were sitting around the table, enjoying a hearty meal. Redflare, not generally much for breakfast, surprised himself by eating as much as either of the others. Their host was the fourth person to rise; he came in just as they were clearing the dishes.

"Ah, good morning. I'm glad to see you were able to successfully navigate the kitchen."

"Other than having to call in one of our technical aces to solve the mystery of the coffeemaker, yes," Redflare admitted.

"I must say that I am surprised to see you awake this early. Ms. Nima, of course, would be up"--Motavians had a shorter sleep cycle than Palmans despite their hyperkinetic pace while awake--"but I had expected the rest of you to sleep much later, as Dace suggested."

"Nerves," Redflare said, rubbing the back of his neck. "The experienced hunters are getting their rest, but we amateurs are finding it harder to relax."

Ashlyn gave him a slow wink from behind Julian's back that nearly brought a blush to the street magician's face. Nima caught the look and her round red eyes seemed to get even wider with her surprise. Redflare quickly changed the subject.

"Is that what has you up as well? Or is trouble sleeping just a natural trait of Espers?" he joked.

"Quite the opposite. In fact, I use certain meditative skills which not only insure restful slumber but compress the time required for sleep."

"That sounds like a very useful skill," Ashlyn noted. "Is it something that I'll be able to learn?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, you do not even have to be a full Esper to master the ability. Even if you prove to be merely a high-grade latent, it would still be possible."

"That's nice," Redflare said dryly. "If we manage to get through this mess alive, we'll never have to worry about insomnia again."

"You know," Nima chirped, "it's too bad that you can't teach them any of that Esper magic now, some of the stuff that's really good in combat, like Wulfeburne uses, or whatever it was that you did to the bad guys in Herrod's apartment."

"Hewn," he explained absently. "It's a wind spell." He tapped two fingers against his right cheek. "Do you know, Ms. Nima, you may have a good idea there? Esper magic takes training to master, but as both Ms. Dumont and Mr....Redflare--"

Grinning, Redflare said, "You're among friends here; you can drop the 'Mr.'s and 'Ms.'s, especially when you're talking to a guy who goes by a street handle."

"Thank you; it does make things less awkward."

"Well, let's face it, most people who have street names aren't exactly into manners, unless they're talking to some syndicate or corp boss with a couple of legbreakers enforcing the etiquette code."

Julian nodded, his smile showing amusement, but in a friendly rather than mocking way.

"I see what you mean. In any case, as I was saying, if the two of you prove to be Espers rather than merely latents, I see no reason why you could not master at least a basic fire spell. Since you both are already skilled at technique use, you are familiar with the energy manipulations involved. Techniques, after all, were refined from Esper magic so that they could be used by non-Espers, so the mental patterns required are remarkably similar. Do you wish to try?"

"Why not?" Redflare asked. In truth, after all he'd been through, all the self-doubts he'd endured and the cynicism that had taken root, there was still a part of him that took wing with a desperate hope when the possibility of learning magic was offered. "Ashlyn?"

"Certainly. I'm all for anything that increases my chances of survival."

Julian nodded.

"Excellent! We have arranged for a section of the building's basement to be set aside and have outfitted it as a training room not unlike one for the practice of techniques. Nima, would you please inform the others where we have gone, should they awake before we return?"

"Of course." She wiggled her ears. "Good luck!"

They took the elevator down to the basement, and Julian led his two impromptu pupils down a short, dusty hall. No one, Redflare thought, took care of their basement. Julian stopped at a side door which was secured by an electronic lock; he swept a card key through the reader and the bolt released.

"There's nothing of real value here, but we don't want someone coming in uninvited and learning things they shouldn't."

"Speaking of which," Redflare realized, "if the deal works out, we'll be fighting alongside SDE sec-troopers. Can we afford to use our magic openly that way?"

"I think so," Ashlyn said. "Almost anyone, if they stopped to think about it at all, would conclude like we did that the abilities were newly-developed techniques, or ones they've never heard of. I mean, who's ever heard of Shinb or Fanbi except people in the technique R&D field?"

"That is quite true," Julian noted, "especially in the case of attacking spells, which are easily mistaken for versions of Foi, Tsu, Zan, and so on in the heat of battle. Externally, the process appears almost identical; one points, chants a specific word of command, and the effect happens. I've taken advantage of the fact more than once--especially if one recognizes that one does not have to shout the spell's command at the top of one's lungs so everyone else can hear what's being said." Redflare didn't blush over that one. Every technique user got carried away with battle enthusiasm sooner or later, not even counting the posers who made a big production of tech use on purpose.

