

The Proteus Manuscript

written by Calle Dybedahl

NaNoWriMo 2004

This story is flawed in many ways. Some of them come from the fact that it got cut down by 2/3 of the intended story to get anywhere close to 50k words and one month of writing time. Others are just plain bad writing. One of the main characters is too dull for words and needs a complete personality transplant. The bad guys are hardly visible and don't make sense. Several supporting characters have no reason to be in the story at all. The central mystery is never explained. Quite a few things about the background don't quite make sense.

If, in spite of all this, you still want to read it, feel free.

Featured fandoms: original creations

Featured pairings:

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: PG

Chapter One: Library

"You mean you actually, physically go to a workplace?" the annoying git said.

Elena speared another piece of bacon on her fork. It was cooked too soft. Elena liked her bacon fried so hard that it crumbled rather than bent when one pressed on it. This one didn't. The fork just went through it, and the bacon stayed in one piece. Elena sighed. This was what happened when your usual breakfast place was closed for redecoration and you had to eat somewhere else. You didn't get the food like you wanted it and annoying gits tried to talk to you before you'd got properly caffeinated.

"Yeah," she said. "I go to an actual workplace."

Elena had taken a seat by the greasy counter, and the annoying git had taken the one next to her. Like most people, he looked like he was in his early thirties. In this part of town maybe he actually was. Not everybody could afford proper antiagathics, after all. His skin was almost as pale as Elena's, and his crew-cut hair was blonde.

"Amazing," he said. "I thought nobody did that any more. Doesn't it get dull, going to the same place every day?"

"I like predictable," she said.

"I don't think I could ever do that," the git said.

"Really," Elena said. "So where do you go?"

Suddenly he looked embarrassed. Elena sipped her coffee.

"Well, you know, it's kind of hard to choose..."

"Local sports bar to watch the games with your mates?" she suggested.

He turned away from her and suddenly got very interested in the spot of wall behind the counter where the menu was projected.

"Why don't they have any naan?" he said. "This place never has any naan!"

Elena looked at him.

"It's a traditional American place," she said. "Naan is English."

He mumbled something she couldn't hear, but that she doubted was very polite. Feeling a bit more cheerful than before, she quickly finished off her bacon and drank the coffee. It tasted foul, just like it should. She touched her card to the counter and authorized payment with a decent tip, then nodded towards the woman behind the counter and left the diner.

Elena worked at the North Atlantis University Library. It wasn't high-paying or glamorous work, and unlike most jobs it required her to actually show up in an office at least three days a week. She usually went there every day. As she'd told the annoying git, she liked predictable. She liked stable. Safe. The NAU Library qualified for all three. Situated on an artificial island in the middle of the north Atlantic, it still after a century and a half hadn't managed to breed any noticeable domestic trouble. It was a well-known haven for information storage and processing, and its one university was famous for its infotech contributions.

Which mostly made their library quite redundant. What use is a dedicated information storage and retrieval department in an entire institution dedicated to it? All the fast-paced, important stuff happened out in the institutions. The library got to handle the

stuff that wasn't interesting enough for anybody else to want it. Keeping up database subscriptions. Handling details of mutual access agreements with other institutions. Making sure old stuff stayed accessible to modern equipment.

And sometimes very occasionally, they got to handle actual physical books.

"Inter-library loan?" Elena said. "What the hell is an inter-library loan?"

"Some sad librarian you are," Jocelyn said. "It's a loan from another library to someone here via us."

"A loan of what?"

Jocelyn was a striking woman on her early sixties, with deep black hair and olive skin. She'd worked at the NAU Library longer than anyone else still there, and for all the Elena knew she might have worked there since it was founded. She fit into the place like a fish into water, moving among its stacks of memory banks in a way that made it look like she wouldn't really notice if she suddenly went blind. She'd still navigate among them just as easily. Elena had never seen her go into the carefully environment-controlled paper storage, but she guessed Jocelyn knew her way around in there just as well.

"A book, of course," Jocelyn said.

"No shit?" Elena said. "Somebody sent an actual book around?"

"Yeah. It's for someone in the crypto department."

They were sitting in what passed for a reception area, which was just the part of the office closest to the outside door. Jocelyn's desk faced outwards, so she could see and deal with the few people who came to visit them. It almost happened every month that they had a visitor.

"Crypto department," Elena said. "That's in Heraklion Street, isn't it? It's only a couple of blocks from where I live, I can drop it off there on my way home."

"Fine by me," Jocelyn said. "Don't forget to have them sign for it."

She handed the package over to Elena. It was quite heavy, roughly square with a side as long as Elena's lower arm, a full handspan thick and well wrapped in impact-protection plastic. The plastic was thoroughly scratched and looked like it really had made a difference to the contents.

"What happened to this thing?" Elena said. "And where does it come from anyway?"

"Didn't ask," Jocelyn said. "Wait a moment..."

She looked briefly at her projection screen. Her eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Neptune," she said. "It's from some kind of corporate research station orbiting Neptune."

She frowned. "Why the hell are we doing inter-library loans with a corporation?" she asked.

"Beats me," Elena said. "Who brought a *book* to sodding Neptune anyway? It must have cost a fortune to get it there. Or is it some kind of modern replica thing?"

"Don't ask me, ask the crypto geeks who loaned it," Jocelyn said. "They should know."

"I think I will," Elena said. She headed for her own desk.

"Let me know what you find?"

"Sure," Elena said. "As soon as I find something."

"Hi there," the letter began. "Sorry for not being in touch for so long. Things got kind of crazy by the end there, you know."

Jeraldine read the opening lines over and over again. They still didn't make any kind of sense. She looked down towards the end of the letter, where it said "with endless love, Rose."

She ran a finger along the screen, as if the feel of its rough polymer would make things make more sense. But it didn't. It just looked like a dark-skinned finger against a white projection surface.

She checked the signature again, even though she'd already done so several times. It still checked out OK. The letter really was signed with Rose's key. Sure, it was possible to fake a signature, but you pretty much had to be a government or multinational in order to afford the equipment for it. And why would any of them fake a letter to a lowly freelance investigator? If they wanted her to do anything it'd be much easier and cheaper just to hire her!

But the letter must be fake. It couldn't be from Rose, because Rose was eight years dead. Of that, Jeraldine was very sure. They'd been together, late in the war, outside their ship repairing an antenna when they got attacked by a Baseline autonomous drone. The thing went for the ship's hull, of course. People in non-combat spacesuits ranked very low to its target selection algorithms. Such a human wouldn't be a threat to it, and pretty much dead anyway once their ship was disabled. So the drone went for the ship. It was just plain bad luck for Rose that one of the drone's kinetic kill missiles took the way to the hull through her chest.

Seeing that from an arm's length away left very little doubt. Rose was *dead*, no question about it.

So what the heck was she doing suddenly sending letters eight years after she died? A letter asking for help, too. Help that didn't particularly make sense, on top of it all.

Jeraldine got up from her chair and started to pace. Ten steps from the desk to the door, across the expensive hand-knit Persian rug and past the reproduction of Battino's painting of the Mars landing. Kind of trite, but she liked it. Turn left, and twelve steps from the door to the window. Like many others on North Atlantis, she had a sea view. In fact, all of her view was sea. She'd have to lean out the window to be able to see the wall of the building she lived in, or the walls of the ones next to it. There was a five-meter or so strip of land between the house and the sea, but from up on the twenty-second floor it was kind of hard to tell. Occasionally, seagulls would land on her windowsill.

Even more occasionally, she'd leave the window open and use the gulls for target practice when they landed. Or just flew past.

Turn left, another ten paces and she was back at the desk. The screen was thumb-tacked to the wall. She'd been meaning to get a proper frame for it ever since she moved in, but somehow she never got around to it. She knew it wasn't good for the circuits, and you could see some stress distortion near the corners, but she'd got used to it. In a way she even liked it. It made it her screen rather than just a screen.

And right now it had an impossible letter on it.

An upload, perhaps? An infospace copy of her old lover's mind. Rose had intended to get one made, and there had been opportunities for her to do it. But if there was an infomorph of Rose around, why hadn't it made itself known to Jeraldine? Sure, infomorphs

weren't exactly popular since the war, but there were plenty of places where they were legal and could live in peace. Even if she'd been hiding, it didn't seem reasonable that it'd take her *eight years* to get a simple message out. Although the message now hinted that she was somehow trapped...

Jeraldine sighed. She wished she could forget this. That she could just leave it be and get on with the life she'd built for herself after the war. But she couldn't. Particularly not if it involved Rose. Sure, they hadn't been lovers for some time when Rose died, but they'd still been good friends and important to each other. She couldn't just leave this without at least finding out what was going on.

She downloaded the letter to her wearables and put her leather coat on. It was a bit too warm for a coat, really, but she felt much too naked without all the equipment hidden in it. The North Atlantis University was some way away, so she'd probably want to take a taxi. Once she got to the campus, the University's systems should guide her to the library. She'd been on campus many times before, but never to the library, so that'd be a first. She hoped it'd be obvious what she needed to do once she got there. "Get the book," the letter said. "You must get the book. The book can set us free."

The black truck floated silently along the street behind the NAU campus. It crept forward at less than walking pace, badly annoying the cars that wanted to travel the street at a more normal vehicle speed. It travel all along the rear edge of the University, turned the corner and kept moving just as slowly down the next edge. A keen observer who tagged along might have noticed that it was accompanied by three vans, also black, that moved around more rapidly and quite randomly, but never strayed more than a block away from the truck. Eventually, the large vehicle pulled in to the side of the road and settled on the ground.

Inside the truck, three people were sitting in front of equipment racks. A handful more were sitting in seats near the rear doors, waiting. They as well as the ones by the equipment were safely strapped to their seats. A stern-looking woman were pacing up and down the length of the truck. All of the people in the truck wore black uniforms. The ones waiting near the door also wore black face-covering helmets and held assault rifles.

"Any sign yet?" the stern-looking woman said.

"Yes, sir," a young man said. He had a number of wires leading from the rack in front of him to a socket in his neck. "We have definite sign of quantum-construct interference in building seven."

"Can you be a little more precise? That's a fucking office block, it'd take days to search."

"We're working on it, major," the woman at the rack next to the young man's said.

"Can't you work on it faster?" the major said.

"No," the third technician said. Like the other two, she was jacked into her equipment.

"We're trying to trace very subtle signals," she continued. "The object has to be more or less stationary for several hours to give us anything detectable, and even then we can't get much closer than thirty meters within a reasonable time."

The major sighed.

"Just let me know the moment you have something," she said.

"Certainly, sir," the first technician said.

Usually, the library staff had plenty of work to do. The actual research staff never thought so, of course, since they were convinced that they did the only worthwhile work in the University. But if not for the people arranging access for them to the material and resources they needed, they wouldn't be doing much. Occasionally, it bothered Elena that her colleagues didn't get the kind of appreciation they deserved. But only occasionally. Most days, she just didn't care, and neither did the colleagues.

And some days there just wasn't anything much to do. All the subscriptions ran smoothly, nobody made any last-minute requests, nothing unusual came in. On those days, they'd take turns leaving early. Somebody had to be there just in case something after all did happen, but not all of them. So it came as no great surprise to Elena when Jocelyn yelled at her to piss off for the rest of the day, nor did she have to shout it twice. Elena took the book package under her arm and left.

She liked the NAU campus. It was modern enough to be comfortable at the same time as it was old enough to feel settled. The people who designed it had known that humans require some variety in their environment, so in spite of the fact that the entire university rested on ground that floated on top of Elena didn't know how many kilometers of water the ground she walked on looked quite natural. It had hills, lawns, trees, flower-beds and all the other kinds of things proper ground should have. There were even a few large rocks sticking out of the soil. On a sunny and warm late afternoon like this they made perfect things to lean against and sit in the shadow of for tired students. Of which there was plenty. There was also plenty of more energetic student, who spent their energy running around the lawns throwing things to each other. The majority of them weren't dressed in much at all, only shorts or bikinis.

Elena considered this an unofficial perk of the job. Even though all the students she'd met so far, though nice and intelligent people, were painfully naïve and immature and really not what she'd consider relationship material, just ogling their toned young bodies made her feel happier and kept her libido active.

She left the campus area and walked out into the city proper. It, too, was nice, for a city of several million people. Which wasn't saying much, really. It had dirty streets, heavy crowds, homeless people, crime and all those other things all cities seemed to be perpetually fighting. Of course, it also had nice people, theaters, shops, restaurants, nightclubs and bars.

Particularly bars. North Atlantis was mildly famous for having more bars per inhabitant than any other place north of the equator and inside the Earth's atmosphere. And in only a few more blocks Elena would be walking past one of her favourite ones. She woke her wearables and messaged Sona.

"Out and about at this time of day?" Sona said when she answered. "Did they finally fire you, or have you just escaped their nefarious clutches?"

"Once again, I have escaped them," Elena said. "Care to join me for a celebratory drink or nine?"

"Got one more patient to see before I can leave," Sona said. "I'll be down in about an hour."

"I'll be at Ramon's Loss," Elena said. "The nice table in the rear corner, if I can get it."

"Ramon'll let you have it just so that he won't have to have your ugly mug near the windows," Sona said.

"Fine by me," Elena said. "I'm not afraid to use the talents nature gave me. See you there."

"Sure thing," Sona said and closed the connection. Elena walked on towards the bar.

"Which part of the university?" the taxi said when they got close enough for it to matter.

"Not sure, really," Jeraldine said. "Do you know where the university library is?"

"Of course I do," the taxi said. "It's towards the back, near Plato Park."

The thing sounded almost offended that she'd questioned its professional skills.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't use taxis very much. I meant no offense."

"Well, you know, it might not help that much if you did ride a lot," it said. "Some other taxi companies that I could mention just don't bother to buy more than the basic street-map databases for their cars. So no apology needed, ma'am. Just pointing out a fact."

"So you've got a heftier database?" she asked, just to make conversation. Outside the window, the city kept passing by.

"Sure do," the taxi said. "With live updates direct from the North Atlantis planning office, so I know about map changes *before* they happen!"

"Does it cover the university?"

"Sure does."

"Could I have a copy of just that bit? It'd be really useful. I need to get somewhere there quickly and I don't know my way around."

The taxi fell silent for a while. It even seemed to slow down a bit, although that might just as well have been a simple request from Traffic Control.

"Well, you know," the taxi said after a while. "That ain't quite kosher."

"I can pay," Jeraldine said.

"Now that would definitely be illegal," the taxi said. "No way I can do that. I'd lose my license, and then what would I do?"

There seemed to be some kind of traffic problem a bit up the street, because they were slowing down even more and she could hear cars honking in the distance.

"Never mind then," she said. "But maybe if I give you a generous tip you could help me find my way in some other fashion?"

"Maybe I could," the taxi said. "You never know."

Slowly, they made their way past a large black truck parked at the side of the road. Jeraldine frowned.

"That's weird," she said.

"What's weird?" the taxi said.

She point back the way they'd just come.

"That truck," she said. "It looked like a military urban assault vehicle with the external gun mounts removed and the entire thing painted black."

"Eh," the taxi said. "Just leftovers from the war. I see a lot of that around. People buy them cheap and rebuild them just enough to get them approved for road use. Stupid thing was probably standing there because it had broken down."

"Maybe you're right," Jeraldine said. And maybe you're really not, she thought. That wasn't war surplus, that was way newer than that. But what would something like that be doing here?

"How far are we from the library?" she said. It didn't feel like much of a stretch to think that the unusual thing might be connected to the impossible thing.

"Very close," the taxi said. "Just next block, on the left side."

In an alley to the right a black van with no brand name on it was parked. A couple of blocks ahead, another one just like it made a U-turn and headed back towards the truck. Jeraldine turned around and looked back the way they'd come. A couple of blocks behind the truck she saw a third black van.

Right. Her long-dead girlfriend suddenly send her a letter asking her to pick a book at the library, and when she gets to the library it's being watched by an urban assault team. Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to think that it was coincidence.

"I'll get off right here, if you don't mind," she said.

"You sure?" the taxi said. "It's just one more block."

"I'm sure," she said. "Although I'd appreciated it if you could give me directions to the library reception desk."

"Riiight," the taxi said. "I see. Of course I can do that. If you'll just authorize payment for the trip and set a suitable system to receive, please."

She set her wearable to take and quarantine whatever the taxi wanted to send her.

"How much is it?" she asked.

"Didn't I say?" the taxi said. "Sorry 'bout that. 5 pounds fifty, please."

"Five fifty! That's daylight robbery!"

"I can see how it might look that way, true. But I'd like to point out that I took you here along the time-optimal route with an absolute minimum of delay and discomfort."

"Those database updates aren't cheap, you know," it added as an afterthought.

She couldn't help laughing. At least the thing did its fleecing with style. She beamed it fifty quid, in the hope that it'd remember their earlier conversation about a copy of the database.

"Thanks muchly, ma'am," the taxi said. "Here's the instructions she asked for."

She watched in silence as a major amount of data transfered to her wearable. A brief look showed that it indeed was a three-dimensional map of North Atlantis, of a level of detail that she'd never seen before. A level of detail that would be very useful to a private investigator like herself, and that would become outdated relatively quickly.

"That looks excellent," she said. "I'll remember you address, in case I want to make use of your fabulous service again."

"Happy to have been of service, ma'am," it said. "Have a nice day."

Jeraldine stepped out of the taxi, and it slowly moved away down the street. So what now? The assault team, whoever they were, seemed to be waiting for something. Possibly for someone to show up and try to fetch something, like a book. In which case it would be unwise for her to do so. Or they might be waiting for something to happen at a certain time, in which case it would be wise to get the book *before* that something happened. Jeraldine sighed. Choices...

She'd never been any good at waiting.

She looked through the taxi's map for an alternative entrance to the library, just in case the assault team was waiting for a six-foot-plus black woman with long active multicolored hair to walk in the door. It was hard to find one, since the university wasn't exactly built with security in mind. Doing her best impression of someone who knew exactly where she was going, she walked in through the nearest door. Like most buildings at this end of the university, it was an office block more than a hundred years old. Which was kind of nice, since that meant that the rooms mostly stayed put. Made it far easier to make a useful passive map. Like the one Jeraldine now had.

She followed the map through several underground walkways, turning at the crossings as the map indicated. She probably could've made it even without the map if she'd known about the entrance, since there were signs pointing towards the library at several places. But it would almost certainly have taken longer, and in any case it was nice to know that the map seemed to be accurate. She'd really have to do business with that taxi again, if it really could keep providing up-to-date maps like this. Hell, who knew? Selling those might be what it really made a living out of.

"Sir?"

The major turned to the soldier who had spoke. It was the woman at the closest electronics rack.

"Yes?"

"Building seven, tenth floor, most probably in the room just north of the central stairwell. 90% probability that the object has spent more than nine of the past ten hours there. Building map data mark the location as the university library's reception area."

The major nodded. She touched a little stud fastened to her collar.

"All teams, status report," she said.

"Bravo team standing by," a voice said from nowhere in particular.

"Bravo team, you enter building seven through its front entrance and secure the stairwell and lifts from there to level ten."

"Understood."

"Charlie team standing by," another voice said.

"Charlie team, you go in via the roof and secure the stairwell and lifts from there down to level ten."

"Understood."

"Delta team standing by and monitoring," a third voice said.

"How are we doing for police interference?" the major asked.

"None so far," the voice replied. "We have signal breakers in place, and the local police isn't very efficient. We should have at least fifteen minutes from when we break contact with Traffic Control until somebody shows up to investigate. Might be less if we do something highly noticeable, but probably not much less even then."

"Delta team, stay where you are and keep monitoring. If the police shows up before we're done, slow them down to give us time to extract."

"Understood."

She touched the stud again.

"Driver, take us in ass-end first through the tenth-floor wall right in front of the stairwell. Team, be ready to get out and secure that library the moment we're standing still."

A short chorus of "Understood" came from the people in the truck. The major sat down in a free seat and strapped herself in. She touched the stud on her collar.

"Go," she said.

Elena was well into her third drink when Sona finally showed up.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "Complication. Took longer than planned.