The room the Esper had opened was large and low-ceilinged, Redflare saw as Julian turned on the lights. The floor was covered in soft mats, modern materials replacing the reed padding used in traditional combat training halls. Along the far wall were a series of targets of various sizes, some geometric, some featureless mannequins.

"A fancier arrangement with holographic targets and computer scoring would be best, of course," their host explained, "but this particular building isn't sufficiently important enough for us to go to the expense of having a range like that installed. Besides, this will be more than adequate for our purposes."

"So what do we do?" Ashlyn asked.

"For now, simply kneel. Before you can learn any specific spells, you must look within yourselves, to find the power of an Esper. That is the secret of magic; while a technique user must draw in their energy from the world around him or her, the Esper carries that power within themselves." Julian frowned and added, "Unfortunately, that is also the gift which can be twisted to the service of evil. The latent's enhanced ability to manipulate magic makes them a prime candidate for the investment of evil power as a sorcerer, but the true Esper gone wrong can become destruction incarnate, a Medusa or a Lashiec."

The names meant nothing to Redflare, but the tone of voice did. Julian, at least, considered the Circle's activities to be very serious indeed, and the magician was inclined to believe him. After all, it was Redflare's own soul they were talking about, and that kind of thing tends to hit close to home.

"The best defense against that sort of thing, though, is to learn to exercise your gift in a proper way," the Esper continued. "So let us begin."

Redflare sank to his knees, the blonde executive joining him a moment later. They shared a quick glance, and he was surprised to realize that he was all but trembling with nerves. He'd thought he had gone beyond those childhood dreams, but clearly they had only been sleeping, for now he was as eager to gain the power of an Esper as he had been at thirteen. Never mind that he wouldn't be able to change the world with this power--that it had been, in fact, the cause of his being caught in a devil's trap that could still bring him down--Redflare couldn't turn away from trying to fulfill the dream.

Sometimes, when you wanted something long enough and hard enough, the wanting became more important than the why.

"Now, I want you to close your eyes and concentrate," Julian said gently. "You are both experienced technique users, familiar with reaching out from yourselves to draw in power. I want you to do that, but before you touch that external force, pull back your will and reach within yourselves. Draw instead upon what you find there."

The instruction would have been incomprehensible to someone not a tech-user, but Redflare understood it well enough. He extended his will, stretching out, but just as he started to gather in force he reversed himself, turning his will back into his own mind. His stomach twisted; the effect felt completely wrong. It was as if he was trying to inhale in a vacuum; his mind pulled and pulled to draw in power, but constrained within himself, unable to extend outwards, it found nothing to consume, drawing nothing, until...

There.

It burst into his consciousness like a blazing star, only somehow hard-edged, as it was surrounded with hard glass walls that prevented him from touching it directly. Redflare's will surrounded the crystal sun, and the heat of it flowed into him, into his mind, gathered into that reservoir of power he used for his techniques, and yet somehow separated from it as well, like water running in two parallel but discrete channels. Redflare let out an audible gasp of surprise at the sudden familiar-yet-different feeling, and the energies he'd gathered flowed away, released back to where they'd come.

"That's--I don't know how to describe it," he exclaimed. "Julian, was that--?" He opened his eyes and looked up at the Esper.

"Try to describe it," instructed the Esper. "I know it can be hard to reduce to words, but try."

Redflare told him everything and was rewarded by a growing smile on his teacher's face.

"Yes, that is it exactly. With a bit of luck, I hope to be able to teach you to use that power, rather than let it drain away."

Ashlyn, meanwhile, just shook her head.

"I wish you could show me where to find it. I don't feel a thing, and I'm getting distinctly nauseous trying to draw in power that isn't there."

Julian frowned.

"Is that so? That is not a good sign, Ms. Du--Ashlyn. The nausea implies that you are searching correctly, and that you did not encounter anything in the way Redflare did implies that there is simply nothing to find. I'm sorry, but I believe it is more than likely that you are a latent only, rather than a full Esper."

"I'm sorry," Redflare told her gently, feeling badly that she lacked Esper abilities and worse because he did have them, that it lay between them. Ashlyn, though, just grinned back and tugged on her braid.

"Hey, Redflare, it's not that big a deal. Hurling magic spells like a wizard on the holovid was never one of my personal ambitions. If I'd had the power, it'd be nice, but it'd also be something of a hassle." She patted him on the shoulder. "I'll leave the magic-slinging to people like you. Besides, you know the fake magic of techniques and sleight-of-hand, so why not add on the real thing?"

He covered her hand with his, her skin smooth and cool to the touch.

"Thanks, Ashlyn."

"You're welcome, although it's hardly necessary to say." She winked at him. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll let you two spell-slingers get to it."

She hopped to her feet and strolled to the side of the room, where she leaned up against a padded wall.

Redflare looked at her again, but she showed no sign that her feelings were anything but as she'd described them. Accepting it as the truth, he turned back to Julian.

"All right, what next?"

"Just as the external power you are familiar with must be absorbed, shaped, and redirected by a technique, so must you guide the force within by a focus, a spell. A spell is not just a word or a gesture; it is above all else a way of thinking, a guide to the patterns of your will."

It sounded, Redflare reflected, like complete metaphysical gibberish, but he also understood exactly what it meant. As an experienced technique user he had followed the same procedure before, only with different results as appropriate to the techniques. Given what Julian had said about techniques being a further development of Esper magic, it made sense that magic spells would be very similar in their method.

Even given his familiarity with tech-use, though, mastering this basic Esper fire-spell, Flaeli, was by no means an easy task. Part of the burden was psychological, Julian gave him to understand. Just as his ability to use certain techniques rather than others was guided by his psyche, so too was his potential for magic. In Redflare's case, he had an affinity for nonviolent techs, ones which deceived or weakened his foes without harming them physically. Flaeli, on the other hand, was a simple and direct assault with fire. The truth was, Ashlyn would have had a much easier time of it than did he.

After over an hour of hard work, with Redflare's face streaked with sweat, his shirt clinging to his torso, and Julian's calm demeanor beginning to fray after repeated mistakes, Redflare at last broke through. It all seemed to fall into place at once, the warmth of the crystal sun channeled into flame that all but burst out of him. He nearly ended up scorching himself in surprise, but at the last second managed to hurl the flame away from himself to detonate against the far wall. It missed all of the targets entirely, but quite frankly he was just happy to have succeeded in casting the spell at all.

"There!" Julian applauded. "Now we can work on your aim."

Having done it once, it was easier and easier to call the fire forth on succeeding attempts. By the third try, he was able to hit his selected target, which was very satisfactorily destroyed by the flames. The fourth bolt did so as well, but while the fifth suffered no loss of performance it hurt to cast it, burning painfully inside his mind. Redflare gritted his teeth and reached for the sixth casting, gasping in pain as a spasm of sudden agony pierced himself from within. It was almost as if whatever part of himself he was using to absorb the power was becoming oversensitive, like skin rubbed raw. Nonetheless, he was about to draw upon that force once more when Julian grabbed his arm.

"That's enough. When it starts to hurt, you've reached your limit."

"What happens if you press the point? Do you eventually pass out from mental fatigue?"

"If you're lucky," Julian said quietly. "Sooner or later, your mind will become simply too drained to go on, just as if you overexert yourself with techniques. If you are fortunate, that will happen with magic use as well. However, since the power is within you, it is possible to open a channel which does not break off all the way, and the power starts to act inside you without your conscious control. It's as if..." He struggled for a proper simile. "As if you activated a grenade, then forgot to throw it."

"How pleasant," Ashlyn said dryly.

"The effects are not. Espers have gone mad from the psychic backlash, or simply died. Which ones were the more fortunate I cannot say." He turned his attention fully upon Redflare. "The pain is a warning to you. Do not push yourself past the limits of your endurance."

Redflare rubbed the back of his neck.

"Believe me, Julian, that's not one I'll forget any time soon."

"See that you don't. Now, my last instruction for this lesson is to go get that sleep that has escaped you thus far. You need to restore your mental energy, else it will have been fairly pointless to teach you magic before the upcoming battle.

"Like buying a vulcan and not having enough cash to get ammo, too."

"Exactly."

Maybe it was the mental exhaustion from the magic training, maybe the sense of near-relief from the emotional upheaval of the dawn hours, or perhaps it was Ashlyn's presence, the sudden explosion of feelings for her a tonic after enduring so many negative epiphanies. For whatever reason, though, almost the instant his head struck the pillow, Redflare was claimed by a deep and blissfully dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 34

It took just over ten minutes for a diligent search to turn up the trap door, a delay occasioned more by the size of the building and the poor lighting conditions than any brilliance in concealment. Indeed, it wasn't really a "door" at all, but a piece of metal that looked like a landskimmer roof that had been dragged across the hole hacked through the concrete floor. A metal handle was bolted to the inside, Redflare noted, to make it easier for someone inside to pull it back into place.