Elena shrugged.

"That happens," she said. "Nice to see you."

Ramon's Loss was a smallish place in a back alley that served basic food and decent alcohol. It had little to recommend to the casual observer. It just happened to be the place where Elena had met with her friends for almost as long as they'd lived on North Atlantis.

"Nice to see you too," Sona said. She and Elena had been lovers for a couple of years, and somehow had managed to stay friends after the relationship died. Elena had no idea how, so she suspected it must be Sona's doing. Sona always was the wiser of them.

Ramon came by and placed a pint of ale and a plate of fries in front of Sona. She smiled thanks at him.

"What's that?" she said, nodding at the package lying on the table next to Elena.

"Book," Elena said. "Going to deliver it to an off-campus university department tomorrow."

"A book?" Sona said. "You mean an actual real-life paper and stuff book?"

"Yeah," Elena said. "It's not *that* extraordinary, we have a whole bunch of them at the library."

"I've never seen one," Sona said. "Can I have a look?"

Elena thought about it. There didn't seem to be any harm in it. The seals on the package were all intact, so it probably hadn't been opened on its way here, which was an argument for letting it be. On the other hand, she worked for the university library. It was her job to properly catalogue and keep track of all books that got sent to them. Particularly physical ones. And who said she couldn't do the inspecting and making sure in her favourite bar?

"Sure," she said. "In fact, I want to see it too."

"Where does it come from?" Sona asked.

"Right now or originally?"

"Well, both, I guess."

"Right now, from Neptune," Elena said. "Originally, I have no idea."

She carefully broke the seal on the impact plastic and unwrapped it. Inside was, as advertised, a book. It was almost as large as the package had been, and every bit as heavy. It seemed to be bound in old, worn leather, and it had nothing printed on either the cover or the spine. It looked very old.

"Wow," Sona said. "That looks like it belongs in a museum."

"I guess that's kind of what we are," Elena said. "Although I wonder what someone in the crypto department wants with this. They usually just get stuff with high-level maths and shit like that in it. This looks more like state of seventeen hundred than state of the art."

"Open it and see," Sona said. "Can't stop now, can you?"

Elena laid the book carefully in front of herself, and opened the front cover. It was heavy, even heavier than it looked. Whatever it was that the leather was glued on to, it wasn't ordinary wood or cardboard.

The front page only had a few words on it. They were in large letters, printed with a narrow and old-fashioned font. "THE PROTEUS MANUSCRIPT," it said. Under that, in smaller print, it said "A Detailed Guide to Some of the Secrets of the Universe."

"Almost full points for ego," Sona said. She'd got up from her chair and was reading over Elena's shoulder. "They lose some for the 'some'. Any decent egomaniac would've claimed that it contained *all* the secrets to the universe."

Elena frowned. "Does this look old to you?" she said.

"Well, yeah," Sona said. "Way old. But I don't know much about antiques, so that doesn't really mean much."

"I wonder why somebody thought it was important enough to physically drag it all they way out to Neptune," Elena said.

Sona sat back down and ate a couple of fries.

"Sentimental value?" she suggested between bites.

"I guess," Elena said. She turned the page, and suddenly her entire world turned brilliant white.

The central stairwell of the library building was spacious and well-lit. There as a staircase winding its way around a big central shaft, in the middle of which two lifts were placed. On every story, a kind of bridge reached from the lifts to the staircase and the entrances to the various levels. The architect, whoever it was, had chosen to make the bridges out of near-invisible transparent material. Which certainly added to the well-lit and the spacious, but it also gave everybody using the lifts for the first time a good scare when they were just about to step out of the lift and looked down at many, many stories of nothing but air. Not that Jeraldine had any problems with heights, born and raised in an O'Neill colony as she was, but it did startle her at first. She thought dark thoughts about architects trying to make a name for themselves as she walked over it and through the library door.

The library, or at least its reception room, looked just like your average office. Desks, chairs, food maker, faded old prints on the walls. The room was empty of people, but for one desk that had a middle-aged or so woman sitting behind it. She looked up when Jeraldine entered.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Can I help you with something?"

"I don't know," Jeraldine said. "I think I'm here to pick up a book, but I don't know what it looks like, where it came from, who it was sent to or anything else about it."

The woman looked at her silence for a few moments.

"Tall order," she eventually said. She gestured towards the chair on the visitor side of her desk.

"I'm Jocelyn Hunnings," she said. "Sit down and tell me what little you do know and we'll see if we can't help you."

"Thanks," Jeraldine said. She sat down without taking her coat off.

"My name's Jeraldine Kuzia," she said. "Usually, I'm a private investigator."

"Usually?" Jocelyn said. "What are you when you're not?"

"Depends on how badly I need money," Jeraldine said. "Investigating isn't a very lucrative business. Although it's mostly bodyguard work."

"And in which capacity is it you think you're here to pick up a book?"

"Neither of those," Jeraldine said. "This morning I suddenly got a message from an old friend I thought dead. It says that she needs my help, and the way to help her is to go to the North Atlantis university library and get 'the book'."

"The book?"

"Just 'the book', yes."

"That doesn't give me much to go on," Jocelyn said. "And even if I do find something I may not be able to help you. Are you a student or employee of the university?"

"I'm aware of that," Jeraldine said. "And no, I'm not. But I thought I could at least ask, even if you're going to say no. Have you had something out of the ordinary arrive lately? Anything at all?"

Jocelyn hesitated. "Actually, there did appear an unusual book today," she said. "Where..."

Her voice was drowned by a terrible noise from outside. It sounded like a wall had come crashing down, and it didn't stop.

Jeraldine got up from her chair.

"Do you have a rear exit?" she shouted, to make herself heard over the din.

Jocelyn nodded, and Jeraldine gestured at her to lead the way. The library employee briefly looked towards the front door, from which direction the noise came, and then apparently decided that getting out was a good idea. She rose and ran towards the rear of the room. Jeraldine followed. As she ran, she pulled a small handgun from an inside pocket.

Just before they reached the rear door, the front door came crashing in. Several black-clad people wielding assault rifles came immediately after it. While Jocelyn opened their escape door, Jeraldine turned around and fired at the intruders. It was quite obvious that they were neither the police nor friendly, so she felt quite justified in trying to hurt them as much as possible.

It seemed they hadn't been quite prepared for armed resistance. Jeraldine got in a few good shots before they reacted to her, and the first two intruders fell to the floor. The one behind them started firing, wildly spraying bullets all over the room. Behind her, Jeraldine heard a grunting sound and then a creak as the door opened. She turned and ran, pushing Jocelyn ahead of her into the narrow stairwell behind the now-open door. As soon as she was through it, she pushed the door shut behind her. She hoped it was the kind that locked by itself, and with any luck it might be a fire door solid enough to stop bullets.

"I...", Jocelyn said. She fell to her knees and would've tumbled down the stairs if Jeraldine had caught her.

"Are you all right?" she asked. Before any answer came, she saw blood trickling down the steps. She felt Jocelyn shiver, and heard her breathing come fast and shallow. She looked down and saw a wet, raw hole in the woman's back.

"Shit," she said. "Hang on, let me have a look."

While still holding the wounded woman up, Jeraldine moved around to her front. If the bullet had gone through her cleanly and left a not too messy exit wound, chances were good that she'd be all right.

But it hadn't.

The exit wound was easily large enough for Jeraldine's fist to fit inside, and she could see bits of a badly ruptured lung move as Jocelyn fought for breath. *Very* bad. She concentrated on her wearable for a moment, getting it to send a set message and her current location to the city's emergency center. With a bit of luck, an ambulance would be waiting when she reached the bottom of the stairs. With even more luck, Jocelyn would still be alive. Jeraldine picked her up as carefully as she could.

"Just hold on," she said. "Don't try to do anything, just stay alive."

She heard gunfire from the other side of the door, and dull thuds as something solid hit it. It seemed that they didn't get through it that easily. Which gave her and Jocelyn a chance to survive. Trying not to jolt Jocelyn too badly, Jeraldine started running down the stairs. Ten stories. If the ambulance really was waiting when she got down she'd have to make up a good lie to explain how she could get down that fast while carrying a grown woman, but that was a later problem.

Jocelyn weakly grabbed her coat and tried to say something.

"Hush," Jeraldine said. "Don't talk. We'll be down and safe soon."

"Book," Jocelyn gasped. Her chest wound made nauseating bubbling sounds when she talked. "Elena... has... book."

"Right," Jeraldine said. "Elena. I hear you."

She ran down the stairs two steps at a time, concentrating on not stumbling and falling. When Jocelyn stopped breathing, it took a while before she noticed.

The major walked out of the black truck, across the debris and wreckage of the stairwell. A couple of her soldiers stood there, on guard in case someone showed up. She nodded at them as she walked past. They'd done well enough, she supposed. It was the point crew that had got sloppy, and they had paid for their mistake with their lives. She guessed that the rest of the people had now learned that just because a place sounded really safe, it might not be. Even in a place like a university library, there could be armed opposition.

The reception room was slightly less messy than the stairwell, but mostly because there was less glass in there to shatter. The corpses had been body-bagged and dragged out, but there was still plenty of blood on the floor. The major frowned. There would be more than enough forensic evidence in that to trace them down, and they didn't have anything to clean it up thoroughly enough with. They'd have to blow the place up. Sloppy.

"Well?" she said to the nearest soldier. "Do we have it?"

"No, major," she replied. "As far as we can tell, it's not here."

She sighed and touched her communicator stud.

"Science team? Tell me if it's here or not."

"It's not," the reply came.

"You're sure?"

"As sure as it's possible to be with this kind of object. They may have sent it on somewhere else. We're interrogating their systems."

"Let me now the instant you've got something."

"Yes, sir."

The major looked up and frowned. This was turning into a nice little fuckup. She didn't like fuckups. They needed hiding, and when you were in a hurry that got messy.

"Listen up," she said, and all the soldiers in the room turned towards her. "The mission is a failure. We go to coverup. I want there to be enough charges to demolish this entire floor and three more above and below it, and I want them to be placed and ready to blow when Science are through sifting through the library computers. Questions?"

"Are we trying not to collapse the building?" a soldier said.

"No time," she replied. "Just place the charges for maximum damage. Anything else?"

There was nothing else.

"All right, then," she said. "Get to work."

She paced the room while they set the place up to be destroyed. Behind the librarians' desks, there were rows and rows of carefully sealed and environment-controlled storage containers for old paper books. The major didn't see the point of keeping them like that. Surely it must be easier, cheaper and more convenient just to scan them and keep them online? Come to think of it, they probably *were* scanned and online, and all this was just a sign of either redundancy gone too far or nostalgia bordering on the insane. No matter which, she wouldn't lose any sleep over having destroyed them. They were obsolete, a useless relic from times gone past.

"Major, this is Science," a voice said in her ear.

"Go ahead," she said.

"The package was scheduled for delivery to an off-campus university site," the voice said. "It left here a couple of hours ago. Most likely it arrived at the other location quite shortly after that, but that information is not logged in the library system."

"Should it be?"

"Yes. Judging from past entries, it's not uncommon for deliveries not to be properly entered until the day after they arrive."

"Right. Do we have the location of this other site?"

"We do."

The major turned her head to all-points.

"All groups, return to vehicles immediately," she said. "We proceed to secondary target."

A minute later, the black truck flew out of the hole in the tenth-floor wall. After a little while three black vans joined it from different directions. Flying in formation, they sped across the city. Behind them, gouts of flame suddenly sprouted from the seventh to thirteenth floors of the university library building. It didn't take long for the higher floors to collapse and take the lower ones with them.

"Elena? Can you hear me?"

Someone was saying strange things to her. Not only that, someone was also prying her eyelid open and shining a bright light straight into her eyes. She tried to push the light away.

"Oh, good," someone said. "Welcome back."

The someone was Sona, she realized. She herself was Elena. And she was lying down on something hard and uncomfortable. The great-grandmother of all headaches was threatening to split her head into a gazillion pieces.

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"The book flashed, you screamed and then you passed out," Sona said. "How are you feeling? Your pupils are reacting a bit weird."

Elena tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea brought her back down.

"Not so good," she said. "My head is killing me, and my back hurts. And I want to throw up."

Sona turned her lamp off and put it back in her pocket.

"Your back hurts how?" she asked.

"Like someone hit me with a bat all along my spine," Elena said. She frowned. "How did I manage to fall like that?"

"You didn't," Sona said. "You fell forward over the book. I and Ramon moved you to the floor so I could get a better look at you."

"Then why is my back hurting?"

"I'm not a neuro specialist," she said, "but my patients tend to be the more well-off kind, so I see a lot. And I've seen before what your eyes are doing right now. Your vision is kind of fuzzy, right?"

"Yeah," Elena said. "Like one of my eyes was drunk."

"And along the inside of your spine is where the military surgeons put your implants, isn't it? Nice and protected, nothing much else in the way and plenty of access to the central nervous system."

Elena looked at Sona. "You think it fucked up my implants," she said.

"Fucked up implants are where I've seen that thing with the eyes before," Sona said. "Although to be honest, that was implants that got fucked up by drugs, mostly."

"How could an old book possibly do that?" Elena said.

"Not my department," Sona said. "Is the pain decreasing, increasing or staying the same?"

Elena did another attempt at sitting up. This time she made it with only minor nausea.

"Decreasing," she said. "If it keeps up like this I'll be fine in five minutes. Vision's better too."

Sona brought out her lamp again and shone it into Elena's eyes.

"Be still!" she barked when Elena tried to look away from the bright light.

"It does seem to be getting better," she said. "Maybe it just did something temporary to your nervous system. Although I couldn't even begin to guess what."

Elena started to get up, but it became obvious that it wasn't a good idea even before she'd got her ass off the floor, so she sank back down. The floor was hard and none too clean. At least it wasn't sticky, the way it could get late Saturday nights.

"Hey, Elena!" Ramon shouted from over by the bar. "Don't you work at the university library?"

"Yeah," she shouted back. She winced as something invisible and intangible drove an ice pick through her head. Or at least it felt like something did.

"News says it just blew up," Ramon said.

"What do you mean blew up?" Sona said.

"Just that, toots," Ramon said. "Blowed up. Went boom. Fell down. Check for yourselves if you don't believe me."

Elena concentrated for a moment, to activate her implanted transceiver and point it at her favourite news site. Sona turned on her wearable.

"About half an hour ago, a terrible explosion destroyed seven floors of the North Atlantis university library," the site's speaker voice said. Along with the voice came pictures showing the smoking ruins of the library building. There wasn't much left but a huge pile of rubble. Fire engines hovered around it, spraying still smoking places with water and, presumably, looking for survivors.

"Jocelyn," Elena said. "Jocelyn was in there."

"I'll ask the hospital system if they have anything on her," Sona said.

"Thanks."

"So far there are no firm reports on the number of killed and wounded," the speaker said. "But preliminary reports indicate at least fifty wounded and ten dead at this site. We will..."

"Stop," Elena thought at her implant. "Search for other site."

The speaker's voice came on again. "Fifteen minutes after the explosion at the North Atlantis university library, another university department suffered an almost identical fate. A devastating explosion on the ground floor of the cryptography department's building in Heraklion Street caused that building too to collapse. Fortunately this building is much smaller, and was at the time almost empty of people. Emergency services currently estimate only two dead and one wounded here."

The picture showed another smoking pile of rubble, smaller and in the middle of a residential street. Here too fire engines hovered about.

"Search for cause," Elena thought.

"As yet the cause of the explosions isn't known," the speaker said. "Initial speculations about some kind of drastic equipment failure were dropped when the second detonation was reported, and the police are now treating this as a deliberate attack on the university by persons unknown. Rumors of a black truck and several black vans being seen flagrantly violating traffic control in the area shortly before the explosions reinforce this view, although those observations have not yet been confirmed."

"Damn," Sona said. "Who would do something like that? And why?"

"I don't know," Elena said. "But the crypto department was where I was supposed to take the book. Did the hospital have anything on Jocelyn?"

Sona looked at Elena, then at the book. It lay there on the counter, closed again, looking as solid and normal as could be.

"It must be a coincidence," she said. "They can't have blown up two buildings just because of that book. And the hospital system says that Jocelyn Hunnings is currently in an ambulance on its way to the emergency ICU."

Elena visibly relaxed at the news.

"So why did somebody blow them up?" she said. "And what did that book just do to me?"

"Maybe it was two accidents that just happened to happen at the same time."

"Yeah," Elena said. "Because we keep so *much* explosive stuff at the library."

She grabbed the book and wrapped it up in the impact plastic again.

"I want Karri to take a look at my implants," she said. "You coming?"

Sona nodded.

Jeraldine sat on the curb near the collapsed building, looking at it. It brought back bad memories, and the blood on her didn't make it any better. She shook her head and tried to force the memories away. That was long ago, that was wartime. This was...

Well, she wasn't at all sure what this was. *Somebody* had blown the hell out of that building. Somebody in a pretty new urban assault vehicle. And somebody had wanted something from the library, or they'd never have bothered to send in the people with the guns. They'd just have bombed it from a distance.

"Excuse me?" somebody said.

Jeraldine looked up. An guy in a dirty and bloodied EMT uniform was standing a few steps from her.

"Are you the one who carried that wounded woman out?" he said.

She nodded.

"How is she?" she asked.

"Really bad," he said. "There may be enough intact brain left to do something, but we don't know yet. I just wanted to ask, do you know what caused that chest wound?"

"No," she lied. "Why?"

"Well, it doesn't look like anything that could be caused by a collapsing building. In fact, it looks quite a bit like a gunshot wound."

"Really?" Jeraldine said. "That's strange, isn't it?"

"Sure is," he said. "Look, the police may want to talk to you about it, so please stay around, will you?"

She nodded. "Sure thing," she said. "I'll be right here."

Just to be on the safe side she waited until he was well out of sight before she got up and vanished into the nearest alley. She had no intention of talking to any police if she could avoid it, and she'd go to considerable length to manage the avoiding. They'd probably figure out the thing about the soldiers and the assault vehicle anyway, from forensics and camera data.

As soon as she could, she went into a low-class bar and borrowed their dirty and evil-smelling bathroom. In front of the cracked mirror, she washed away the blood as well as she could. Jocelyn had bled copiously while she carried her, and her arms were drenched in blood up to her elbows. The coat was self-cleaning and would be as good as new in half an hour, but her blouse was another mother. Thankfully, it was red to begin with, so the stains on the front didn't show much. The arms, though, were a complete loss. She'd never be able to get enough of the half-dried blood out for them to either be comfortable or look even halfway decent. Rather than try, she fished a knife out of a coat pocket and converted the blouse to short-sleeved.

That would have to do. If the police started asking people about here, she'd be remembered no matter how clean she was. Her combination of height, near-black skin, oriental features and long, variably multicolored hair made her kind of hard to forget. The long leather coat didn't make her any more forgettable, but at least she could change the color of that one as she wished. The hair, on the other hand, just reacted to her moods.

She sighed. The hair had seemed like a good idea at the time. It was still better than keeping her natural color, but she wished she'd had the sense to get something more controllable. At the moment, streaks of electric blue chased each other on a deep-black background. A sure sign that she was upset, if she hadn't already figured that out.

Deciding that she wasn't going to get any cleaner, and that being wet was better than touching the towel that hung from a nail driven into the wall, she put her coat back on and left the bar. As she walked aimlessly down the street, she tried to think.

She couldn't for a moment believe that what had happened at the library was unrelated to the letter from Rose. Sure coincidences sometimes did happen -- but two so incredibly unlikely events on the same day and relating to the same place? That was something other than coincidence, and she wanted very badly to find out what. People had been shooting at her, and that always made her cranky.

Near the end, Jocelyn had said something about a book. It seemed safe to assume that she wouldn't have said it unless it somehow related to what she and Jeraldine had been talking about before they got so violently interrupted. So that was a lead. She'd said that Elena had the book. But which Elena? Probably someone familiar to Jocelyn, since she only mentioned the first name. Jeraldine activated her wearable and contacted the university's public information bank. It didn't take long to find a public contact list for the library, with names and pictures. One of them was a very attractive blonde woman by the name of Elena Arden.