The tunnel descended into the dirt beneath, with wooden boards set as crude steps to aid in getting down. Redflare wondered how easy it had been to avoid utility conduits or sewer lines while digging, then put the question aside. Ultimately, he cared about whether it had a back door, not about initial construction.

Captain Everett shrugged, then took the lead; it was, he said with a grunt, what he was getting paid to do. The rest of them followed. The chamber had a dank, earthy smell, but there was something else as well, the sickly sweetness of blood, that made Redflare want to retch. They'd found the place where the Circle practiced its evil rites and blood sacrifices.

"By Heaven, this is vile," Julian cursed. "I can feel the presence of evil here." Redflare could as well, a wrongness that twisted at the base of his brain.

The dug room consisted of a single large chamber, perhaps a hundred feet on a side. The ceiling was supported by crude beams made of scraps of wood and metal; it would have been very easy to bring the whole thing down. Road flares hissed and sparked, casting an eerie red glow over everything. Their luminescent chemicals were needed, because there were no electrical wires and the lack of ventilation would have made fire a death trap from smoke inhalation. The four flares were set in iron sconces driven into the floor, each at one of the four corners of a diamond-and-circle design cut into the bare earth. A corpse, probably a homeless person to judge by his clothes, lay sprawled in the pattern's center.

One of the mercs flipped up his helmet's visor and retched in disgust. No doubt these hard-bitten soldiers were old friends with death, but there was a distinct difference between the evils of greed and petty cruelty and the willing embrace of a systematic, formal worldview centered in corruption. Here there was no spurious self-justification, no belief that they were in the right no matter how wrong the actions.

Just as the good side of magic was the golden glory Redflare had dreamed of as a child, its dark side was equally extreme in the other direction.

In that instant of shock and repulsion, Ashlyn suddenly shouted, "They're here!" and unleashed a Tsu technique. No doubt she realized that the gravity waves of Gra and Gigra could end up bringing the ceiling down on their heads, but for whatever reason a lance of light speared out.

Julian raised his cane, chanting, in the next instant, and another windspell launched forth against their unseen enemies. As it struck, the veil of invisibility was dropped, and Redflare could see what had been hidden, the poor lighting and his own distraction creating the stage conditions that had kept him from even seeing the telltale rippling in the air.

They were surrounded on three sides. The figures of Wulfeburne and Herrod were visible opposite the stairs, together with a tall, lean young man dressed in Bane Spike colors, denim vest and jeans. The view was obstructed, though, because there was a row of enemies in front of them, forming an arc together with those on either side.

These enemies were not human.

Probably they had been, once. They were generally humanoid, with one head, two arms, two legs, and the shabby remnants of clothing clinging to their bodies. Their flesh, though, was a hideous greenish-yellow color, some with hints of gray, and there was a rubbery slackness to their features that destroyed the individuality of each face, which made even gender all but impossible to distinguish.

Then, while the invaders looked on, stunned, the corpse within the (presumably) magic circle lurched to its feet, adding one to the number of attackers while confirming their source. Yet in some way, this extra horror served as the spark to jolt the hunters and mercs out of their momentary paralysis, allowing them to react before the monsters were on them.

Unlike the shambling corpses of holovid shows and Gothic fiction, there was nothing slow or clumsy about these ghouls. They sprang quickly, undead muscles in legs and torsos rippling as their bodies moved with bestial agility. Redflare barely ducked a rending claw, then took a hard punch to the belly from the thing's off hand. It was on him at once, tearing at the magician's shoulder. His poisonshot fell uselessly aside, and the thing lunged for his throat.

He didn't see it. Redflare's eyes were closed, the only way he could shut out the horror enough to focus his will. He called the fire, and the monster fell away from him, its body flash-burning.

"Fire!" he shouted into his commlink--subvocalization be damned!--"The things burn!"

The advice hit home; two of the mercs switched to Foi techniques with brutal effectiveness. Two more went down under waves of the monsters. Redflare cast his spell again and again, staggering as he torched yet another with the last Flaeli he could manage. Blade and gun, spell and technique were all set upon the undead horrors. Finally, Julian stepped forward and with a dramatic gesture, lashed out not at the monsters but at the three men who stood behind them. The one in gang colors waved his hand airily, and glittering green shields sprang up before each of them, taking the impact of the Hewn spell.