Bingo.

She found a park bench and sat down on it. Walking around while concentrating on finding information over the net was a sure recipe for banging into things, which would look silly and probably be painful. Safely not moving, she brought out all her investigator's tools and tried to find out everything she could about Elena Arden.

The truck that had until recently been black sped down the highway to Port Critias, just one of many vehicles heading there. It moved along safely guided by Traffic Control, carefully not doing anything that might look unusual or out of the ordinary. Occasionally, police cruisers flew by over them.

"No, sir, it was a complete failure," the major said. A lead went from the one remaining equipment rack to the communicator stud on her collar.

"I'm aware of that, sir," she said. "We're extracting now. The city is too hot to keep the vehicles there at the moment. We'd be spotted and apprehended within hours."

She sat in a seat bolted to the wall next to the rack, well strapped in. In front the rack sat the woman who'd sat there before. At the moment, she wasn't plugged in. She was holding a pack of cards, with which she was practicing sleights of hand.

"Of course we're not giving up," the major said. "I've left a team in the city with enough equipment to trace the object. Before sunrise they should be able to say if the object is still in the city and, if it's being reasonably stationary, where."

At the back of the truck, by the exit doors, the ground team sat. Two of their seats were empty, and black ribbons had been tied across them. The surviving team members were passing a bottle and a joint back and forth.

"I know it's very important, sir," the major said. "But you must realize that with an object of this nature incredible coincidences and other probabilistic anomalies are entirely to be expected."

The major rolled her eyes as the person on the other end of the connection spoke.

"Yes, sir," she said. "Of course, sir."

She pulled the lead free from the communicator stud.

"I really don't like this," she said to nobody in particular. The science team member raised an eyebrow at her.

"Truck?" the major said.

"Yes?" the truck said. The voice came from the dashboard.

"We're skipping the ferry," she said. "As soon as convenient, turn off the road and head for Rotterdam."

"Yes, sir," the truck said.

A little while later, the truck turned off the highway onto a smaller road. A kilometer later the small road reached the coast and turned south.

The truck kept going straight, speeding east towards the Netherlands.

Chapter 2: Book

Karri Bozych's apartment tried to look like it was a converted loft. It was a loft, in that it was highest up under the roof of the building. But it had never been converted from anything. The very high ceiling and visible roof beams had been put there by the architect for aesthetic reasons alone. Karri liked it because she could hang equipment from the beams.

"Wow," Sona said when she and Elena entered. "I've never seen so many machines in a home before."

She thought about what she'd just said. There was a bed in a corner and something like a kitchen in another, but the entire place looked like no other apartment she'd ever been to.

"This *is* your home, right?" she said. "Elena said we were going to your place, so I assumed."

Karri herself was a short, wiry and sharp-faced woman. She was dressed in worn old combat fatigue pants and a t-shirt with "EGOTECH" printed on the front. Her dark hair was cut short in a way that left no doubt that she kept it that way to keep it out of the way rather than for style reasons.

"Yeah, it's my home," she said.

"Wow," Sona said. "You sure have a lot of... stuff."

Elena was leaning against a big machine of some indeterminate kind. Her hair, which unlike Karri's *was* cut for style, glinted in the rays of the setting sun that shone in the large windows. The book leaned against the same machine, still wrapped in its impact plastic.

"Karri likes to fix stuff," she said. "Most of the things here she got free for carting them away."

Karri was clearing a table from clutter and placing various machines and devices around it.

"Why?" Sona said. "What are they all for?"

Karri shrugged. "Like to keep my skills up," she said.

"She was my weapons tech during the war," Elena said. "She's branched out since then and, from what I understand, makes a more than decent living from consulting as a very, very good electronics troubleshooter."

"People pay for the damnedest stuff," Karri said. "Get your shirt off and lie down."

Elena unbuttoned her blouse and hung it from the corner of the machine she'd been leaning against. Her bra soon joined it there, leaving Elena bare from the waist up. She laid down on the just-cleared table, face-down to give Karri access to her back. Karri started putting skin connectors at the gaps between her vertebrae. Sona looked on.

"I thought she had lots of fancy wireless stuff?" she asked.

"No good for diagnostics," Karri said. "Got filters."

Sona moved a stack of circuit wafers from a chair to the floor and sat down.

"Shouldn't we tell you what happened before you start grotting around?" Sona asked.

"No," Karri said. "Later."

She fastened the last connector to Elena's back and turned to the machine where all the leads joined. She took another lead from it and attached it to her own neck. A data projection flickered into life in the air before her, showing some kind of schematics that Sona didn't recognize.

"You know," Sona said. "In all our time together Elena never actually told me what it is she's got in there. I know about the wireless connection and the enormous data storage and the indexing stuff, but none of that seems like it'd be very interesting to the military."

"Interesting stuff was sealed off," Karri said.

"Sealed off?"

"There's lots more stuff in there," Elena said. "Codebreaking and intrusion stuff, mostly. Stuff they don't want ordinary civilians having easy access to. So when I got my discharge they put in blocks so I can't get at most of it any more. I can only use the data storage parts of it, which as you say aren't that interesting. Gives me a freakishly good memory if I concentrate on it, but that's about it."

"Why didn't they just take it out?" Sona said. "I mean, as long as it's still inside you there's always a risk that you'll figure out how to break the blocks, right?"

"Resource-inefficient," Karri said. She was looking intently at the projection, where columns of numbers, diagrams and drawings flew past.

"It'd take a team of surgeons a week to dig the crap out without leaving me quadriplegic," Elena said. "Putting the blocks in took one medtech an afternoon. And it was just after the war. Everybody was tired and mostly wanted to forget about it all. And most of the really good doctors had been on the Transhumanist side anyway, so there was a bit of a shortage of competent surgeons."

"I see," Sona said. Silence fell, and for a time all that could be heard was the occasional grunt or snort from Karri and the soft whirring of the air conditioner.

"So, Karri," Sona said when she couldn't stand the quiet any longer, "do you also have a lot of blocked implants?"

"No," Karri said.

"All right," Sona said, and the silence returned.

Eventually, Karri shut off the display.

"Now you tell me what happened," she said.

Elena started to get up from the table, but before she got anywhere Karri put a hand on her back and pushed her back down.

"Stay," she said. "There's weird shit here. May want to look more, or do something."

Elena grimaced.

"Great," she said. "Just what I wanted. Weird shit all along my fucking spinal column. Is it going to kill me or just leave me paralyzed?"

"Don't know," Karri said. "Might figure something out if I knew what happened."

"She got this book," Sona said. "That one over there."

She pointed at the package leaning against the machine near the door.

"She opened it to have a look," she went on, "and suddenly there was this flash. Elena screamed, although she doesn't remember that bit, and then she fell down unconscious. When she woke up, she showed clear signs of implant-related neural trauma. That's when she decided to come see you."

"How long did the flash last?" Karri asked.

Sona frowned. "How long? How should I know that? It was a *flash*. A fraction of a second, at most."

Karri brought up her projection display again. She looked closely at a certain diagram and the numbers surrounding it.

"Is a shitload of data in you," she said. "More than I've ever seen. About four fifths full."

Elena raised her head from the table and looked at Karri.

"What?" she said. "When did *that* happen? This morning it was a couple of percent!"

"Interesting, no?" Karri said. "Seems to be inert, fortunately."

She closed the display down again and started removing the connectors from Elena's back.

"But how did it *get* there?" Elena said. "Getting that much data in takes *days*."

"Guessing the flash," Karri said. "No idea how. I'll have a look at the book."

Sona, who had been silently listening to them, got up from her chair and fetched the book for Karri.

"Maybe this is a stupid question," she said as she handed it over, "but can we see what the data is? I mean, it seems reasonable that there would be plenty of hints there."

"Yes," Karri said. "Elena can do that."

There turned out to be a whole lot to find out about the good Elena Arden, so after a while Jeraldine got up from the bench and walked over to sit in a café instead. She thought better on a bellyful of coffee in any case. Coffee and something laden with sugar and fat.

Safely ensconced in a huge overstuffed chair and with an equally huge mug of steaming black liquid within arm's reach, she sank back into the less physical world. Her tools had been chugging along while she was gone, probing more and more obscure sources for data about Elena Arden. They had long since reached the point of diminishing returns, but you never knew. Sometimes interesting stuff showed up long after any reasonable person would've given up.

To a first look, the good Elena was a perfectly normal librarian. No, strike that. She wasn't a librarian. She didn't have the information management degree for that. She was simply a library assistant. It got a bit more interesting when a couple of public logs mentioned her knowing the entire library catalog by heart. That's what made Jeraldine keep looking after she'd found what she was originally looking for, which was just where she could find this Elena and, consequently, the mysterious book. But having the entire catalog memorized? That was too far out of the ordinary to let lie. So she kept looking.

Elena had lived in North Atlantis for seven years. Before that, she had sixteen different addresses in one year. And before *that* her location was given as "UNHDF active service".

UNHDF.

Eight years since the war, and the mere name still made her blood boil. United Nations Humanity Defense Force. As if they'd been fighting something that wasn't human. If anybody in the whole mess had been inhuman, it was the UNHDF leaders who had

the arrogance to unilaterally decided who was a proper human and who wasn't, and then try to kill anybody they'd branded "not human". Like Jeraldine, and Rose, and all their sisters.

The records about what Elena had done during the war were spotty and partly non-public. But the fact that she had been an officer, a lieutenant, was open, and there were a few places mentioned where she'd been in action. The rank, the places and her phenomenal memory made Jeraldine feel sure that she'd been an infocommando. A special operations soldier, part of a small team that got sent into places to infiltrate, subvert and possibly destroy the information infrastructure of the enemy.

The station where Jeraldine grew up had got its climate control subverted by infocommandos. She wasn't there at the time, but some of her sisters had been, and they'd told her about it. Over the course of a night, the temperature had fallen so low that if you spat your spit would hit the ground frozen. All the vegetation had died, including the algae in the hydroponic tanks. There was no way to get the temperature back to livable and the ecosystem restored in the little time there was before the air went stale. The station had been hastily abandoned, and the many refugees from it became one more strain on the ecologies of other stations. As far as Jeraldine knew, her old home still orbited cold and dead around Ganymede. She supposed it would keep doing so until someone decided to do something with it. Or until the systems managing the orbit or the station's Casimir engines failed, and it succumbed to all the stresses of the Jovian system, lost orbit and crashed into Ganymede.

At least Elena hadn't, according to the records, been anywhere near Jupiter during the war. She'd mostly been stationed the other way, sunwards of Earth's orbit. Probably fighting the Transhumanist research stations on Mercury.

And now, eight years after the Transhumanists lost the war, Elena was working as an assistant in a library, using her amazing implants for nothing more than keeping track of the library catalog. How the mighty does fall.

It disturbed Jeraldine very much that an ex-infocommando had possession of an object that, as far as she could tell, had been sent to herself. No matter what was in that book, it shouldn't be in the hands of the former enemy. Not if she could help it. She put the wearables to sleep, checked that her weapons were where they should be and set off for Elena's apartment.

Elena was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of a large projection display, which showed what looked very much like rapidly scrolling random garbage. The sun had set behind the buildings on the other side of the street from Karri's place, and lamps now provided light. Karri had put the book inside a large machine of some kind, a machine where she had now unscrewed the covers from and was messing about with its innards. For lack of something better to do, Sona was online checking news about the explosions.

"Karri," Elena said. "You wouldn't happen to have an old crypto database, would you?"

"Box under the bed, labeled porn," Karri said.

"Sona? Please get it for me? I don't want to move unless I have to."

"Sure," Sona said. She walked over to the bed, knelt next to it and took out a box clearly labeled "pr0n" from under it.

"Way to not spell," she said. "Where do you want it?"

"There should be a silvery disk inside," Elena said. "Put that in the slot in the box next to you."

Sona did as she was told.

"Offline data storage?" she asked.

A progress bar appeared in the corner of Elena's display and began to fill up.

"That stuff is kind of illegal for civilians to own," Elena said. "So Karri's being careful."

"Illegal? But you said it was crypto stuff?"

"It is. Transhumanist crypto stuff from the war."

"Oh."

The progress bar reached its end, and Elena concentrated again. Sona put the box back under the bed.

She'd known that Elena had fought in the war almost from the first time they met. But it had been a long time before Elena was willing to talk about her wartime experiences at all, and she still avoided details. When she first talked about it at all, it was only as an explanation for her recurring nightmares. Sona knew that she'd been some sort of special operations soldier and an officer. She knew that she'd received many implants of some rare and special kind, only the most basic of which she still had the use of. And she knew that Karri Bozych and Nolan Polselli were the only two surviving members of Elena's old team. She didn't know how large the team had been originally, only that it had been larger than three. Over time, she'd also realized that all of the three still suffered from the war. Elena had her nightmares. Karri had more or less retreated into isolation among her machines. It had been almost three years before she initiated a conversation with Sona. Nolan was addicted to romantic VR games, a vice that had cost him his pilot's license. He now made a pretty poor living singing and dancing in nondescript nightclubs.

Keeping old Transhumanist crypto stuff under the bed was the kind of thing none of the three had ever talked to her about, and it did make her feel left out. Which she guessed she was. Whatever they'd been through during the war, it had forged bonds stronger than friendship or love. In the beginning, she was jealous. Karri and Nolan had a closer relationship with her lover than she had, and that wasn't how it should be in her world. But as time wore on and she kept seeing Elena wake up drenched in sweat and screaming in the middle of the night, jealousy passed. Whatever it was that had brought them their close bonds, it just wasn't worth it. She was happy to get what she got, and that was that.

Except in the end she couldn't deal with Elena's nightmares and regular bouts of depression, and they separated. She was glad that they remained friends, but she was also glad that she no longer felt obliged to shore Elena up during her bad times. Karri and Nolan could do that better anyway, so let them do it.

"It's encrypted," Elena said. In front of her, the projected screen winked out of existence. "Transhumanist crypto Carabid-8. The whole thing is so much noise unless we can get the key."

"I thought you broke that kind of thing during the war?" Sona asked.

"I did," Elena said. "But then I had all my tools. Today I have a good memory."

On the other side of the room, Karri swore and slammed a panel shut on the machine she'd been working on. Elena and Sona looked at her in surprise. Emotional outbursts were very much not Karri's sort of thing.

"Problem?" Elena asked.

"Doesn't work, but nothing's wrong," Karri said, frustration permeating her voice.

"Doesn't work how?" Elena said.

"What *is* it?" Sona said.

"Molecular imager," Karri said. "Can't get an image of the book."

"Can you get an image of something else?" Elena said.

Karri looked condescendingly at her.

"It's *molecules*," she said. "*Everything's* molecules."

"Just trying to help," Elena said. "Sorry."

"So it's vacuum in there?" Sona said. "Or does it filter out the air?"

"Filters."

"So maybe you should turn those off? I mean, if the book could do weird-ass things to Elena's implants it might do weird-ass things to scanner things as well."

Karri shrugged, reached into the machine and pulled something out. The display turned into a misty cube hanging in the air next to her. A misty cube with a book-shaped empty impression at the bottom. Karri frowned.

"The hell?" she said. She pulled a wire from the machine and attached it to her neck socket. The display started changing colors, and numbers and smaller pictures sprang into being hovering around the central cube.

"It's not there," she said. Her voice sounded strange, full of a mixture of disbelief and wonder. "It's just not *there*."

The display died and Karri disconnected from the machine. She opened it, took the book out and carried it over to another machine. She put it in a compartment just barely large enough for it, and closed a heavy lid with airtight seals around the edges. A vacuum pump started chugging along as soon as the lid was closed.

"Er, Karri, what's happening?" Elena said. She'd turned off the display she'd been working at and got up from the floor. Sona was still sitting on the bed, looking at Karri.

"Wait," she said. Another display winked into being, as usual showing lots of data that looked like gibberish to the non-initiated. In the middle was a kind of diagram, where a bar was rapidly rising from the bottom towards the top. It started out green, passed through yellow, reached red and a little while after that the entire diagram was replaced with the words "Sensor Malfunction" blinking brilliant red.

"That's no fucking book," Karri said. "Don't know what the hell it *is*, but it sure isn't natural."

"Explain please?" Elena said. Sona had mostly given up on understanding.

"ZPE calibrator," Karri said and pointed at the machine the book was still hidden inside.

"For fixing Casimir engines. Measures lots of quantum-level stuff. At that level, book doesn't even register as matter. Looks like nothing I've ever heard of. Nothing the machine's ever heard of either, by the look of that," she said, nodding towards the blinking malfunction sign.

"Does that mean anything, in practical terms?" Sona asked.

"It means that that book is much, much stranger than anything has any right to be," Elena said. "And suddenly it seems less far-fetched that someone would blow up a couple of buildings to get at it."

"Don't think this was made by humans," Karri said. "Is *way* to far out for us."

"It filled me with Transhumanist-encrypted stuff," Elena said. "Seems human enough."

Karri shrugged. "Maybe they sent out probe," she said. "Maybe something picked up transmissions. But no way Transhumanists made this, even if any are still around."

"Are you sure?" Sona said. "They were mightily fond of far-out science and risky experimentation."

"In eight years, with no labs and while hiding from everybody? Yeah, am sure."

Elena leaned against a wall. "So what do we do with it?"

"Want to know where it came from," Karri said. "*Really* want to know."

"Jocelyn said Neptune," Elena said. "And yeah, I wouldn't mind knowing that either. Also, I guess I'm out of a job, what with the library getting blown up and all."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Sona said, "but I get the impression here that if somebody could get control of whatever made this thing they could end up very seriously rich. Like, Casimir Corporation rich."

"Quite likely," Karri said.

"So if you're going gallivanting off to Neptune, I'm coming along. I've got loads of vacation days to spend anyway."

"Maybe not Neptune straight away," Elena said. "I want to try to find out what the data in me is, and that's easier done hereish. But in any case it's probably a good idea to get moving pretty soon. The people who blew up those buildings almost certainly won't stop until they have the book."

Sona got up off the bed. "Fair enough," she said. "I want to fetch some clothes and stuff first, if that's all right."

"Me too," Elena said. "Let's do my place first and we can drop by your place on the way back. Will you be all right by yourself, Karri?"

Karri nodded. She had started fiddling with the ZPE calibrator, and wasn't paying much attention to the other two.

"We'll be back in a couple of hours," Elena said.

For an ex-commando, Elena Arden had surprisingly bad security on her apartment. It only took Jeraldine about five minutes to disable the alarms, open the lock and enter.

She couldn't help suspecting that the alarms she found were decoys, and the real ones were busy calling for help even as she walked through the door. But, well, she'd know about that soon enough, if it was the case. So no point in worrying about it.

The apartment itself was common enough. A hallway, with some cheap animated prints on the walls. A kitchen, with a stack of old takeout boxes on the counter and a leaky faucet. A living room, where the absence of a VR station surprised her until she remembered that anything one of those could do Elena's still-working implants could do much better. A bedroom, with a double bed but only signs of single occupancy. Also, an impressively large stack of dirty washing. Through the windows she could only see

across the street into the face of the building on the other side. She wondered if any of the people on the other side used to try to peep at Elena while she dressed. Or if Elena tried to peep on someone on the other side.

Never mind.

She dragged one of the two armchairs in the living room around so it faced the entrance to the room. She sat down in it, with her pistol in her hand and all the lights off. She wanted Elena to be well inside the apartment and not suspecting anything by the time she noticed that she had an intruder.

The taxi crawled along the streets of the city. Elena looked out the window, wishing that she could be soaring ahead above it all. The suggestion that traffic be layered, so that one set of cars would fly over the other, was frequently put forward but always failed for safety reasons. Nobody wanted a truck suddenly dropping on them, once they thought about it a little. So only emergency services were allowed to really fly.

"The hospital systems say that Jocelyn is still critical and unstable," Sona said. "Which is really not good, considering that she's been in the ICU for hours now. Also, she's being treated for a gunshot wound, not for burns or crush damage."