"I'm sick of this bastard," Herrod growled, and raised his hands--not to cast a spell, but to aim a Redfield Vindicator, a high-powered pulse-vulcan. The sight of the powerful military weapon in the hands of the corp-clad exec was almost laughable, but the stream of gunfire that poured from the weapon's barrel was not. Neither the ballistic armor of Julian's mantle nor the carbonsuit beneath could stand up to the pure power of the slugs; it was doubtful that even the titan plates worn by Dace and the mercs could have done the job. The Esper did not so much fall as he was blown off his feet, his corpse a bloody ruin as grotesque as any of the undead.

Kemet choked and dropped as a corpse spat something into his face even as he blew out its torso with his sonic guns.

"You...insufferable...idiot!" snarled the gang leader, obviously the mysterious "Gil." Redflare would have bet money that Gil would turn out to be Peter Gaffney, the last member of the Circle, but he'd have been wrong. This man looked almost like a caricature of literary villainy, with a handsome, angular face and jet black hair falling to just past his shoulders. His voice carried effortlessly through the room, easily audible over the grunts of pain, the roar of gunfire, and the groans of the monsters. "That was an Esper, and now he is dead, useless to me!"

And that finally settled the question of just who was really in control of the Circle.

"But...I..."

"But nothing!" The gang leader made a quick gesture, and a bolt of energy seemed to descend from above, regardless of the fact that they were indoors and underground, blasting into Paul Herrod. The Vindicator dropped to the ground with a clunk a half-second before his charred corpse did.

Then, the dark-haired man turned to the melee, his expression furious.

"This game no longer amuses me. Wulfeburne, let us end it."

"Yes, Master."

Wulfeburne quickly responded with the mindblast spell he'd used to such good effect before. More than one of the invaders realized what was coming and tried to draw a bead on the man, but the melee kept all but one from succeeding and that trooper saw his bullets deflect off a silvery-blue shield conjured up at another wave of the leader's hand. Then it was too late.

Just as before, a wave of exhaustion washed over Redflare, feeding into the weakness he already felt. Several of the others went down, all but one of the surviving mercs, Yoshida, and Dace. Only Ashlyn and Isis retained their feet among the hunters, and each had been temporarily staggered by the sleep-inducing spell.

The undead, meanwhile, those half-dozen or so that remained, seemed completely unaffected. Perhaps Wulfeburne's magic only sought out his enemies and had no effect on his allies, or perhaps the mindblast simply could not harm the mindless. One struck Isis a two-handed clubbing blow to the face, and the red-haired hunter joined the other fallen invaders.

"I don't care anymore!" Ashlyn screamed, regaining her senses just in time to dodge another ghoul. "Being buried alive would be better than this!"

Redflare was barely aware that he had slipped to his knees. Too much magic use, the attacks he'd taken, and the lingering effects of Wulfeburne's spell were too much for him. As if in a dream he saw Ashlyn thrusting her hands out, calling upon her Gigra technique. The shockwave flashed across the room, shattering four support timbers, annihilating at least as many of the living dead, knocking Wulfeburne head over heels, and even rocking the gang leader in his stance. Clots of dirt rained from the ceiling in a shower of grime, but the roof held.

Getting to his feet, Wulfeburne wiped blood from the corner of his mouth.

"These skags are..."

"Troublesome," his master finished for him. "I shall end this now."

He extended his hand, pointing towards the last three of the raiders, but Redflare did not get a chance to see what would happen. Even as a swirling windstorm began to take shape, he fell forward, falling, falling into a welcoming darkness.

## Chapter 35

Slowly, the darkness cleared, to be replaced once more by the ruddy light of the emergency beacons. Redflare's head still throbbed; apparently passing out didn't count as "rest" for restoring the fatigue caused by the use of magic. Or perhaps he'd been hauled awake by the force of an Arows or similar technique, and hadn't had the opportunity to finish the restoration. His shoulder burned, too, where the ghoul had clawed it; he could feel the tacky wetness of drying blood. So, he hadn't been out too long. Redflare tried to move, turn to see what had happened, and found that his wrists and ankles had been tied together behind his back. His commlink had, of course, been removed.

"Well, it seems the last of my guests is awake."

Gil.

Strong hands--Wulfeburne--pulled Redflare up to a kneeling position. He could see as his head was swung around that the others were tied too, recognizing Dace, Isis, Yoshida, a handful of troopers, and even Kemet--gagged and blindfolded, yes, but alive. Apparently the ghoul's toxin had been to induce unconsciousness rather than death. It couldn't be an accident; there were far too many living victims for them to have wanted to kill the invaders. The dead troopers, as well as the fallen enemies, merely lay sprawled on the floor where they had fallen, as if having lost their animation they were of no more concern than the other debris of the fight.

"Are we that valuable to you that you start torching your own people rather than let us be killed?" he asked sarcastically.

"I would kill a thousand like Herrod to get my hands on but one like you, or Wulfeburne, or Dumont, or that Esper he so stupidly killed." He said it matter-of-factly, almost earnestly, without the slightest trace of humor.

Redflare supposed that it wasn't much different from the corp-jump they'd all first believed this job was. Companies spent money extracting valuable personnel. The amount they paid was based on how valuable the target was. Apparently, having Espers or potential ones in his clutches was very valuable indeed to this man who ruled what was left of the Circle.

"Those," he dismissed the mercs and Redflare's friends with a sweep of his hand, "will merely replace the mesomen I have lost in capturing you. To raise them up, I must first strike them down with the power of my god."

"Your...god?" He shouldn't have been surprised. Every time he'd seen black magic in a book or on the holovid, someone had invariably dragged religion into it, usually the foulest kind.

"You, who have been born with the gift of magic, will soon come to know his glory and serve him even as I do. There is always a need for skilled minions."

"I'm not surprised, given how you treat the ones you've got." He nodded at Herrod's charred form, which lay just to his left, the dead man's outthrust arm actually touching his hip. No one had made even a pretense of cleaning up the dead.

Wulfeburne's hand cracked across the back of his skull, and the blue-haired sorcerer came around to stand next to his master.

"You are unschooled," replied the gang leader, "but you will soon learn the proper respect. As for this one, he was nothing. A tool cowed by threats. His corporate connections were useful in gathering information, but your exposure of him made him a liability I would not have suffered in any case. Just as the activities of the gang members you destroyed had made them too well-known to be effective servants, so I allowed them to be slain while whittling down your strength. Besides, in identifying Ashlyn Dumont for me, Herrod more than fulfilled his purpose. Not that his 'genetic profiling' and 'computer analysis' was any more effective than when I simply chose to walk your Downtown streets and observed you performing. I sensed your true nature immediately."

Redflare hated to admit that he'd been wondering about that.

"So you had your flunkies check up on me, and you came up with a scheme to deliver Ashlyn and myself to you in one little package, and even do it in a way that would cloud the backtrail of both of us so nobody would come looking for you." Keep them talking! he thought. As long as he was alive, there was a chance to escape.

Theoretically.

"Exactly." The too-handsome face contorted into a scowl. "Only, time and again you proved too stubborn, costing me in time and resources at every step. I shall have to all but begin anew."

Suddenly, the smile was back. A brilliant, shining smile. Ecstatic.

"But it was worth it. I have the two of you, and you will make fine initiates into my god's legion."

Redflare spat in his face. A puerile gesture, really. Cliched. But it felt right.

"I'm not like Wulfeburne here. I didn't go digging into old magic to try to get out of my rut. I gave all that up a decade ago. And after what we've seen, what you've done, do you really think we'd join you?"

For a brief, fleeting moment he was afraid that Ashlyn would do exactly that. The corporate executive, with her back to the wall, cutting the best deal she could to protect her interests. He could see it, and then in the next second his gut twisted with guilt at even letting the thought come into his head.

None of which was germane to the point. They'd tied him. Didn't they know he was good at slipping ropes? He'd done it once already during the course of this biz, after Holst had captured him.

But no, they don't know that. Holst worked for SDE, for Yoshida.

The combination of bound limbs, gags, and blindfolds that the others wore was as effective as plasmarings for blocking technique use. They were just meat to Gil. He and Ashlyn, though, were only tied, maybe because they needed the two of them to see and hear what was to come.

"Do you hear me? You get nothing from us. You can kill us, but we'll never worship whatever devil you claim you're serving."

He'd cut his wrist; it burned like his shoulder, but the blood helped, too, by making the rope slippery. A little lubrication could go a long way under these circumstances. Redflare almost had a hand free.