"Gunshot?" Elena said. "Where did that come from?"

"Unknown, as far as I can figure out. And the woman who carried her out of the library building vanished before she could be questioned."

Jocelyn in hospital. Elena supposed that was really for the best, but she still didn't like hospitals. Not since that time when Setsuko just fell apart in her arms. Eight years later, and the terrible sense of powerlessness still haunted her.

"What are you thinking about?" Sona said. "You fell all silent there."

"Nothing," Elena said. It wasn't a lie, exactly. There was a whole lot of nothing in between Mercury and Venus. One little hospital ship didn't make much difference to the vacuum, when you averaged it out.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" Sona said. "Going after this ourselves. Maybe we should just turn it all over to the authorities."

"Can't see how that would make anything any better," Elena said. "I wouldn't trust those fuckers with firecrackers, much less something that might be important."

"I know," Sona said. "Just checking."

She had trusted those fuckers, once upon a time. There'd been a recruitment drive in her school, and she'd taken their aptitude test because all her friends did. She was astonished when they told her that her nervous system was unusually suited for receiving implants, and if chose to join the military they'd pay for a first-rate education. Among other things. It had seemed like a safe bet. Nobody thought there would be a war only a few years later. But there was, and Elena found herself not only on the front lines but working behind them, deep in enemy territory. She didn't like it, but she did as she was told. There was a war on, and she was a soldier. She followed orders. She destroyed things. She killed people. She did her best to survive. She did her best to protect her squad.

When the war was over she tried to learn how it had started. They hadn't got told that, when she was a soldier. They'd only been told who, where and how to kill. What she found was a mess of misdirection, half-truths and hate. Groups of outer-system colonists

and isolated communes on Earth had been trying to create better humans, in a way that would be passed on from parent to child. Other groups, mostly on Earth, saw this as blasphemy, the end of the human race or just as revolting and scary. Tension increased, until one day *somebody* released what was supposed to be an intelligence-enhancing self-replicating plague at Orly spaceport in France. It worked, too, in almost ten percent of the infected. In the rest, the effects ranged from a bad flu to brain death. Fortunately for humanity, the self-replicator wasn't any better than the enhancement function. In the end, only about two hundred people were affected. Seven ended up with brain damage, three died. Twenty-one ended up with significantly enhanced mental faculties. Which, according to some, messed up their lives worse than brain damage would have done.

After that, things exploded. Soldiers were sent after the communes on Earth, navy ships after the space colonists. The initial aim was to detain them, to get a good look at what they were really doing.

It turned out that some of the Transhumanists' augmentation programmes had worked better than anybody had suspected. The first soldiers to enter a commune got completely thrashed. What was worse, from their point of view, it was hard or impossible to tell the augmented humans and the normals apart. The transhumanists scattered into the normal population, aided by the infomorph part of their population, the AIs and the uploaded. A very dirty and unpleasant war started.

In space, where Elena had fought, the war was somewhat cleaner. The sides were more obviously separated -- this station was Transhumanist, this navy ship was Baseline. It's almost impossible to sneak unnoticed onto a ship in space. It's hard to do it to a station, but Elena, her squad and those like them were trained to do it.

The war went on for nine months. The Transhumanists fought well, far better than anybody had suspected in advance, but in the end the Baselines' far greater industrial capacity decided the matter. Every ship on the Transhumanist side was an almost irreplaceable resource, for every ship that got destroyed on the Baseline side they built three new ones. The Baseline side won, and after a couple of years the random terrorist strikes by remaining Transhumanist cells and operatives petered out. Humanity remained as it has always been.

Elena came out of the military disillusioned. The few times she'd got to actually meet people from the Transhumanist side, she'd found them to be pretty much like herself. Sure, some of them had stuff in their bodies that Mother Nature hadn't put there -- but so she. The only difference was that theirs had grown in their bodies and Elena's had been grown in tanks of nanoconstructor sludge and surgically implanted. After the war was over, she wanted reassurance that she had been doing the right thing. That she had been fighting on the right side.

She didn't find it.

When she began looking, she naturally started with the Orly incident, and almost at once she found things that didn't fit in very well with the official version. There were no signs, then or after, that any Transhumanist enclave had ever been working on a self-replicator like the one that had been released. Right after the incident, there were statements from all the major Transhumanist enclaves condemning the action, and offering help, both to cure the victims and to find the culprits.

Those statements never reached the mainstream media outlets. As Elena read the reports and assembled the facts, it became apparent to her that some people in powerful positions had *wanted* the war to happen. That it furthered their interests, economic or political, and that they didn't care about all the people who died or had their lives destroyed.

She tried to bring this to the public's attention.

She failed. No media outlet was interested in talking about it, except the lunatic fringe ones that already were. Nobody wants to hear that, she was told. The war is over. Let it rest. Nobody cares how it started. The good guys won. The forces of evil were defeated. All is well. Do not rock the boat. Do not think. Watch your personalized VR soap.

Unsurprisingly, she lost faith in her leaders. When she was asked to rejoin the military, she declined. Karri and Nolan, the only surviving members of her squad, went with her. They all ended up on North Atlantis, mostly just getting by and trying to forget.

"We have arrived," the taxi said. "That will be four dollars twenty, please."

One could tell that the room had been chosen and set up in a hurry. The equipment racks stood in the middle of the floor, with no attempt to position them conveniently. The walls were bare concrete. A coffee maker and microwave oven stood in a corner, connected to a the same barely portable Casimir engine that provided electricity for the racks. A black-uniformed man sat on a rickety office chair, a bunch of cables leading from the rack to his neck. A similarly uniformed woman lay on an inflatable mattress nearby. The room was lit by a portable floodlight connected to the Casimir engine and aimed at a wall.

"Can't sleep?" the man said.

The woman sighed.

"No," she said. "Too tense, I guess. You getting anything yet?"

"A little," he said. "Vague, but something. The object is still in the city. Which is something, I guess."

"I almost wish it wasn't," the woman said. "Then we could get out of here soon."

"Well, if we find it we can get out of here at once."

"We're not going to find it," she said. "We *can't* find it. *You* know that, even if the major won't admit it."

"That's just a theory," he said. "We can't prove anything."

"No, we *only* have about a gazillion coincidences to support it," she said. "But, as you say, no *proof* that the blasted thing warps probabilities around it."

"It could be just a WOAH!" the man said. The last word came out a shout.

"A what?" the woman said.

"Something just happened," he said. "I got the mother of all spikes. I think..."

His voice trailed off. The woman got up from the mattress and jacked herself into her rack.

"Holy fuck," she said. "What is *that*?"

"Tapering off fast, that's what it is," the man said. "It was about ten times as strong a few second ago. But I think I got a pretty good set of coordinates."

"What do you think happened?" she said. "Is this why it was sent here? What did it just *do*?"

"Honestly?" the man said. "I'd rather not think about it. The mere thought of where that thing comes from makes me nervous."

"Yeah," she said. "Let's hope we're still us in the morning, eh?"

"55 Democratus Road, top floor," he said. "Will you contact the major or shall I?"

"You found it, you tell it."

He closed his eyes and concentrated.

When she heard the front door open, Jeraldine got up from the armchair. It wouldn't do to be sitting down if it came to fighting. Also, she'd look a lot less impressive if she was.

"I'll just throw a few things in a bag," a voice said. "It won't take more than a few moments. Get something from the fridge, if you want. There should be some beer in there."

"Beer sounds good," another voice said. "Do you want one?"

"Actually, yes," the first voice said.

"I'll bring a couple to the bedroom," the second voice said.

Steps closed in on the living room. Jeraldine raised her gun and aimed it at the door to the hallway.

She recognized Elena Arden from the pictures, of course. But somehow she looked more imposing in real life. Part of it was that she was not a small woman. She was almost as tall as Jeraldine, and more muscular. Certainly not *stronger*, but bigger. Even though it was many years since she was an active soldier, Elena had obviously not let herself go.

"Lights," Elena said, and several soft lamps around the room came to life. Elena froze as she saw Jeraldine.

"Give me the book and I'll go away and leave you to your packing," Jeraldine said.

Elena looked at her for a few very long moments.

"What book?" she finally said. "And who the fuck are you?"

"You know which book I mean," Jeraldine said. "Don't pretend to be stupid. I know you're not."

"It's not yours," Elena said. Jeraldine heard the other person approach from the kitchen.

"It's not yours either," she said. "And tell your friend to stand still."

"What do you want it for?" Elena said. Her friend's steps stopped.

"Never you mind," Jeraldine said. While not exactly a good answer, it certainly beat admitting that she had no idea. "Just give it over."

"It's not here," Elena said.

Of course. It couldn't ever go smoothly.

"All right," Jeraldine said. "Where is it, then?"

"At a friend's place," Elena said. "She's investigating it."

Investigating? A book? Sounded odd. She wanted to ask about it, but it probably wasn't a good idea to admit her lack of knowledge.

"The friend who's standing right behind you," she said, "who is she?"

"Her name is Sona Quon," Elena said. "She's an endocrinology specialist at Hipocrates Medical Institute. She's no threat to you."

"I'm sure she's not," Jeraldine said. "She'll come in here where I can see her. Then you'll walk towards the door, and she'll walk after you. If I think that you're doing something suspicious, I'll shoot her. Clear?"

Elena looked daggers at her. "Oh yes," she said.

Jeraldine put her hand in her pocket, turned her wearable on and called for the cab she'd got the map from. It felt like there was a better chance that it could be bribed into not seeing what was going than that any random taxi could.

"So," she said. "Get moving."

At two different points in the city, black vans suddenly broke out of the traffic pattern and took to the air. Alarms immediately went off at Traffic Control and police were soon dispatched to take a look. It wasn't too unusual that kids disabled the monitors in their cars and went for less than legal joyrides, so neither the Traffic Control overseers nor the police officers were particularly bothered. They took their time.

The vans, in their respective places, rose to just above rooftop height and set off at high speed for the same destination. They hurried along, dodging antennas, extra high buildings and occasionally birds, until they finally reached an apartment block on the east side of the city. One of them kept hovering over the building, with two black-uniformed people leaning out open windows with rifles. The other one landed on the street in front of the building, squeezing in between the wall and the line of parked cars at the side of the road. Its side door slid open, and four armed persons in black uniforms ran out and headed for the building's door.

Elena kept staring at the woman with the gun. There was something familiar about her, although Elena was almost sure that she'd never met her before. She had very dark skin, almost black. She had high cheekbones and slightly slanted dark-brown eyes. Her hair was long, reaching well down her back, and had been treated to be able to change color. When Elena first saw her in the flat, the hair had been deep black. Now it was a clear electric blue with an irregular net-like red pattern. Her coat also changed colors. It too had been black in the dark of the flat, it was now a deep maroon red.

"Why are you doing this?" Sona said. She was sitting next to Elena in the taxi's rear back seat. The woman with the gun was sitting in the seat facing them, so she could see them clearly. Her gun didn't waver, and she held it like she knew how to use it. It was not a new gun. It looked like it was war surplus, and it had quite clearly seen use. If by this woman or some previous owner was impossible to tell.

"I was asked to get the book," she said. "I intend to do so."

"Asked?" Sona said. "By who?"

"My dead girlfriend," the woman said.

Elena winced internally. Great. They were being held at gunpoint not just by a violent criminal, but an *insane* violent criminal.

"You know, that doesn't really make sense," Sona said.

"Agreed," the woman said. "So I'm kind of eager to get the book, so I can find out what the whole thing is about."

All right, so maybe she wasn't entirely off her rocker, then.

Sona was about to say something more when the woman spoke again.

"Why do *you* want the book?" she said. "You're with the library, right? So it's just part of the job for you. Nothing to be particularly upset about, really. The library is insured for things like this, isn't it?"

"It is... curious," Elena said.

"Right," the woman said. "Curious enough to risk being shot for?"

The taxi slowed to a gentle stop.

"Sorry for butting in on your conversation, boss lady," the taxi said. "But a van is parked on the sidewalk outside the place you asked me to take you to, and a bunch of armed people just ran from the van into the building. Thought you might want to know."

The woman with the gun turned around and looked out the front of the taxi moment.

"Oh my god," Sona said. "Karri!"

The woman turned back to them.

"That's your friend with the book?" she said. "Call her and tell her to get out or hide or something. Those are the same people who blew up the library."

It was an effort for Elena to sit still. She wanted to get out, to run after them and try to help Karri. Wanted to *badly*.

"I don't think there is a back exit," she said. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Sona activate her wearables. Calling Karri, almost certainly. Hopefully, she was smart enough not to call the cops.

"No fire escape?" the woman said. "Bad planning, that."

Elena didn't say anything. The woman looked like she was trying to make up her mind.

"Well, fuck this," she said after a couple of seconds. "This is probably a mistake, but I just don't like those guys."

She reached inside her coat and took out a second pistol.

"You know how to handle this," she said to Elena. It wasn't a question, but Elena nodded anyway.

"After we've saved your friend and the book, do you promise to give it back to me?"

Elena nodded again. The woman handed the pistol to her.

"Let's go," she said.

Jeraldine kicked open the cab door and ran out. It wouldn't surprise her if they had snipers placed, so she wanted to be out in the open for as little time as possible.

"Hey! You're paying for that!" she heard the taxi yell, and then Elena's steps were right behind her. She kept running, not really caring of the ex-commando kept up with her or not. There was a chance she might get a few shots in on the guys with the guns from behind, if she was fast enough. Things would get much more difficult if they actually reached the destination and could spread out properly before she reached them.

And suddenly, as she ran through the door, it occurred to her that she didn't know where she was going. She stopped. Elena was still right behind her.

"Where to?" she asked.

"Are these guys pros?" Elena asked. Jeraldine nodded.

"They'll go for the stairs, then. Second door on the left."

"Right."

It was a non-automatic door. A sure sign that it wasn't meant for casual use. Jeraldine opened the door with some care, to avoid unnecessary noise. Once it was open, she could hear running steps from above.

"How many floors?" she asked.

"Twelve," Elena said.

"Some exercise."

"So get going."

Jeraldine couldn't help smiling. She turned away from Elena so she shouldn't see it, and then set off up the stairs at a pace she knew she could keep up all the way to the top but that any normal human would find very difficult to match. Of course, an ex-commando didn't really count as a normal human. Unless, of course, they'd ripped out all her implants and augmentations after the war. Which was entirely possible.

Those running above were normal humans, though. After only four flights of steps she could hear them getting closer. She tried to run as lightly and noiselessly as possible, and hoped that they'd be too focused upwards to care about noise from below. A couple of steps behind her, Elena was breathing very heavily but actually keeping up.

When it sounded like they were only one flight of stairs from seeing their targets, Jeraldine slowed down a little.

"Legs or arms," she said. "You take right, I take left."

Elena nodded. She was drenched in sweat and obviously fighting very hard to keep up. Jeraldine was breathing a little heavy, and her heart had speeded up a lot, but she could still keep this pace up for a lot longer. She hoped that the people above wouldn't be in much better shape than Elena, and hopefully worse. Augmentations weren't very common since the war, not even among those whose work included occasional violence. And with some luck, these people still believed that they were going after unarmed civilians.

They were almost at the top. Jeraldine put on a burst of speed to get her quarry in sight. She saw the back of two men running up the staircase. They were dressed in black combat uniforms, with obvious armor plates covering their torsos. They were also wearing helmets. She aimed for the thigh of the left one and fired.

The shot echoed deafeningly through the stairwell. She saw a small hole appear in the back of his thigh, just under the hip, and a cloud of blood, muscle and bone fragments explode out in front of him. His leg bent at a place it was never intended to bend, and he fell down, too surprised and shocked to scream. His assault rifle clattered as it bounced down the steps. A second shot rang out from next to Jeraldine, but as far as she saw it didn't hit anything. The still-standing guy turned around. He started firing long before his rifle was aimed in the direction of Jeraldine and Elena. Ricochets clanged and whirred between the walls. Jeraldine felt one pass far too close to her arm for comfort. She took an invaluable split second to aim, and shot the second man in the head. His right eye vanished in a splash of blood, and all of a sudden the wall behind him was splattered with generous amounts of red and grey.

Suddenly, strangely, the only things to be heard were the clatter as the second man's rifle fell down and Elena's heavy breathing.

"Hey!" a woman shouted from above. "What's happening down there?"

Jeraldine looked at Elena and put a finger across her lips. Elena nodded. Jeraldine stalked up the staircase, carefully stepping over the fallen men. The one she'd shot in the leg seemed to have passed out, which suited her just fine. There was a growing pool of blood under his leg. He might very well have bled to death before she and Elena had handled the remaining two attackers, but, well, that was the kind of risk that came with the job.

"Antony! Stephan!" the voice shouted from above. "Talk to me, damn it!"

"Something's fucking wrong," another, male, voice said. "You want to go down and check?"

"Hell no," the first voice said. "Just get that door open so we can finish and get out of here."

Jeraldine stopped. One of those up there almost certainly was looking down for something to shoot at, which made things kind of tricky. If she could only somehow get them to turn their attention elsewhere...

"Ah, there," the male voice said. "Now, let's..."

There was a crackling sound, followed by two heavy thuds in rapid succession. Jeraldine frowned. What the fuck?

Lighter steps moved around up there. After a few moments they headed down the staircase. Jeraldine raised her pistol. The cold ceramic of a pistol muzzle touched her neck.

"That'll be my friend Karri," Elena said. "So lower you gun."

"You promised to give me my gun back after we took care of these bastards," Jeraldine said. Something heavy and gun-shaped was put into one of her coat's outer pockets. The muzzle against her neck didn't move a millimeter.

"Sure did," Elena said. "Nice of the bastards to give me a replacement for it."

A short, wiry woman carrying a large and obviously home-built weapon came into view. She lowered the weapon when she saw Elena and Jeraldine.

"One of them?" she asked.

"Given that she just killed one of them and badly wounded another, I really doubt that," Elena said.

"But not friend," Karri said.

As fast as she could, Jeraldine reached up, grabbed the barrel of Elena's assault rifle and pulled it forward as hard as she could. The muzzle was well past her neck when a shot rang out, narrowly missing Karri. Elena lost her balance from the sudden tug and fell against Jeraldine's back. Jeraldine spun around, grabbing her on the way and ended up with their positions reversed. Holding Elena in front of her as a shield, she quickly put her pistol to her hostage's head.

"I just want my book," she said. "What kind of library are you anyway, to make a thing like that this hard?"

She lowered her pistol and took a step back.

"Truce?" she said.

Sona patched up the leg of the one still-living attacker as best she could with only Karri's first-aid kit to use.

"We should get him to a hospital," she said. "He needs replacing all the blood he lost."

They had all moved into Karri's flat. Elena had sat down on Karri's bed, suffering from post-combat shakes. Karri was kneeling by the bodies of the two she'd killed outside her door, carefully examining them. Jeraldine was watching Karri. Sona was kneeling next to the wounded man, and Nolan sat slumped in a chair, deeply sunk into VR.

"I don't think any of us want to talk to the police," Jeraldine said. "So let's do that very carefully, if at all."

"How long can he wait before we have to call an ambulance?" Elena asked.

"A couple of hours, at most," she said. "Although that'll be cutting it might fine. I can live with waiting one hour, if we have to. Considering he probably came here to kill Karri and all."

"His friends damn near killed the woman at the library," Jeraldine said.

Elena looked up.

"You were there?"

"Yeah," Jeraldine said. "The mail I got said to get the book from the library, so that's where I went. I was talking to this Jocelyn person when these jokers came crashing in with guns blazing. She got hit while I tried to get her out of there."

Sona taped the last piece of traumaflesh to the man's leg. She looked critically at her work, and while she didn't like the way it looked it was the best she could do under the circumstances.

"You still haven't told us your name," she said.

"I don't think he's going to answer you," Jeraldine said.

"I meant you."

"Oh. Of course. I'm Jeraldine Kuzia. Private investigator."

"And your dead girlfriend asked you to get this particular book at the North Atlantis university library."

"Yes."

"You know that that sounds a bit insane, right?" Sona said.

"She may have been uploaded before she died," Jeraldine said.

Karri abruptly stopped her examination and stood up. She looked hard at Jeraldine.

"Amazon," she said after a little while.

"What?" Sona said.

"Of course!" Elena said, looking annoyed with herself. "I should've known you weren't human, the way you fought!"

"That's a matter of definition," Jeraldine said. "We were brought up to consider ourselves human. It was you guys who said otherwise."

Suddenly Sona understood what they were talking about.

"Oh!" she said. "You're a parahuman! Cool! I never met one before!"

Jeraldine looked strangely at her.

"If your friend here and her colleagues had done their job just a little bit better back in the war, you never would have," she said.

The enthusiasm left Sona just as quickly as it had arrived.

"Right," she said. "Of course."

Silence fell. Nobody seemed to know what to say. Finally, Sona couldn't stand it any longer.

"So," she said, "did your dead girlfriend say what you were supposed to do with the book? Where you supposed to take it somewhere, or give it to someone, or whatever?"

Jeraldine looked a little sheepish.

"No, actually she didn't. The only thing she said is that the book can set her free. And she's more of a dead ex-girlfriend, really."

Sona and Elena looked at each other.

"So you have no idea what the book is about?" Elena said.

"No," Jeraldine admitted.

"But you're determined to the point of using violence to get hold of it?"

She hesitated a little.

"I wasn't at first," she said. "But now people have shot at me for it, they've blown up buildings and killed people for it, and *I've* had to kill people for it, so by now I *really* want to know what's going on."

She looked from Sona to Karri to Elena.

"So I guess the answer to your question is, no, I won't fight to get it. I wouldn't know what to do with it! But I *will* stay around it, to find out what the fuck is going on."

"Well," Elena said, "given what's happened so far, I'll be glad to have a really good fighter around. What do you guys say?"

"Hey, no problem," Sona said.

Karri looked intently at Jeraldine.

"Her kind killed a lot of us, back then," she said.

"Well, your kind killed just about *all* of us," Jeraldine replied. "So I really don't think you got the bad end of the deal."

"So maybe you want revenge."

Jeraldine looked at her, obviously both surprised and angry at the accusation.

"Yeah," she said, "because that would be such an *efficient* way to go about it."

"Yes or no, Karri?" Elena said.

"Yes," Karri said. "But I'll be watching."

"Right," Elena said. She grabbed a loose circuit board from a shelf near Karri's bed and threw it at Nolan. He started and looked up in surprise.

"Er," he said. "What?"

"Is she in or not?" Elena said.

"Who?" Nolan said.

Elena pointed at Jeraldine.

"Oh," he said. "Well, if you think it's all right that's good enough for me."

His eyes glazed over again as he sank back into his virtual world.

Jeraldine looked around at the people surrounding her.

"Are you all total space cases?" she said.

Karri pointed at Sona.

"Not her," she said.

"Let me get this straight," Jeraldine said some time later, after pizza and beer had been brought in, Karri had cleared a table for them to eat from and dug out a bunch of chairs from somewhere. The corpses had been covered up for later disposal, and the wounded man had been but in the not-so-honest taxi and, for an extortionate amount of money, driven to a hospital that wasn't the one where Sona worked.

"The book does not really exist. It's some kind of quantum-mechanical trickery that's been made to look like a book. When Elena tried to read it, it filled her storage implants with huge amounts of data, that just happened to be encrypted with one of *our* side's best cryptosystems. Meanwhile, there's a group of people with large enough resources to hire mercenaries who want to get the book-thing really, really badly. Badly enough to kill indiscriminately and engage in wanton property destruction. Did I miss anything?"

"Not that I can think of," Sona said.

"We knew that it was sent here from Neptune," Elena said. "Unless somebody did a really good fake job on the shipping logs, which I doubt. Too many different systems and companies involved for that."

"Neptune?" Jeraldine said. "Where around there?"

"The first logged station was a gathering terminal on Astropolis Station," Elena said. "Which doesn't make sense. It should've been dropped off at a collection point first."

Jeraldine frowned.

"Interesting," she said. "But in any case, I think we should get out of here as soon as we've finished eating."

"But it's the middle of the night," Sona protested. "I've been up all day, and I want to sleep. What's the hurry?"

"The hurry is that they were coming here," Jeraldine said. "And I can't see how they could possibly have found this place. The only connection between here and the book is Elena, and anyone who followed that trail, like I did, would end up at Elena's place first. But they never went there, they went straight here. And when they came here they weren't doing a slow investigation, it was a full-on raid. So I think they're somehow tracking the book itself."

She grabbed another slice of pizza and started wolfing it down. She'd ate more than twice as much of the pizza as anyone else, and she didn't seem about to stop any time soon.

Elena winced internally. She should've seen that. It had been her job to think about that kind of thing, back in the day. Even if they didn't think about it consciously, Karri and Nolan would be expecting her to do it now as well. And Sona, of course, had never been in this kind of situation and couldn't be expected to react very sensibly at all.

"I agree," she said. "And before we set off for Neptune, if we ever do, I want to try to get at the data in my implants. Which means finding someone who can crack an old Transhumanist code. I know of a couple of people who might be able to, but it's quite possible that they don't even want to talk to me, much less help me out. But it's the best I can think of right now, so unless someone has a better idea, I suggest we set off for Berlin as soon as possible."

Jeraldine swallowed the last bit of the pizza slice she was holding.

"I have a better idea," she said. She washed the pizza down with beer. She'd been going through quite a bit of that as well. Sona kept watching her, obviously fascinated.

"Yes?" Elena said. "What is it?"

"You used to be able to do that kind cracking in your head, right? And I'm guessing that all that stuff is still inside you but blocked off?"

"Yes, and yes it is," Elena said. "And don't tell me you can break the blocks, because I won't believe you."

"I can't, but a half-sister of mine can," Jeraldine said. "An Alkaia. She did operations-efficiency analysis of various Amazon strains and biotechnology development during the war. After it, she went underground and started studying the enemy instead. Which is you. And I happen to know that she's broken the blocks for a handful of your old sisters-in-arms, for various reasons. She should be able to give you your wings back."

Elena thought about it. She wanted it so bad she could *taste* it. She didn't quite dare believe it was true, but if it was it would be a whole lot better than trying to find people who hadn't been willing to talk to her for six or seven years, and then try to convince them to give her the use of highly significant amounts of dataprocessing resources. Without telling them what she wanted to use it for.

"All right," she said. "Where do we find her?"

"L4," Jeraldine said, grinning. "Stepping Stone Station. Nasty old triple-S itself."

This time Elena winced out loud.

Chapter 3: Stepping Stone

Officially, it was one of Bibasary Corporation's orbital warehouses. An elevator shaft of nanomachine-spun carbon composite two hundred meters long, with a cylinder of similar material on each end and a docking hub in the middle, it rotated leisurely around its own center of mass in high Earth orbit. The rotation was enough to give the cylinders a gravity of about a sixth of a G, which while not exactly ideal at least allowed people to stay there in reasonable comfort.

Less officially, the station was a staging point for the corporation's not exactly legal paramilitary division.

The major sat in the station's communications center, waiting. Live images from cameras at the station hub displayed on the monitors in the walls, giving a decent illusion of being stationary above the Earth. She liked watching the weather systems move across the surface below. They were slow, stately. Imperturbable. Unaffected by human desires and politics.

Well, at least unaffected on any scale she could sit up here and watch.

The monitor directly in front of her flickered a little, and the view on it changed from the Sahara a hundred thousand kilometers below to a lavishly furnished conference room somewhere on Luna. Around the table a motley collection of people sat, and at the far wall from the camera a meter-high image of Bibasary's corporate logo hung.

"Ah, Major Kiner," the man at the top of table said. She recognized him, but hadn't bothered to remember his name. He was vice president of something or other that rarely had anything to do with her.

"How good of you to join us," he said. "I hope you are well?"

"As well as can be under the circumstances," she started to say. The VP of something or other started talking again before she was halfway through the sentence. Either unfamiliar with Earth-Luna communications lag, or just rude. She wasn't sure which she liked less.

"We've got you report about your recent actions on Earth," he said. "Which didn't turn out nearly as well as we hoped, frankly. We hope you have an explanation for us?"

It would've helped a lot if you'd let me know what the hell we were going after, she thought. She'd learned enough diplomacy not to say it out loud. At least not in those words.

"Not one you will like, I'm afraid," she said. "It seems that the object itself is working against us."

This time the VP waited for the lightspeed lag, so she guessed he'd just been rude earlier. Maybe it was his way of expressing displeasure.

"The object itself?" another of the people round the table, a blonde woman who looked to be in her early sixties but probably was a lot older than that, said. "How is that possible?"

"I really wish I knew that, sir," major Kiner said. "But I don't. What I do know is some basic facts about the so-called Neptune Anomaly, and that there has been a string of wildly improbable coincidences near or in association to the object. I'm convinced that there is a connection, and I would like permission to talk to the people at the Anomaly base about it."

The VP of something or other looked at another of the women at the table, a hard-faced one with bright yellow hair. She looked younger than the first one, but still well above the currently fashionable cosmetic age. She shook her head.

The VP turned back to the camera.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he said. "But if you have any specific questions, we might be able to relay them for you."

"I don't even know enough to ask questions," she said. "So that won't help. Any reliable prediction, or even a decent probability spread, for what may happen next would be very useful. So far I have four people dead and two wounded in what should be a routine operation on civilian grounds, all because of the sudden appearance of a retired infocommando, her squad and, of all accursed things, an Amazon-line transhuman."

The VP looked at the woman with the yellow hair again. This time she decided to speak for herself.

"Major Kiner," the woman said. "My name is Gloria Bae. I'm the vice president in charge of our Neptunian operations, which these days almost exclusively consist of the Anomaly. I assure you that if we had anything to say that might help you, we would. While there is a major component of security in this, that doesn't mean that we're withholding information from you. Quite simply, the reason we're not telling you any more than we are is that we don't have any more to tell."

She cleared her throat.

"I've forwarded you reports to our technical people, and they agree with you that the most likely explanation is that the object is warping probabilities in its vicinity. We also looked a bit harder at the people who have become involved in this. It turns out that the infocommando you mentioned, Elena Arden, isn't just a random ex-soldier. She's an ex-soldier who after the war vocally criticized the grounds for it. That she's now cooperating with a transhuman is worrying, in particular in light of the fact that we believe the Anomaly, and thus also the object, to be of Transhumanist origin. It is not impossible that they are trying to start the war all over again. If they manage to do that, and to somehow harness the power of the Anomaly, it may be that this time the human race may not win."

She paused to take a sip of water. All through her speech, Major Kiner had had to work hard not to show what she was feeling. This was terrible.

"This is only speculation, major," Gloria Bae continued, "and fairly far-out speculation at that. But it is not impossible, and we've judged the possible consequences sufficiently bad that you should be informed. We need to get the object back, major. Not only because of the continued survival of Bibasary Corporation, but possibly for the continued survival of our species."

Major Kiner didn't bother to wait for the lag.

"I request permission to take this to the UNHDF," she said. "Right now."

"Request denied," the VP in charge of Something or Other said. "If we get supporting evidence for Ms Bae's theories, we may reconsider, but at the moment you are to keep the authorities out of this."

"Let the record show that I disagree strongly with this decision," Gloria said. "I agree with the major. We should take this to the UNHDF."

"Well, you were voted down," the VP of SoO said.

"At least give me more resources, then," Kiner said. "Let me hire more mercenaries, and if need be to operate in the open."

The VP of SoO nodded. "That we will do," he said. "Your budget allocation has been increased. You have permission to act overtly if you deem it necessary, but you do not have permission to expose Bibasary Corporation. You have crash-priority access to the corporation's high-acceleration courier spaceships. Will this be sufficient, major Kiner?"

The major sighed.

"It'll just have to be, won't it?" she said.

"Indeed," the VP said. "Get us that object, major. It's important."

The transmission ended, and the view on the display returned to showing northern Africa.

Fuckheads, the major thought. They're all fuckheads. Even that Bae woman. But, as long as they give me my paychecks, they buy the right to be as fuckheaded as they want.

"Give me Mercenary Exchange," she said to the computer. Time to get to work.

The chose to leave for Stepping Stone from Stansted spaceport. Not because it was close or convenient, because it wasn't. They had to leave North Atlantis, go across the North Sea to England in order to reach it. Nor was it because it was a particularly nice or pleasant place to travel from. Quite the opposite. Stansted was a tourist place, teeming with hordes of obnoxious people, all of them going somewhere in a hurry, many of them unused to traveling and therefore worried and tense. Some of them were drunk or high. The entire place was a security nightmare, and the chances that they'd be spotted by someone they didn't want was small. Far smaller there than at Alcibides Spaceport back on North Atlantis, anyway.

The ship itself looked like an oversized bus. It was a longish, basically rectangular thing with two rows of paired acceleration seats. That wasn't strictly speaking necessary, since during no part of the journey would they hit more than about 1.1 Earth gravity, but they were there anyway. The seats had all the facilities one associated with them. Lights, buttons to call for steward attention, net jack, power outlet and so on. The trip would take a little over four hours, so that much wasn't needed. Much of it was rarely or never actually used. There were small and thoroughly airtight windows by each pair of seats. Not that there would be anything to see once they got into space, but most people wanted them there anyway. And the few views one sometimes got could be spectacular.

Elena got a window seat, with Karri next to her. She sat looking out the window while they waited for takeoff, watching the ceaseless activity of the spaceport. She wondered where all the people were going. In spite of over a century of space colonization, there really weren't that many places in space to go, as a tourist. No matter how easy it was to get there with Casimir drives, space was still an intensely hostile environment to beings

evolved to live in warm, moist atmosphere deep in a gravity well. So no matter where you went, all of your time would be spent indoors in one way or another. Except possibly Mars. There it was just barely possible to go out and feel the thin atmosphere tug at your very heavy clothes and triple-redundant rebreather system. It wasn't very fun.

Particularly not when people were shooting at you.

Sona sat down in the seat behind Elena's. She had never been to space before, and wanted a chance to see any interesting sights that might pass by. She'd been told there wouldn't be any, but she wanted to check for herself. Just in case.

She felt someone sit down in the seat next to her.

"Do you mind?" she heard Jeraldine ask. She turned to look at her and shook her head.

"Thanks," Jeraldine said. "It didn't seem like much fun to sit next to the zombie there."

She pointed over her shoulder towards Nolan, who was sitting behind Sona. He was already jacked in and had disappeared into his virtual world. Sometimes, Sona wondered what kind of life he lived there. Mostly, after thinking about it, she decided that she didn't really want to know.

"No, he's not much fun," she said. "Hasn't been for as long as I've known him. Elena and Karri insist on keeping him around, though."

"War buddies," Jeraldine said. "I can understand. Although mine are all dead."

"I'm sorry," Sona said.

"Hey," she changed the subject. "You don't want the window seat, do you? To get a good look at vast amounts of nothing, as I'm told there will be?"

"No," Jeraldine said. "I grew up there. It's kind of familiar."

"Oh," Sona said.

She turned to look at Jeraldine again.

"You grew up in *space*?" she said.

Jeraldine nodded. "Smallish station orbiting Ganymede," she said. "It was called Elysium, which was a serious case of wishful thinking on somebody's part."

Sona noted the 'was'.

"Destroyed, huh?"

Jeraldine nodded. "By people just like your friend Elena."

She didn't know what to say to that.

"You know," she said in another attempt to change the subject. "Do you mind if I ask you questions about you? Because, you know, I was in the first year of med school when the war broke out, and all of a sudden it became impossible to find out anything about parahumans. So I'm kind of curious."

Jeraldine grinned at her. "Go right ahead," she said. "Although I don't promise to answer. Hell, I may not know. I'm a warrior, not a geneticist."

"I remember the newscasts during the war," Sona said. "They painted you people as some kind of superhumans. Fast, stronger and better in every conceivable way. Something we just had to kill to remain as a species, or we'd be out-competed in very short order. Then, after the war, I met Elena. She didn't believe any of that, and she was an ex-soldier. She'd been out there. She was very angry in those days, Elena."

She shook her head.

"Anyway," she went on, "was any of what they told us actually true? Are you better than us in every respect?"

"That depends on what you mean by 'better'," Jeraldine said. "And what you mean by 'you'."

"Am I, Jeraldine, better than you, Sona? Well, I'm stronger than you. I have much faster reflexes. Over short distances, I run very much faster. But if we were to compete in a ten-kilometer run, you might very well win."

Sona kind of doubted that very much, and it apparently showed in her expression, because Jeraldine suddenly grinned at her again.

"It's true," she said. "I'm a parahuman of the Amazon line and the Pantariste variant. All Amazons are made to be fighters, in some way. We Pantariste are close-quarters fighters. We're designed to do well on spacecraft, on stations, in cities and anywhere else where distances are short and things happen quickly. We react fast, we move fast and if need be we can easily kill with our bare hands."

She'd taken her coat off before she sat down. She was wearing a skin-hugging black turtleneck shirt and black pants with many pockets. Both of them looked like they were made of some material that wasn't quite cloth.

Nor did it hide what was under it very well. Sona could see the outlines of Jeraldine's well-defined, athletic-looking muscles almost as well as if the woman had been naked. And she could see the nipples on her smallish breasts. She tried not to ogle them too obviously.

"But if all of us were like that," Jeraldine said. "We'd be a really crap army. So we're not. The woman we're going to see on triple-S is also an Amazon parahuman, but unlike me she's an Alkaia variant. Alkaias are the smart ones, the leader types. They're not much to brag about physically. But they're very intelligent, they get by on about two hours of sleep every other night and they have simply amazing stress tolerance. And where we are specialized, you baselines get a little of everything chosen at random. Sometimes one of you get very little of everything and go through life as hopeless losers. Sometimes one of you get a lot of everything and you end up with Terisa Gutieres. So are we better than you or not?"

She shrugged.

"We're different," she said.

"I see," Sona said. She turned away from Jeraldine to look out the window and saw that they had already taken off. They were slowly moving away from the spaceport, one in a long line of similar craft. They'd accelerate slowly until they got far enough out at sea that there was no risk of disturbing anybody, and at that point they'd start accelerating more severely upwards and out of the atmosphere.

She turned back to Jeraldine. Her hair was slowly turning golden red.

"But how does that feel?" Sona said. "To be locked into doing exactly one thing like that?"

"How long have you been a doctor?" Jeraldine asked.

"What?"

"How long?"

"Fully licensed, four years now," Sona said. "Why?"

"When did you decide that that was what you wanted to be?"

"What? Oh, I don't know, really. It just seemed like a good thing to do at the time."

"Do you like it?"

"I guess. It's all right. Pays the bills."

"I *always* knew what I wanted to do," Jeraldine said. "I've *always* been a warrior. And I've *always* liked it."

"Oh," Sona said. She thought about it. It sounded kind of appealing, in a strange way, although she didn't think she'd like to live like that herself.

"I'm not sure I can even imagine what that must feel like to be you," she said.

Jeraldine smiled at her. It was a nice change from the somewhat predatory grins she'd displayed earlier.

"There's nothing in it that's outside the human norm," she said. "Mentally, we Pantariste are pretty much your basic human warriors. We enjoy our adrenaline rush. We often act before we think. We have a terrible need to win. We like to show off."

She leaned over and put her face so close to the side of Sona's head that Sona could feel her warm breath against her skin.

"And we have *very* active libidos," Jeraldine whispered. She teasingly nipped Sona's ear with her teeth. Then she sat back and leaned against the back rest of her own seat as if nothing had happened.

"Do they have in-flight magazines?" she said. "In-flight magazines fascinate me. They always seem like missives from another planet. Like what's written in them has nothing whatsoever to do with anything I ever experienced."

Sona's head swam. She was feeling hot and cold at the same time, and she had problems getting her breath under control. With an effort, she managed to talk.

"I think it's behind the spaceline's logo on the display," she said.

Jeraldine touched her finger to the CisLunar Alliance logo, and a number of brightly colored pictures and some text swirled into view.