"Oh, yes, you will. For the One I serve is no mere fantasy, no illusionary idol born of human minds and their desire to feel meaning in their lives, justification for their actions. My god is real, purely real, and I shall bring you into his fold, within his darkness."

Gil smiled again, distantly, fixedly, like his face was nothing but a carnival mask.

"Watch and behold."

His body rippled. There was no other way to describe it; it was as if a small wave had flowed up through it, distorting the flesh.

What is this? Do they have me hooked up to some kind of VR sim? Nah, that's a load of--

Suddenly, Gil's body expanded, growing tall, over nine feet. The too-perfect face vanished--it had been too perfect, nothing more than an artificial creation of magic. Long, flowing robes of scarlet swelled out around it, an ornate symbol on the chest, melding with a conical headpiece with full-face mask showing only a slit for vision. The arms were frightfully elongated, the hands the same, each claw-tipped finger a pasty, bluish-white.

This thing wasn't human--not Palman, Motavian, or even Dezolian. It had never been human.

Perhaps for the first time in his life, Redflare truly believed in demons.

"Now do you understand, little Esper?" it keened in a voice that was high and shrill. "I am no crazed fanatic, no deluded cultist. I am a Gi-le-Farg! I stand among the highest of my deity's creations. You will submit to me."

It reached out with those two impossibly long hands, index fingers extended, and pressed the tips of its claws to Redflare's temples, just denting the flesh.

The black lightning roared through the magician, exploding through every nerve ending. Pain seared his entire body, as if every single inch of flesh, every bone, had been plunged into the fire. His arteries felt as if his heart was pumping acid through them rather than blood. His back arched. He screamed.

None of which was the worst part.

Black flames seemed to burn along his nerves, seeking up into his brain. They played with Redflare's neurons, hunting deep into his long-term memory. The Gi-le-Farg's magic burned down through him, entering the hidden corners of the magician's soul, seeking out the darkest corners. What they found there, they lifted out and tenderly, almost lovingly presented to Redflare's mind in visions, hallucinations.

He saw his father, a lean, half-starved fellow with a drooping mustache. A weak man, whose tiny shop was the target of two or three rival groups of "protection" rackets, gangs and syndicates. His hands had taken to shaking there, near the end, whenever he hadn't had a bottle in them. How he would cringe when Redflare's mother would accuse him of cowardice. "At least stand up to them. You're paying the Miklaers for protection, aren't you? Well, the least they could do is keep the gangs from shaking you down for more!"

Redflare didn't know who it was that his father had finally stood up to. He didn't know if the syndicate goons had killed him for demanding they keep the gangs off his back in exchange for their extortion money, or if it had been a gang because he'd refused to pay, claiming syndicate protection. Redflare hadn't even seen the body. He'd seen his mother, though. She'd turned stark white when Scarface Joey, the Miklaer "collection agent," had brought the news. Then she'd turned wordlessly, locked herself into the bathroom, and hung herself from an overhead pipe. He'd seen her, all right, when they'd broken the door down, her blackened tongue protruding from her mouth.

He saw Scarface Joey's sneer as he announced to the two Denton children that the syndicate would be taking the store in payment of certain "debts" owed by their late father. And they had. There was no one to help them, no Juvenile Protection Bureau rep for two kids who had never been registered as legal citizens.

Suddenly, Redflare felt all his hatred well up inside him and cascade out at the vision of the thug. Redflare saw Joey scream as he was consumed in a cloud of acidic decay that corroded and rotted his flesh, until there was nothing left of the predator but a stinking corpse.

The vision changed until he saw four young men, toughs with the electric red-dyed hair of the Crimson Razors pushing Redflare's father around his shabby little shop. He saw the knives come out, long shanks of steel with serrated blades or curved claws strapped in retractable sheaths to the backs of gangers' wrists. He saw the metal tear into Noel Denton, cutting and slicing his flesh, scarlet blood spraying grotesquely.

Once more the hate boiled up within Redflare, and all of a sudden the Razors burst into flame, each becoming a burning pillar as red as their now-scorched hair had been.

With a wrench the vision shifted once again. This time, Redflare saw his sister Marys, tricked out in skimpy black leather, leading a man back to her shabby bedroom because it was the only way a fifteen-year-old girl in the Court could support herself and a brother four years her junior. Redflare heard the gasps and cries, then the john burst from the room, his eyes wild with fear and his face green with horror at what he'd done. The magician saw again the naked body of his sister sprawled lewdly on the bed, stripped of dignity even in death, her sightless, bulging eyes staring upwards at nothing, the dark bruises of finger-marks obvious on her throat. The rage ate him again, rising up and consuming the client like a hungry, dark shadow.