"Right," she said. "Thanks."

"Sometime I'll have to take you somewhere private and show you my in-flight magazine collection," Sona said.

Jeraldine looked strangely at her.

"You have an in-flight magazine *collection*?" she said.

"No," Sona said. "Would that be a problem?"

Jeraldine's expression turned into a wide smile.

"No," she said. "No problem at all."

Stepping Stone Station had been built during the war, to be used as a staging area by UNHDF Space. This meant that it had been built in terrible haste, with almost no planning and using whatever materials could be scrounged up at the moment. It wasn't even one contiguous station, but a large number of smaller enclosures that together went under the name of Stepping Stone. Some of them were proper well-designed well-built habitats, the large central docking-capable ones in particular. Most were smaller things, brought in from elsewhere and pressed into service long after they should have been allowed to burn up on atmospheric re-entry. At the fringes of the station were the really small object, some no more than shipping containers welded vacuum-tight and insulated just enough that touching the walls would be safe. Or at least not very dangerous.

During the war, it served its purpose. Thousands of soldiers and hundreds of ships passed through it, staying for a few hours or a few weeks to get restocked and repaired. It wasn't pretty, it wasn't very efficient and the soldiers hated it, but it *worked*. And since there was a war on, that had to do. There wasn't time to build anything better.

After the war things were different. As soon as they could get the budget approved for it, UNHDF Space started building a series of new and significantly better staging stations. They spread them through the Solar System, to decrease their minimum response times. Even with Casimir drives that let ships accelerate indefinitely, the distances between planets were large. If something happened at Saturn, it would take ships from Jupiter Station pushing at three gravities all the way three and half days to get there. And that was if the planets happened to be at their closest. If they were at their farthest, it would take twice as long. Luna Station was built first, and was the largest and most important. A few years after the war, UNHDF Space moved their headquarters there, and much of their training happened there from the very beginning. Mercury Station was next, a very special place where they experimented with ships capable of actually moving inside the outermost layers of the Sun itself. After that came Mars Station, which was responsible not only for operations in the asteroid belt, but also largely for on-planet operations on Mars. Jupiter Station came after that, to patrol the messy and unpleasant Jovian system and everything between there and Pluto. Outside Pluto was Kuiper Station, small and sparsely manned, which tried to see if anything at all happened that far out. One single station in all that space seemed far beyond pointless to most people, but the post-war paranoia led some people in positions of power to fear hidden Transhumanists everywhere.

While all those stations were built, Stepping Stone languished and fell into disrepair. For a time, until Luna Station had proven itself fully functional, a small skeleton crew kept Stepping Stone in usable state, so it never quite became a wreck. But it came close, and as soon as the military moved out the private entrepreneurs moved in.

Some of them were legit. Shopkeepers, engineers, doctors and things like that catering to the increasingly large spacefaring population. Sure, they could get all of that on Earth, Luna or any of the major commercial stations -- but on Stepping Stone they could get it without anybody looking on, and some people really valued their privacy. Things pattered along like that for a year or so, small-scale and discreet.

Then someone discovered that a legal oversight when the UNHDF left the place made it officially stateless territory. No state meant no law, and no law meant that big money could be made from doing all those things that one couldn't easily do in all the places that had laws. The crime syndicates, the lunatic fringe cults and the less ethical large corporations moved in en masse. After six months, every last piece of livable space at Stepping Stone was sold or rented, and few if any of the people who'd lived there a year earlier remained. Stepping Stone became the sort of place where you could have *anything* for a price. Where research was done that would have ethics committees up in arms on Earth. Where it was wise to care where you went, or you might end up raw material for somebody's experiment.

It was, of course, a natural place for a refugee. Particularly so for a refugee with talents above and beyond the human norm.

Unfortunately, if you asked Elena.

CisLunar Alliance's flight from Earth to Stepping Stone Station docked at the hub of the largest single part of the triple-S complex. On its way there, it flew past hordes of smaller habitats, many more than there had ever been in the station's military days. At least Elena thought there was. She might misremember, of course. The first time she arrived here she hadn't had her memory and infoprocessing implants yet. She got those later, in a surgical theater on Luna. She did already have her more physical ones, though. The ones that made her faster and stronger and more resilient than ordinary people. That made her tough enough to fight parahumans. She'd been shipped up to triple-S to train. To become a soldier, rather than a civilian with implants.

They weren't happy memories. She was glad that the place had changed as much as it has, so not everything she saw brought back memories. Only most things. The dock they were headed for was one of the big, main ones that back then had handled the large ships of the line that went out towards Mars or Venus, or came back from there for repair. Ship transports from Earth had docked in smaller docks, further up the station's side.

"Welcome to Stepping Stone Station," a steward's voice said. A small shudder went through the craft as they latched on to the station. They were hanging from the outside of it, rotating along and getting some measure of gravity. Here in the ship it felt like about a quarter gravity to Elena. She knew well that it'd be less inside.

"Please remain seated until the captain has turned off the seat belts sign and we have the staircase into the station in position," the steward went on.

Most people immediately got up from their seats and started digging through their carry-on luggage.

"Hey."

Sona leaned forward over the back of Elena's seat.

"What do we do first?" she asked.

"I don't know," Elena said. "It's our parahuman friend there who knows where we're going. And how long we'll be staying, I guess."

Sona turned towards Jeraldine.

"So?" she said. "What do we do now?"

"It'll probably take me more than a day to find Terina," she said. "So I'd suggest that we start by finding somewhere to stay."

Sona turned to Elena.

"You heard?" she said.

"I heard," Elena said. "I still don't know where to go, though. Last time I was here this place was a wartime military base. I suspect things will have changed since then."

"Don't worry," Jeraldine said from behind. "I'll lead. I've spent some time here. I know a place that'll hold us all for very cheap."

Karri turned her head and looked at Jeraldine.

"Radiation?" she said.

"Don't worry," Jeraldine said. "The place is well shielded. As well as having a decent climate and well-breathable air. In those respects, I'm every bit as human as you are."

"Will it have more than one room?" Sona asked.

"Oh yes," Jeraldine said. "You bet it will."

"Good," Sona said, with a happy smile.

Elena gave her a questioning look, but she didn't respond. Elena shrugged, grabbed her jacket and the backpack with the book from the overhead locker and headed for the exit.

The bar was crowded when the major got there. She had hoped that it would be, in spite of not really liking crowded bars. But she was here to talk to as many people as possible, so she'd just have to put up with it.

The place resided in one of the major enclosures just off the center of triple-S, one of the first ones to be built after the place fell to complete anarchy. The entire enclosure was an ugly, worn-down place and it stank of humanity and fear. The bar itself was probably the oldest one in the entire station complex, and it had served as a meeting place for unsavory characters ever since it was no more than a room with a couple of chairs and an old woman selling vacuum-distilled hooch out of a cooler chest. It was still run by that same old woman, Amelia Mayerle, it still had chairs and it still flogged vacuum-distilled hooch, but apart from that just about everything had changed. There were many rooms, some of them public and some of them for rent. There were several proper bar counters, and they sold things other than Mom Mayerle's Special. There were tables as well as chairs, and booths in some places. There were bouncers and, according to rumor, a device to flood the place with tear gas in case of brawls that the bouncers couldn't handle.

The major suspected that the tear gas thing was a myth. It'd be very much cheaper just to seal off the problematic room and vent the atmosphere, and Mayerle was a seriously ruthless old bitch. She was also powerful enough within triple-S to get away with it.

"Jody!" somebody shouted. "I'll be damned, it's Jody Kiner!"

The major looked up. There was a woman standing at the bar waving frantically at her. She was a bit on the short side, but wide as a barn door and with lots of weapons hanging off a combat harness. She had a face that looked like it smiled a lot and her skull was shaved.

"Desiree Lorch, as a live and breathe," the major said after she'd walked up to the woman. "It sure wasn't yesterday! What the hell happened to your hair?"

"Hung around a bit too long in the lower Van Allen belt a couple of years ago," Lorch said. "All dressed up in a snazzy black uniform! Life must be treating you good."

"Can't complain, really," the major said. She didn't have much more to say, really. She and Lorch had served together in a mercenary company for a while, just after the war. They'd got along well enough, and both left the company at the same time, after the two owners fell out over a contract. Lorch had had hair that reached down to her knees back then. Any sensible soldier would've cut it off, but she just claimed it made for better padding in her helmet.

"So, are you too here to find out about this corporate big-money job?" Lorch said.

"No," the major said. "I'm here to tell you guys about it."

Lorch looked surprised.

"No shit? You're the one giving it out?"

Kiner nodded.

"Hey," Lorch said. "Give an old pal a leg up, will you? Let me have first shot at it?"

"Isn't that kind of mission, I'm afraid," the major said. "I'm not looking to pick one gang to do this for me. I want *everybody* to do this for me, and the first ones to get me what I want get the prize."

"Kind of like a contest?"

"Kind of like I'm in a bloody hurry," the major said. "Talk to you later, if you want." She walked out and stood in the middle of the floor.

"Hey!" she shouted as loud as she could, which was quite impressively loud. Conversations died out around the room and people's eyes turned towards her.

"I'm major Kiner with the Bibasary Corporation," she said. "I'm the one who's asked you all to come. I have a job for you."

"For all of us?" a young woman with lots of knives in her belt said. "Are you starting a war or what?"

"Somewhere on triple-S are a bunch of people," the major said. "One of them is an Amazon parahuman, one is a former infocommando and the rest are her old squad. They have something I want. The first of you to get it to me will get a prize."

"That's a bit of a bum deal, pal," a scarred old woman in urban camo fatigues said. "Risk with no sure pay."

"The prize in question is a brand new 6-person 100-day Ford-Jinmao spacecraft rated for three gravities sustained," the major said.

The room became totally silent. The major took a projection pod out of her pocket. She turned it on, and an image of a large leather-bound book appeared in the air above her.

"The object I want looks like this," she said. "And don't think about trying to keep it and sell it somebody else. We're only paying this much because we need it very urgently. From anybody else, you'd be a lucky to get a couple of thousand."

"How do we know you really have that ship to give?" a voice from a dark corner said.

"It's docked to enclosure five, dock three," she said. "You can go there and have a look at it. As for if I'll actually give it to you or not, you'll just have to trust that the corporation don't want to burn their reputation with every mercenary in the system."

"Er, Jody, I don't mean to doubt your word or anything," Lorch said from over by the bar counter, "but a ship like that does seem like *way* overpaid for a book."

The major smiled. "Don't ask me," she said. "The bigwigs made the decision. I'm just the one they sent to do the job."

"An Amazon, you say?" the young one with the knives said. "What kind of Amazon?"

"A Pantariste," the major said. "So you may want to stock up on neural accelerators before you go after her, kid."

The kid sneered at her.

"Do you have pictures of the targets?" the older one in the city camo said.

The major pressed a button on her pod. Pictures of Jeraldine and Elena appeared above her.

"The dark one is the Amazon," she said. "The blonde is the commando. We're not sure if her wartime implants are active or not, so it's probably best to assume that they are. I'll download what data we have on them to anybody who wants to have a go. Any questions?"

"Do you want them alive or in pieces?" the kid said.

"I don't want them at all," the major said. "I want to book. First one to bring it to me gets the ship. No arguments, no questions asked."

There was a silence again as the various individuals and groups looked at each other. They all seemed to be thinking the same thing: this is going to get ugly.

"Right," the major said. "So who wants a copy of the data?"

The place was cylindrical, with a diameter of about ten meters. Each story was roughly three meters high, and there was a narrow elevator shaft in the middle. There were seven stories, the bottom six divided mainly into four pizza-slice rooms and a small, circular hallway in the middle. The top floor was one big room, with thick red carpeting, dark red velvet wallpaper and plenty of large gilt-decorated mirrors on the walls. Several formerly-lush sofas dotted the floor, with knee-high tables near them. All of it was dusty, and what happened to be close to the floor had a layer of frost on it. There were a couple of large stains on the carpet, stains that looked disturbingly much as if pools of blood had been left to freeze-dry. The entire thing hung from a rotating ring-shaped structure, providing it with roughly a fifth of a gravity.

Jeraldine waved her hand lamp about, putting every little bit into clear light for a moment. Reflected and scattered light from it was enough to let the other see the rest of the room.

"What the hell *is* this place?" Elena said.

"It used to be a brothel," Jeraldine said. "I worked here as a bouncer for a while. I've rented it for three months. That should help us fly under the radar of people looking for people staying short-term."

"It's kind of cold," Sona said.

"It's kind of miserable," Nolan said. "Does it even have a net connection? And are we going to stay up here long? The lag down to Earth is terrible."

Jeraldine walked over to the elevator and pried the doors open. She shone her light down the shaft.

"Machine room's at the bottom," she said. "The place will look better after we get some light and heating going."

"Will fix," Karri said. She dug a small lamp out of her backpack and strapped it to her forehead.

"There's a ladder in the shaft," Jeraldine said. "It's a bit of a climb, but in this gravity it shouldn't even make you break a sweat."

Karri looked briefly down the shaft, then entered it. The light from her lamp gradually vanished downwards.

"There's a kitchen at the bottom level as well," Jeraldine said, "in case we get tired of eating out. If it's still got something in the fridge we'll just have to hope it doesn't attack us, though."

"So what are your plans?" Sona asked. Elena was walking around the room, looking closer at things in it.

"Same as before. I get something to eat, I catch a bit of sleep, I go out and try to find Terina. In some order."

"Maybe I'm just not used to this sort of place," Sona said. "But a lot of the people we walked past out there were armed and didn't look all that friendly."

"They were and they aren't," Jeraldine agreed.

"Think it might come to violence at some point?"

"Wouldn't surprise me at all."

"Right," Sona said. "In that case I want to buy or rent some medical equipment and give you a thorough examination."

Jeraldine looked at her.

"As interesting as that sounds, I don't think we have the time for it," she said.

"Your choice, of course," Sona said. "But, given a choice, would you rather that I learned about whatever differences there are between you and the humans I trained on while you're healthy and awake or while you're unconscious and bleeding on a floor somewhere?"

Jeraldine grimaced.

"Point," she said. "We'll try to arrange that as soon as possible. Although we may have to settle for buying a high-grade first aid kit rather than proper medical stuff."

Lights came on at several places around the room. A few of them were colored red, giving that genuine brothel feel to the room.

"How are the locks to this place?" Elena asked. "Can we defended if somebody un-invited comes knocking?"

"Depends on how hard they knock," Jeraldine said. "This place was built to be defended somewhat, so it'll stand up to just about anything a single person can carry around. If someone comes along with something bigger, the entire lowest floor can be blasted loose and used as an escape pod. The Casimir unit giving us power is able to provide about a twentieth of a G of acceleration in that case, which should be enough to get us to somewhere before the air becomes unbreathable."

"Pretty neat little fortress," Elena said. "One might even say that it seems a bit over the top."

"It was a pretty high-class establishment," Jeraldine said. "Had a handful of parahu-mans working in it, a couple of Aphrodites and a few Adonises. They made a lot of money, and wanted to keep it safe."

"Who cares?" Nolan said testily. "Are we going to do whatever we came here for or are we just going to sit around?"

The door to the elevator opened and Karri stepped out of it.

"Fixed now," she said. "Engine's in pretty bad shape. Good toolbox, so I can fix, but will take time."

"As long as it holds up while we're here, that's fine by me," Jeraldine said. "And I'm going to go out and get started looking for Terina. There's a restaurant called the Stinking Star in the wheel above here. I suggest we meet there for dinner in four hours. Is that all right with everybody?"

"Will you be all right by yourself?" Sona said.

Jeraldine nodded. "Sure," she said. "I'd suggest none of you go out alone, though. See you in a while."

She went up the staircase to the station wheel three steps at a time.

The young woman with the many knives, who went by the name of Dagger, bounced down a corridor in the microgravity center of a part of triple-S known as Satan's Turd. It had been meant to become an O'Neill station and be tugged out to Jupiter, but the budget ran out before it was finished. It had hung in space as a mostly empty shell until a bunch of squatters made it airtight, got it to spin and had it dragged to Stepping Stone. It had bad air, little water, no food production, crap power systems, almost no computer network and it smelled bad. It was not a high-status place to live.

How Dagger had come to triple-S nobody knew and she didn't say. Nor did she reveal her original name. She'd chosen to call herself Dagger in the belief that it made her sound badder than she was. It was after she chose the name that she'd got into the habit of carrying as many blades of different kinds as possible about her person. The knives did more than her name for her reputation, since most people would assume that anybody who carried around that much sharp metal probably wasn't quite right in the head.

She pulled a dirk from a sheath under her arm and banged on a rusty steel door with its large ceramic pommel.

"Hey in there!" she shouted. "Get your asses out here!"

After a few moments of shuffling sounds, the door opened a little and a young-looking woman with crew-cut blonde hair peered out.

"Dagger?" she said. "What the hell is the problem?"

"Hello, Scar," Dagger said. "How would you like owning a spaceship?"

The woman in the door -- Scar -- sneered.

"You got us out of bed for a stupid joke?" she said.

Dagger shook her head. "Ain't no joke. A corporate stiff wants a book *real* bad, and she'll give a spaceship to the ones that get it to her. That could be us, if we're fast enough. So get out here!"

The door opened wider. Scar's naked torso came into view. She was pale and skinny, with an almost flat chest and a thick scar running from her right shoulder diagonally across her front to her left hip. Next to her another girl was floating, just as naked and skinny but with a darker complexion. Her scalp was shaved, and an ornate cross was tattooed on the top of her head.

"For real?" she said. "You're not shitting us?"

Dagger shook her head. "I swear I'm not," she said. "Every merc in triple-S is going at it right now, just about. Get some clothes on and let's get going!"

Scar and the other girl looked at each other.

"Dagger, we can't fight the others," Scar said. "We don't even have guns."

Dagger smiled. "I know," she said. "But I've got a plan. We're going to get the ship without needing as much as a needle."

"If you say so," Scar said. "Just give us a moment to dress, all right?"

She closed the door. Dagger waited impatiently for the minute or so it took before the door opened and the two inside appeared again.

"So," Scar said. "Where to?"

Desiree Lorch stomped into her mercenary company's small ship, or at least she did her best to stomp. It wasn't easy in a quarter of a gravity. The ship itself had steel grating floors, which didn't help either.

"Everybody to the cargo hold!" she shouted. "And right fucking *now*!"

She waited impatiently until her five subordinates had gathered around her. They were a motley and not very pleasant bunch. All of them were war veterans in some way or another, and about the only thing they had in common was that they'd never managed to fit into the normal world after the war ended.

"There's a job," Lorch said. "It's a crap job, but the possible reward is substantial. And speed is absolutely vital, so forget about sleeping until it's over."

"What is it?" her second-in-command, a grizzled maori guy with tattoos over half his face, said. His name was, he claimed, Bruce.

"An old mate of mine, Jody Kiner, really wants to get a book that someone else has. She's giving a brand spanking new spaceship to whoever gets her the book, which is somewhere here on triple-S. Main problem, the people who has it include an Amazon parahuman and an infocommando."

"Fuck me," one of the others, a woman who went by the name of Stasia said. "I ain't fighting no Amazon! Those bitches are *vicious*!"

"It's a six-person hundred-day ship," Lorch said. "We could go anywhere in the system, comfortably. And I was kind of hoping that we'd handle the Amazon by shooting her in the back. While she's sleeping, if possible."

"You sure this isn't a bum job?" her pilot, a tiny young girl from Moscow with the best reflexes Lorch had ever seen in a baseline human, said.

"I'm sure," Lorch said. "Jody may be a stone bitch, but she's good for her word. And if I gave the impression that you have a choice here, I apologize for that. We're doing this. That's not negotiable."

"Well, then," Bruce said. "What are we waiting for? Where do we find these people and how much can we shoot them?"

Jeraldine strode through the crowd. She was in the most central part of triple-S, the large space in the middle of the entire thing that had once upon a time been used to assemble warships in. Small ones, granted, but still. These days, it was full of everything a pleasure-seeking traveller might possibly want, and quite a few things most travellers had never even imagined that it was possible to want. There were bars. There were drug dens and strip clubs. There were brothels, VR dives, slave pits and casinos. There were things that Jeraldine, in spite of having been here many times, wasn't sure what they were. She strongly suspected she didn't really want to know, so she'd made no effort to find out.

Most of the places were down at the wall of the huge cylinder, where the gravity was highest. A few places had placed themselves more or less high up on the support beams that led from the wall to the central spine, and one fairly famous brothel had made it its gimmick to be entirely in microgravity, and had therefore been built around the spine. It didn't quite get weightlessness, but it'd take you most of an afternoon to fall across a room.

But she wasn't looking for any of those places now. She was looking for a much simpler place, a low-key bar or nightclub where nothing much ostentatious would be going on. There would be people drinking, and people doing various kinds of other substances, but it would all be kind of calm and mostly tasteful.

There would also be someone there who'd notice that an Amazon walked into the place and let the right people know about it. So she did her best to keep her hair as close to its original pale blonde as possible, and she went into every likely-looking place around the circumference. She ordered a drink and sat playing with it for fifteen or twenty minutes before she left, drink untouched. It was long and tedious work, but it was the only way she knew to contact Terina. Her half-sister didn't want to be found by just anybody, and she had the brains and the resources to see that she wasn't. She only saw who she wanted to see.

She'd told Elena and the gang that Terina studied her old enemies, and that she'd unlocked the implants for a few old infocommandos. Which was true, to a point. After the war, Terina *had* studied baseline humans in much the same way that she'd studied parahumans earlier, it was just that the point of the studies had been to develop new and interesting drugs to sell them. And she *had* broken the blocks on the implants of three ex-infocommandos, after they'd got addicted to some of her creations and she started using them as bodyguards and thugs in exchange for a steady supply of certain complex chemicals.

Terina was family, after a fashion, but she wasn't a particularly nice person.

Jeraldine walked past a bondage club offering services they claimed were illegal in several Earth nations (a cynical part of her noting that that didn't narrow things down much, what with many religious dictatorships being around), a gambling den advertising betting on live fights to the death (she'd fought in those, a few times) and a weapons store before she came to the next bar of the kind she wanted.

"A chili vodka," she said to the guy behind the bar.

"Coming right up," he said.

She'd been walking for some time now, and this would have to be the last place before she went to meet the others for dinner. It annoyed her that she didn't know if she'd succeeded in her mission or not. She'd know only when, or possibly if, Terina choose to contact her.

"So, you part of this big hunt thing?" the bartender said.

"What?" Jeraldine said.

"Well," he said, gesturing to the guns she now wore openly on her belt, "you do look the mercenary type."

"There are mercenaries involved in a hunt?" she said. "I must have missed the announcement. What are they hunting?"

"A bunch of people and a book," he said. He put the drink glass down in front of her.

"I've had more than a dozen of them pass through here in the past few hours," he said. "Sure wouldn't want to be whoever it is they're hunting. Some of them looked like right psychos."

"Must be something valuable they're after, with that many involved," she said.

"I guess," he said. "None of my business, really. Just curious."

She got up from the bar stool.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I think I'll skip that drink and go have a look at what's happening. Might be money in it, you know."

"As long as you pay for it, you can do whatever you like with it," he said.

Jeraldine paid up and left. She really didn't like the sound of this.

Sona rummaged through a large bin of medical equipment. She and Elena had gone out to buy such for her, and after randomly milling around the corridors for some time while Elena complained that everything had changed since the last time she was here, and certainly not for the better, they'd found a hole-in-the-wall shop that sold some. It wasn't sorted, it wasn't new and much of it looked like it had been ripped loose from other stuff by people who didn't even know what it was, but it was available. Some of it was also insanely cheap.

"The prices here are weird," Sona said.

"Weird bad or weird good?" Elena said.

"Both, actually. Some simple stuff is way expensive, while some pretty advanced things are almost free."

Elena was browsing other things at the other side of the room. They were the only people in the shop, except for the old woman behind the cash register. Sona assumed she was the shop's owner.

"I suppose the stuff that's easy to use is cheap, while the stuff that needs actual skill is expensive," Elena said. "This shit is all stolen anyway, so make extra sure to check the seals and dates on any drugs."

Stolen. Of course. This was a lawless place, so stolen goods could be sold openly. Even if it was *very* obviously stolen, with fragments of bulkheads still bolted to the backs of the machines.

"Look at this," she said. "A dermal regenerator. For five dollars. New, it'd cost you about ten thousand times as much."

"Now that's cheap," Elena said. "Is it useful to us?"

"Not really," Sona said. "It needs to be permanently mounted and needs a lot of expensive drugs to work."

"So it's actually not worth even \$5 to us."

"No, it's not," Sona said. She put it back in the crate where she'd found it. She already had enough stuff for a decent emergency kit. As long as nothing really bad happened to anybody, or too many of them got hurt at the same time, or she got hurt herself, they'd probably be all right.

"I'd like these, please," she said to the old woman as she held up her bag full of stuff. The woman passed a scanner briefly over the bag, and a number showed up on the cash register. It was quite close to Sona's mental sum of the stuff she'd picked, and she decided not to argue about the one fifty difference. She got some money out of her pocket and started counting out bills.

That was another thing that was strange about this place. They used *cash*. Small pieces of flexible plastic with stuff printed on them that represented money. They had none of the stuff that real money had, like delays and detractions and traces. And they could be stolen. There was nothing to tie a certain piece of money to a certain person, so one could just take them and use them. It all felt very primitive to Sona.

"Here you are," she said as she gave the woman a small stack of flimsy plastic.

"Thanks," the woman said. "Good luck with using all that."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Sona said. "I'm a fully qualified doctor."

The old woman looked up at Sona.

"Are you now, dear?" she said. "Newly arrived, are we?"

"Why, yes, we just..."

Suddenly Elena appeared from behind and grabbed her arm.

"We're just passing through briefly," she said. "We're staying in a hotel up towards the hub."

Sona frowned. That wasn't where they stayed. Elena took the bag of things that Sona'd just paid for, grabbed Sona's arm and tugged her away.

"Let's go," she said. Somewhat puzzled, Sona followed.

"What was that all about?" she said as soon as they were out of the shop. The corridor was wide but worn. There were lots of people in it, enough to make it feel crowded, and a lot of shops opened onto it. In the few spots where there wasn't a doorway in to a shop, somebody had set up a stall to sell something.

"It just occurred to me," Elena said, "that if they have a shortage of doctors up here they might not hesitate to recruit one by force."

"Oh," Sona said.

"Yeah, oh," Elena agreed. "Let's get away from around here, shall we? I'd like to find a weapons shop, but not right here right now."

They set off down the corridor, discreetly followed by a young woman with an ornate cross tattooed on her scalp.

When Nolan couldn't stand being in the red, red top room any longer he took the elevator down to where Karri was working. The room down there wasn't much better, but at least it was different. It was all bare metal walls, machines, tools and harsh light. In the middle of it, Karri had a machine opened up and was tinkering with its innards.

"You don't happen to know of a way to increase lightspeed, do you?" he asked. Not that the question made sense, but it was a moment's distraction. He hated being here in the flesh world. Everything here was hard and contrary and never did as he wanted. Not that he always got his way in the online world either, but when things went against his wishes there at least they did so in an interesting way.

"No," Karri said, just as he'd expected.

He'd tried logging on from up here, but the lag was just terrible. One point two eight seconds for a signal to move from L4 to Earth, on average, and just as long for the reply to come back. Giving a grand total of two thousand five hundred and sixty milliseconds of lag. A hundred might be tolerable, but even that was verging on unusable. Two and a half seconds was torture. He could just about watch what was happening, but if he tried to do something it'd be two and a half seconds too late by the time he acted. Useless.

"Stop pacing or leave," Karri said.

"Sorry," he said and sat down on the nearest flat surface. Being close to someone was better than being alone, even if it was just Karri. No, actually, come to think of it, it was actually better if it was Karri. She wouldn't try to talk to him, she'd just be there.

"Nolan?" Karri said.

Well, she *usually* didn't talk to him.

"How long from here to LEO at point oh five?"

All right, technical stuff he could handle. He was a pilot, he should know this. He furrowed his brow and tried to think.

"Point oh five?" he said. "That's slow."

"Yes."

"About sixteen hours, I think," he said. "Provided that you want to end up stationary, and not just zoom past. Why do you want to know?"

"Long time to resist boarding."

"Resist boarding? Why would we... Oh."

Right. Escape pod. And if they needed to escape, somebody might come after them. Worse, said somebody might know exactly what kind of acceleration the pod was capable of.

"Can we speed it up?" he said.

"Working on it," Karri said.

Lorch was hanging around near a food stall in the Scavenger's Market. It was a central area, the kind of place that most roads led to. It was the main source of fresh food on triple-S, which made sure that most people came here eventually. And since it had become obvious that the people they were hunting hadn't checked in to any of the short-term hotels, it seemed reasonable to assume that they'd eventually come here. So four of her company were stationed at the edges of the market, and Lorch herself waited in the middle.

Of course, she also had Bruce searching as much of triple-S as possible via mosquito-sized remote cameras. Just in case he'd get lucky. They also had taps on most of the other merc companies' internal communications. Put there while they were drinking in Mom Mayerle's, and meant to be used to simplify bidding for contracts, but it was real good to have right now as well.

"Anything yet?" she said into her collar mike.

"Not much," Bruce said. He was sitting aboard their ship, watching the feeds from the cameras and monitoring the communications of the others.

"Nobody's saying anything interesting?"

"No," he said. "So at least nobody else is having any luck either."

"Well, that's good..."

Lorch's voice trailed off. There was a tall woman not more than twenty meters from her, that looked a whole lot like the picture they'd got of the commando. She had a shorter woman with her, but there was too much people in the way for her to see the other one clearly.

"You got a camera near me?" she said.

"Fairly," he said. "Can have it there in half a minute. Why?"

"I think I see the commando, but I want a closer look. There's someone with her, and if it's the Amazon I'm not getting any closer."

"On its way. To where exactly?" he said.

Lorch walked out into the crowd. She followed the pair, keeping as far behind them as she could without losing them.

"About twentyfive meters spinward of me," she said. "Moving at an easy walking pace."

She stayed behind them, waiting for Bruce to get the camera into position. At least the two didn't seem particularly worried about anything. They meandered along at an easy pace, often stopping to look at something in a stall or to quickly dodge into a small

shop. Lorch got a couple of glimpses of the shorter woman, who looked too pale to be an Amazon. But, well, you never knew and it was better to play it safe than to get her head handed to her.

"Got them," Bruce said. "And we have a 99% match for the commando and a 96% match for the doctor. No Amazon in view."

Paydirt.

The group was traveling with the book, so it couldn't be that well hidden. And, in particular, it didn't seem reasonable that it would be hidden from some of the members of the party. They should all know exactly where it was. Which meant that they only really needed to talk to one of the group. Which, in turn, meant that they could safely take down the two dangerous ones from a distance.

Lorch got her handgun out. It was a nice gun, that had cost her quite a bit to buy and modify. Powerful, firing-time selection between three different ammunition types, targeting connection to wearables or implants, IFF system and built-in owner-only safety. She activated her wearables' targeting programs and connected them to the gun. She looked at the back of the commando's head, and with a double blink marked it as a target. The targeting system immediately started calculating optimal firing data. It'd be a little less accurate here in an atmosphere than it would out in space, but not enough to matter for distances under a hundred meters.

She raised the gun and let the system carefully aim it right in the middle of the back of the commando's head.

If you wanted to know what went on in the mercenary community on triple-S, you'd go to one of the merc bars. The biggest and best merc bar of them all was Mom Mayerle's, so that was where Jeraldine headed. If someone was hunting her and the people she travelled with, she wanted to know who it was, why they did it and who she had to kill to stop it. So she made sure that her guns were easily available and fully loaded, that her coat reported itself fully intact and ready to absorb impacts, that the trauma cloth in her top and pants was in working order and all those other things, and then she walked into the lion's den.

She was several steps inside the door before anybody noticed her. At first it was just a random nobody turning her head to see who just walked in the door and then returning to her drink. Then another did the same. The third person who looked, though, stood up so abruptly that her chair fell over. She remained standing there, staring at Jeraldine as she walked over to the bar.

"Could I have an orange juice, please," Jeraldine said to the girl behind the bar. "With a couple of ice cubes, if it's not too much of a bother."

"Er, sure," the bar girl said. She took a glass from a tray and started filling it up.

Behind her, Jeraldine heard more people stand up. She wondered if anybody would have the sense to shoot her in back right now. She doubted it. This kind of people were a sensation-seeking and curious bunch. They'd want an explanation of why she came here, and wouldn't at all mind a fight.

Particularly not a fight they felt sure they'd win.

"Tell me," Jeraldine said. "Does Mom Mayerle herself still run this place?"

The bar girl nodded.

"And does she still have that nifty little anti-riot thingy?"

The girl nodded again.

"Can you or the bouncers down here set it off?"

A shake of the head.

So the length of a fight would depend on the alertness and ruthlessness of anybody watching remotely. A hired guard would probably not have the guts to make the bar girl and the bouncers breathe vacuum, so it boiled down to if she believed that Mom herself was watching or not. A bit of a gamble, that.

"Hey, you," someone said behind her back. She turned around.

The speaker was a very large woman, easily a head taller than Jeraldine and twice as wide. She had far more muscle than anybody could gain naturally, and she moved like she depended on brute force when she fought. Jeraldine smiled at her.

"Yes?" she said.

"We don't want no trouble in here," the bouncer said. "So I'll have to ask you to leave." Jeraldine reached back and took the juice glass from the bar. She sipped from it.

"But I just want a quiet drink," she said.

Several people in the room were still standing up looking at Jeraldine. They gave a strong impression of wanting much more than just a quiet drink.

"Well, we have reason to believe that some people aren't going to let you do that," the bouncer said. "So would you please leave?"

"Can I say something first?"

The bouncer made a gesture somewhere in between a nod and a shrug. She took a couple of steps to the side, so that Jeraldine could see the room properly.

"Listen up!" Jeraldine shouted. It didn't make much difference in the level of attention directed her way.

"You all know what I am," she said. "And I guess a fair few of you also know who I am."

She gulped down the last of the orange juice. It looked like everybody in the room was paying close attention to her. She put the glass back on the bar with a swift movement, and while she did so she reached into her coat pocket and palmed a small flashbang grenade.

"Now," she went on. "It has come to my attention that some less than nice people are hunting me and my friends, looking for an object we may possess. This pisses me off considerably."

She activated her wearables with a slight hand movement, and with another one she readied her coat for camo mode.

"I want to know who paid for the contract on us," she said. "I want to know where to find them, and how much they paid. I want to know exactly who are out there looking for us right now, and I want anybody thinking about joining them to stop such suicidal thinking."

She paused briefly.

"Have I made myself clear?"

A lot more people stood up. They, and those who had already been standing, brought out firearms of various kinds. For a few moments, nothing could be heard except a concerted metallic din of weapons being readied for firing.

"Hey, now," the bouncer said. "Stop that at once! You all know what will happen if you fight in here!"

"It's just fucking tear gas," someone said. "We can stand a little tear gas."

"Right," Jeraldine said. "I take that that means you..."

In the middle of her own sentence, she threw the flashbang. She twisted her head to the side as far as it'd go, and screwed her eyes shut as hard as possible.

There was a noise like the world ending and a light as bright as the sun going nova.

The engine in the ex-brothel was a Casimir Corporation Model Z600, a space-rated combined Zero-Point Energy Generator/Thruster. It was quite common for applications like this. Mainly, it provided a lot of electricity, enough to run and heat a small space habitat. In an emergency, it could provide a limited amount of thrust as well. It was designed and built to be extremely rugged and very, very reliable. After all, in space losing power and propulsion usually meant a slow and uncomfortable death. Karri had dealt with a number of Casimir Z600s during the war.

Mostly, she'd rigged them to break down.

Off the top of her head and eight years later, she knew about a dozen ways to very permanently disable one. If it had been at all possible to do so, she would've known how to make one explode. She wished it had been possible. It would've made the memories a little easier. If she'd known that the people whose engines she'd sabotaged had died quickly from anoxia and vacuum exposure, it would've been better. Then, she wouldn't have had to imagine them slowly fighting for breath as their scrubbing systems failed and their air slowly filled with carbon dioxide.

Rising carbon dioxide concentration is one of the ways the human body uses to tell if it needs to breathe. There can be more than enough oxygen around, but if there is too much carbon dioxide, your body will think that you're suffocating.

She could imagine them fighting in panic as the air became unbreathable and the temperature fell beyond what was livable. Or rose above it, depending on where in space they were. And all the time they suffocated and froze, Karri and Elena and Setsuko and Darlene and Ezequiel and Nolan flew away in their stealthed little spaceship, Elena's implants filled with stolen information. Leaving all the men and women and kids and pets behind to die and their corpses to slowly freeze-dry. Space is a fantastic preserver, in its way.

Karri had kept studying the machines after the war. Machines kept her attention, and helped her wrench her mind away from the memories of the people in those habitats. While she was working on a mechanical or electronic or algorithmic problem, her mind was at ease. So she worked. She got better. She learned.

The ex-brothel's Z600 was in pretty sad shape. According to its log, it hadn't had any maintenance done in over three years, which was much longer than was good for it. A couple of years more, and the extremely high-grade vacuum at its heart would've degraded to the point where the thing wouldn't function any more. Karri didn't have the equipment to fix the vacuum. That kind of stuff was far too large to be portable. But she could fix the containment, to slow down the degradation, give it another couple of years

of life. She could also change the stuff around the heart, the controllers and regulators and virtual particle siphons and all that stuff. She could change the algorithms in the control units for newer, better ones.

If they had to flee, they would do so at more than a twentieth of a gravity. How much more, she didn't know yet, but probably closer to a fifth of a G.

And if someone snuck in and disabled the thing when they weren't looking, they'd all die slow and lingering deaths of suffocation and exposure.

It would be fitting, if they did.

"So, what kind of gun do you want?" Sona said. She and Elena was walking down yet another corridor full of people, stalls and innumerable smells. They'd hurriedly left the part of the market where Sona had bought her medical stuff, and after some time of dodging around people, going through back passages and buying cheap hats that they only used for a couple of hundred meters Elena had finally agreed to return to a more normal mode of transport.

"I have no idea, actually," Elena said. "I haven't used a gun since the war, and the kind of stuff I used then all relied on me having shitloads of implanted stuff. I don't even know if I can hit a wall from two steps away these days."

"Ah, don't worry," Sona said. "You were a great soldier. You'll do just fine."

Elena frowned.

"I'm not so sure about..."

Suddenly, somebody came rushing out of the crowd and tackled Elena in the knees from behind. Totally unprepared, Elena went over like a chain-sawed oak.

"Hey!" Sona shouted. She turned towards the assailant, trying to understand what just happened. Elena started to get up.

"If you want to keep your head in one piece, stay down," the assailant said. She was a too-thin young woman in ragged clothes, none too clean and armed with a stiletto. She had a large, richly decorated cross tattooed on her hairless head. In spite of her words, she made no move to threaten them.

"What?" Sona said.

"Mercenary," the girl said. She pointed back the way Sona and Elena had just come. "Over that way, about twenty meters back."

Sona looked back the way the girl pointed. Not far away she saw a woman with a shaved head just lowering a handgun that she'd had pointed in their direction. Fear suddenly flaring up inside her, Sona sank down on her knees. The people nearby didn't seem to care, except for the few who had to walk around them.

"Thanks, I guess," Elena said. "Who the hell are you and why'd you do that?"

The girl smiled. "I'm called Crucis," she said. "And I did that because I think there's a better chance that you'll pay me to find out why someone's trying to kill you than for me to kill you myself."

"What!" Sona said, outraged. "Someone's trying to kill us here too?"

"Not a surprise," Elena said. "Let's get out of here."

"Do you know somewhere safe?" she added to the girl.

"Not really," the girl said. "I was kind of hoping that you'd have somewhere."