Then the visions came faster. Those who'd abused him. A senior WizKid who'd tried to keep him out of the gang. A rival who'd gutted one of Redflare's friends. A DLE agent who'd busted him on the street and broken a rib for entertainment purposes. Everyone who'd ever hurt him. Everyone who'd caused him pain.

That was what the Gi-le-Farg's god offered. The power to never be hurt again. To destroy anyone who so much as attempted it. To take what he wanted from life, to no longer be weak, never a victim.

It was a seductive promise, calling up all the hurts of his past and showing him how they needn't happen, how they never had had to happen, if only he'd found then what was being offered to him now. Redflare ached to take the offer, the power, to crush out his enemies and be safe and secure from harm forever.

The pain that raged through him made it impossible to think, to gather even a single coherent thought--which, no doubt, was its purpose, to make him feel and decide with only emotions. Yet the visions had done more than show him his pain and weakness. They had shown him the faces that had caused his pain. Scarface Joey. The Crimson Razors--were they really guilty or just a vision? The nameless man who'd killed Marys. They were the type of men who would wield the power being offered. Not the victims, no, but the victimizers. Paul Herrod and Jason Wulfeburne.

Repulsed by the association, Redflare's soul recoiled, screaming, from the offer.

Reality returned with a sudden twist of thought, the pain vanishing with the hallucination.

"No," he whispered. His chest heaved; his entire body throbbed with soreness from the aftereffects. "Never."

"There is time," the monster keened, moving back slightly, as if to consider its next move. "Anyone can be broken with enough time, and I have all that I need."

It was right, Redflare knew. He'd been close to caving after one session. How would he be after two? Or three? Or five? No doubt it would vary the techniques, too, keeping him off-balance, to avoid the sources of his rejection, if its alien intelligence could comprehend them. He had only one chance, and he had to take it at once.

"No, you don't," he snarled, and jerked his right hand free of the ropes, wincing in pain as skin tore on the rough cord. His fingers brushed his vest on their way up, sore or not Redflare forced them to do their work.

"Redflare, no!" Ashlyn screamed, well aware that casting another spell might kill him or worse, just as Julian had said, and being able to see for herself that he'd been stripped of guns or other lethal weapons.

He flung his hand open as he thrust it towards the Gi-le-Farg.

"Flaeli!"

A shower of sparks exploded from his palm.

The Gi-le-Farg was ready. Perhaps it could have taken the flame-bolt of a Flaeli spell without serious harm, but it saw no reason to. One taloned finger was extended, matching Redflare's motion, and the sparks were stopped by the glittering green barrier against energy and magic. In fact, not the slightest bit got through, which was not surprising since they were nothing more than a magician's flash-powder.

No more than a half-second later, Redflare's left hand, freed by the slack on the rope, brought up Herrod's fallen pulse-vulcan. The Gi-le-Farg's complete carelessness towards his late minion's corpse had extended to his weapon. The anti-energy barrier was no opposition at all to the purely kinetic assault of the vulcan slugs that slammed into the fiendish wizard. The gun's roar was deafening, but Redflare did not let up, grabbing onto the front grip with his free hand to keep the weapon steady on target, and he emptied the remainder of the clip at point-blank range into the Gi-le-Farg. The monster let out a single shriek of protest, and then its body seemed to implode into a cloud of stinking vapor that dissipated at once.

There were several loud thumps from behind Redflare, the surviving undead collapsing now that their controller was dead. Jason Wulfeburne, though, did not fall. He stared in shock, scarcely believing what he was seeing, but Redflare's gun was empty and Wulfeburne's magic definitely was not. His hands began to rise, summoning a no doubt real killing spell.

"Tsu!"

Wulfeburne staggered as Dumont's technique hit him. Perhaps his armored clothing kept the laserlike tech from slicing him apart, or perhaps the Esper resistance to spell effects extended to damaging techniques as well. His concentration was shattered, though, and the tech had stunned him momentarily. Redflare hobbled to his feet, ankles still hampered by the rope, and took two stumbling steps forward.

The pulse-vulcan might have been out of ammunition, but it made a very satisfactory cracking sound as the magician applied it directly to the side of Wulfeburne's skull.

This was one time he doubted he'd object to killing an unconscious foe.