Elena sighed. "All right then," she said. "Let's try to get back to the brothel."

She got up on her feet, carefully keeping bent down so her head stayed below those of most people. She set off for a side corridor. Sona followed her closely. Before she too followed, Crucis reached into an inner pocket and turned on a locator beacon.

Even while the flashbang exploded, Jeraldine was clambering over the bar and turning on coat's active camouflage. Behind her, guns were firing. For a split second the coat flared brilliant white, attempting to imitate the eye-searingly bright light from the grenade. When that faded, the coat settled to a more sensible state. It wasn't quite fast enough to keep up while she ran, bent down, behind the bar but at least it was smart enough to choose a weighted average of the colors she passed instead of flashing lots of different one.

Jeraldine reached the end of the bar and stopped. The coat turned into a near-perfect imitation of what was visible on the other side, rendering her nearly invisible. Except for her head and hands, of course. Proper battle dress would cover all of her, but this was supposed to be able to pass for normal clothing most of the time.

Above her, gunfire demolished the large mirror and lots of bottles. Shattered plastic and aromatic liquids rained down on her. Quickly, carefully, she peeked out from behind the bar.

The room was complete chaos. The grenade had got some overly tense people to fire wildly, and they'd hit other tense people, who'd fired back. In a second, a free-for-all firefight had broken out. Which was more or less what she'd wanted, but she'd hoped to get some information out of someone before it broke loose. Well, you couldn't win them all. Next goal, getting out of there alive. Which might be tricky, since this level of mayhem would almost certainly bring out the sealing-off and atmosphere-venting in short order. She peeked out again, this time looking for a way to get outside without being shot to bits. The coat could take some small arms fire, but even then she'd end up with lots and lots of bruises and almost certainly a cracked rib or three. Besides, some of the people out there were using stuff that go through both the coat and herself like a hot iron through butter. So not getting hit seemed like a really good idea.

If she could get from behind the bar to behind that decorative waist-high brick wall, then from there to behind those turned-over tables she might be able to sprint from there to the door...

She got her guns ready, one in each hand. She breathed deeply and fast for a few seconds, activating neurochemical systems that ordinarily lay dormant. And which she wouldn't survive having active for more than a minute, but if she turned out to need them that long she'd be history anyway. Around her, the world seemed to slow down and take on a gluey feel.

Jeraldine ran. She threw herself out from behind the bar, heading for the brick wall thing but looking towards the core of the fighting and keeping ready to fire that way. After only a couple of steps, someone spotted Jeraldine and started to move her arm to point. Jeraldine shot her, one bullet from her right-hand gun. The weapon barked dully and kicked slowly in her hand, and for a moment she thought she could actually see the bullet as it flew. Someone else turned a rifle her way, so she shot her too, with the other gun as the first one was still cycling in a new bullet. As she ran, more and more people spotted her. Some she managed to shoot, but her guns weren't fast enough

to handle them all in time. Some of them got shots off before they were struck down. Most of them missed, partly confused by Jeraldine's camo and partly because she ran faster than any baseline human could, and they didn't lead the aim enough. One bullet hit, getting her in the very outermost part of the hipbone. The coat stiffened instantly, distributing the force over a much larger area. It still felt like being hit by a speeding truck, and the force of the blow twisted Jeraldine around and she fell uncontrolledly the last half meter in behind the brick wall.

Once there, she let the acceleration lapse and returned to normal time sense. Her lungs were burning, and sweat poured down her face. She felt the familiar tingling behind her eyes that said that in about ten minutes she'd have the grandmother of all headaches. Her hip hurt in that deep way that said that there might be a fracture. It slowly went numb as the trauma cloth her top was made of bled anesthetics into her skin. Behind her, bullets kept hitting the other side of the brick wall. She heard frightened and upset cries from the other side of the room as it slowly sank into the people over there exactly how many of them she'd managed to shoot during her short run. She smiled tiredly. Those who managed to get their guns pointing her way while she was still running were almost certainly those few who'd had some kind of augmentations, and seeing most of them gunned down in rapid succession should put a healthy amount of fear into the rest. Now if she could only use that fear before...

"Hey, the door!" she heard someone shout. "The door is closing!"

Fuck.

Jeraldine relaxed. Well, that was that. She probably should've thought about how to get out of here before she ever went in.

There was a loud splintering and crashing as the massive door forced its way through whatever debris was in its way, and then a final-sounding clang as it slammed shut. A strong wind suddenly tore through the room. Jeraldine's ears popped as the pressure fell.

Chapter 4: Heidebrink

"Sharan!" Lorch shouted into her collar mike. The damn commando had ducked just when she was about to fire, and hadn't stuck her head far enough up for a shot ever since.

"Here, boss," came Sharan's voice through her wearable.

"Commando and doctor are headed your way," she said. She shoved her way through the crowd, no longer even trying to stay inconspicuous. They obviously knew she was there, so what would be the point?

"Roger that. What do you want me to do? Take them out?"

"Only if you're suicidal," Lorch said. "Commando bitch sensed I was about to shoot. With no warning, from behind and twenty meters off. Only attack if you're *really* damn sure about it. If not, just keep track of where they're going."

"Copy on only follow," Sharan said. "Don't you wish you could afford to have that kind of shit installed?"

"Damn sure I do," Lorch said. But it wasn't likely she'd ever be able to. It was damn expensive even if you could get it legally, on the black market the prices were astronomical. Usually, it was much cheaper and almost as effective just to hire a mercenary company for a while.

She closed in enough on them that she could occasionally see them weave back and forth between the people in the crowd. She hung back a little then. No matter that she was armed and somewhat armored, if the woman up ahead was anything like the other infocommandos she had met, she could quite easily put a bullet between Lorch's eyes from fifty meters off while they were both running. In the dark.

"Bruce," she said.

"Yup," he said.

"Got cameras following them?"

"No," he said. "These little things are slow. They're moving faster than the cameras can fly."

She swore. They had proper surveillance drones, but those were safely stored back in the ship. Their quarry would be long gone by the time they got here. So, nothing to do but to keep following.

"Aura, Greta, Wanita," she said. "Abandon posts, close in on me or Sharan depending on who is closest to you."

Three short acknowledgments came in quick succession.

"Wanita, if you pass by that gun shop on Twelfth, buy a couple of the heftiest rifles you can carry," Lorch said. "And enough explosives to cut open a pressure door."

"On company credit?" Wanita said.

"Of fucking course on company credit!" Lorch shouted.

"I've got to do something," Nolan said. He hadn't stopped pacing for a moment since Elena and Sona left. "Just waiting is driving me crazy!"

Karri doubted that it was the waiting that was doing it, but she agreed on the conclusion.

He took the large book-thing out from the cupboard Elena had put it in.

"So this is the thing we're here for, huh?" he said. "Doesn't look like much."

"People died for it," Karri said.

"I know," he said. "So, yes, obviously it *is* very important to somebody. It just doesn't *look* it. Important things should be impressive. Or possibly very small and unremarkable. This thing is just weird."

Karri was still working on the engine. She'd taken some parts up to the top room where she could sit more comfortably while she fiddled with them, and where Nolan at least had more space to pace in. That made it a little less annoying.

She'd like to try out the propulsion part of the engine, but she hadn't been able to figure out a good way to do so as long as it was firmly attached to the triple-S sub-station. She'd thought about seeing how much it could slow down the station's rotation. She'd be able to measure that with a simple accelerometer. But it wouldn't tell her anything about how powerful she'd got the engine, since she had only an extremely vague idea of how heavy the station was. So all she could do was fix it up as well as she could and hope. She didn't like relying on hope, but sometimes you had no other choice.

"The Proteus Manuscript," Nolan said. He had opened the book and was reading from the title page.

"Reading that knocked Elena out," Karri said.

"Eh," Nolan said. "If it does that to me at least I'll be unconscious. 'A detailed guide to some of the secrets of the universe'. Well, that sounds pretty useful, doesn't? Although it'd depend on exactly which secrets they are, I guess..."

There was a dull clang when the outer hatch opened, shortly followed by running steps coming down the steps. Karri put the engine parts down on a table and stood up, making sure she had her pistol easily available. She relaxed when she saw Elena appear, shortly followed by Sona. She tensed up a little again when they were followed by a grungy-looking young woman she'd never seen before.

She looked questioningly at Elena.

"Shopping?" she said.

"There are mercenaries after our asses," Elena said. "Crucis here helped us not get shot."

"Why?" Karri said.

"She wants to get paid," Sona said. "For letting us know why they want to kill us."

Karri looked at the girl again. She looked like station trash, the kind of person that had almost but not quite dropped out of normal society, for whatever reason. From the girl's apparent low age, she guessed the reason would have something to do with losing her parents.

"So talk," she said to the girl.

"Lorch was right behind us," Crucis said. "Aren't going to lock the place up or break out the weapons or something?"

"It's as lock as it can be," Elena said. "And we don't have much in the way of weapons."

"There was supposed to be a parahuman with you," Crucis said. "Is there?"

"Maybe," Karri said. "Why?"

Crucis shrugged.

"Never met one," she said. "I'm curious, is all."

"She's not here right now," Elena said.

She looked distracted for a few moments.

"Someone's trying to crack our lock," she said. "I think it's about time you talked, girl."

"All right," Crucis said.

She cleared her throat. Public speaking wasn't a skill she'd practiced much.

"There was this meeting called at Mom Mayerle's, you know?" she began.

Jeraldine woke up with a terrible headache. Not just a headache, she realized a few moments later. Her ears hurt, and her nasal passage, her eyes and her lungs. Her hip felt like an elephant had been jumping up and down on it, and most of the muscles in her legs, arms and torso were sore as hell.

But on the plus side, she was alive to feel the pain. Which was considerably better than what she'd expected. She tried to open her eyes. It felt like somebody'd been pouring sand into them, but she eventually managed. After many attempts at blinking, she could also see.

She was lying on a couch in an incredibly lavish office. Every luxury she could imagine, starting at the very comfortable couch she was lying on and the nice, thick carpet by way of the huge panorama window with a view of the Earth to the highly sophisticated automated bartender in the corner, seemed to be crammed in there. The gravity was light, maybe a tenth of a G or so. The door out was large, round and looked airtight. On each side of it a large, muscular woman stood. They had assault rifles hanging from their shoulders. *Worn* assault rifles.

"You Pantariste," a voice from the other end of the room said. "Always as clever as bricks. Had you even thought about how you were going to get out before you went in?"

She knew that voice.

"Nah," Jeraldine said. "If we Pantariste got into the habit of thinking, what would you Alkaia do then?"

A dry chuckle came as the response.

"It's good to see you, Jeraldine," the voice said.

She sat up. The two by the door looked carefully at her, so she took it slow and easy. Behind a desk at the opposite end of the room from the door a dark-skinned woman sat. Like Jeraldine, she had oriental-looking features. Unlike Jeraldine, her hair was platinum blonde and she was slightly overweight. She was also shorter and much less muscular.

"Terina," Jeraldine said. "It's been too long."

"I heard there was an Amazon prowling the bars," Terina said. "Then I heard that this Amazon had walked alone into Mom Mayerle's and picked a fight. Which limited the options down to a Pantariste, but I still thought it was one of your sisters and not you. Last I heard, you had a decent enough life going for you down on Earth."

"If you heard about the fight," Jeraldine said, "why didn't you come help? With your commandos there to back me up I could've wiped that place clean."

"They might've got hurt," Terina said. "You can take a bit of vacuum much better than the baselines can, so it was easier simply to wait."

"My ears hurt!" Jeraldine protested.

Terina shrugged. "They would've hurt a lot worse if you'd been baseline and had your eardrums ruptured."

Jeraldine sneered. It was true, of course, but she didn't have to like it.

"Can I at least have some water?" she said.

Terina nodded at one of the goons, who got a glass of cold water from the auto-bar and gave it to Jeraldine.

"Thanks, toots," she said. She eagerly drank it down. Having your mucous membranes freeze-dried made you thirsty.

"Why are you here, Jeraldine?" Terina said. "You didn't come all the way here from Earth to pick a fight in a bar, and I kind of doubt that it was just to pay me a visit."

"No, it wasn't," Jeraldine agreed. She gestured towards the guards. "You don't want them to hear this."

"They are my highly loyal bodyguard," Terina said. "I trust them with everything."

"Then you can tell them later," Jeraldine said. "I'm not talking while they're listening."

Terina shrugged. "All right," she said. "Nanci, Syble, please wait outside."

"Yes, ma'am," both the guards said. Without another word, they left.

"Damn," Jeraldine said. "Well trained dogs you have there."

"They have strong incentive not to piss me off," Terina said. "You can talk now."

Jeraldine hesitated a little before she began.

"A couple of days ago, I got a letter from Rose," she said.

"Rose who?"

"Your sister Rose. My ex-girlfriend Rose. You knew her."

"Don't be silly," Terina said. "She's been dead since the war. You know that. You were there when she died!"

Jeraldine nodded. "I checked it every way I could," she said. "And it all came out clear. That letter was from her, and it was sent less than a week ago. And it was injected mid-stream somewhere, so I couldn't trace it."

"All right," Terina said. "Let's assume it was somehow genuine. What did it say?"

"It told me to go get a book from the North Atlantis university library. I did, and I got there just before some uniformed goons raided the place and blew it up. Then they did the same to another building where the book should've been."

"Right," Terina said. "I heard about that on the news. Should've guessed you were involved in it somehow."

"I just tried to stay alive and find out what was going on," Jeraldine said. "Still am, mostly. Anyway, I figured out where the book had got to and met the people who had it. They'd figured out that the thing was deeply strange. Apparently, it doesn't exist in the conventional sense, but is some kind of quantum-mechanical mumbo-jumbo. They also knew that it came from Neptune."

Terina snapped to attention. "Neptune?" she said. "You sure?"

"Yep," Jeraldine said. "Saw the logs from the transport companies."

"Well," Terina said. "That's... interesting."

"Thought you'd say that," Jeraldine said. "One of the ways I could think of for Rose to still be alive is if she was uploaded before she died. I disregarded that at first, because she would've got in touch somehow in the years since the war. But when they mentioned Neptune, I thought what if she's in Ascension Point? The letter she sent me said that the book could set her free."

"Ascension Point was destroyed," Terina said. "And it never properly got built in the first place."

"I know," Jeraldine said. "That's what we all heard. But we also heard that it was supposed to exist half in this universe and half in some other kind of place, and that it was at least partly functional. What if it was only the part of it that was in this universe that got destroyed? What if they've been in there all this time and can't get out without help?"

Terina was silent for a little while. She gnawed at a nail.

"Rose did get uploaded," she said. "And she was involved in the Ascension Point project."

"You've got lots more brain than I do," Jeraldine said. "If you tell me for sure that I am wrong, that there is no way that any part of Ascension Point still exist, I will forget the theory and go back home."

Terina shook her head. "I'm a biochemist, mostly," she said. "The people in that project were information physicists. The only people who could tell you for sure what happened to Ascension Point when it got attacked were *at* Ascension Point then, and either died or, if you're right, got trapped inside."

"We've got to try to get them out," Jeraldine said. "Or at least I have to. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try. I owe Rose that much, at least."

Terina got up from behind her desk. She walked over to the window and looked out. A few triple-S sub-stations drifted by, obscuring Earth.

"You and Rose broke up, didn't you?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jeraldine said. "We had a lot of fun together, but it just couldn't work in the long run. Pantariste and Alkaia. You know."

"Yet you would risk your life just on the off chance that she might be suffering."

"We remained friends. Good friends."

Terina turned to look at Jeraldine again.

"Tell me," she said. "How much do you know about what Ascension Point was supposed to be? What the whole point of building it was?"

Jeraldine leaned back on the couch. Not that it made much difference in gravity this low. It was a mental thing.

"All I heard was that it was supposed to be some kind of ultimate research facility," she said.

"Not wrong, as far as it goes," Terina said. "The term for it is, I believe, computational para-space. I won't pretend to understand exactly what it is. But it's a kind of place where matter doesn't exist. Everything in it is information and algorithms. It was explained to me as being rather like a very, very large and rather strange computer with near-infinite storage capacity. The thought was to transfer uploads of our best minds into this para-space, and use them as a base for theoretical research."

"It sounded much more impressive, the way the rumours went back then," Jeraldine said. "Then it was going to save all our asses and still have time left for karaoke."

"If it had been nothing but a huge computer it would have been useful but not world-changing," Terina said. "But there isn't just one of these computational para-spaces. There is an infinite number of them. And in some of them time runs faster than here. Or, I guess, they have some kind of basic constant that affects rates of change in the informational infrastructure and that works out as a sense of time to an upload. The whole point of the Ascension Point project was to put uploads in a space that ran much faster than this place, and have them do their stuff there. The theorists said that we should be able to reach spaces running at more than a thousand times normal without too much trouble."

Terina returned to her chair and sat down again.

"That's what made it so important," she said. "In a day, we would be able to get almost three years' worth of research done. In a week, we would have weapons that the baselines never even dreamt of."

"And they destroyed it before it was finished?"

"Yes and no," Terina said. "The war was over before those thousand-speed spaces were reached. But there *was* a ten-speed space running, as a prototype and proof of concept. It was the machines for that one that got destroyed in the war's final days. And where, it looks now, those uploads have been stuck ever since."

"Ten-speed," Jeraldine said. "So for Rose, it has been *eighty* years?"

Terina nodded.

"And eighty years' worth of research by the best minds the Transhumanist movement had," she said. "Yes, you were right. I didn't want even my bodyguards to hear this. Thank you."

"We've got to get Rose out of there."

"What?" Terina sounded distracted. "Oh. Yes, of course. She wrote that the book could set her free, you said?"

"Yes."

"Where is the book now?"

"With those people I mentioned."

"Is one of them an infocommando?"

"Ex, but yes. Why?"

Terina smiled. "They're being hunted by just about every mercenary on the station."

"Oh. Right. I knew that."

Jeraldine looked embarrassed.

"You wouldn't happen to know who ordered the hunt?" she said.

"One Major Jody Kiner," Terina said. "In the employ of the not so nice Bibasary Corporation. And I guess the easiest way to get the book is to go for her and take it when someone comes to claim the prize."

"That might not work so well," Jeraldine said. "The first time Elena tried to read the book, it uploaded a large amount of information into her implants. I think we want that information, which means we need Elena. And she won't be very cooperative at all without her friends."

"Elena is the infocommando?" Terina said.

Jeraldine nodded.

"The reason I gave them for coming here and looking you up was to get her implants unblocked," she said. "The information she got from the book is encrypted, and she can't crack it without her old stuff active."

Terina seemed to think about it for a few moments.

"Right," she said. "I'll take your word for it. Do you know where they are now?"

"Don't you already know?"

"No. I could find out, but it'd take valuable time."

"We rented the old brothel over in Wheel Ten where I used to work," Jeraldine said. "That's where they are, unless they're out shopping."

Terina pressed a button on her desk. It looked old, black and worn and set in a piece of polished brass.

"Come back in, please," she said. Moments later, the door opened and the two bodyguards returned.

"Do you know where the Weeping Orchid used to be, over in Wheel Ten?" Terina said.

"Yes," one of the bodyguards said. She had mouse-brown, crewcut hair and scar tattoos on her cheeks.

"The group of people who are being hunted are staying there," Terina said. "I need those people, and a large book in their possession, to be taken here as quickly as possible, without being harmed. You may use whatever resources you think you need. You may call in whatever favours you need. You may kill anybody who's not me, in my direct employ, one of the targets or a parahuman. You may destroy anything, as long as it isn't one of my long-range spacecraft and doesn't threaten the lives of any of those I just listed."

She looked from one of them to the other.

"On other words," she said. "Do whatever you have to to get them here intact, and damn the consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," the one with the scar tattoos said. She looked a bit scared.

"Then get started," Terina said.

Jeraldine got up from the couch. "I'm coming with," she said.

"So, well, Dagger figured we could get more out of this by helping you out a bit against the other mercs than by competing with them all," Crucis finished. It looked like the earthers swallowed her story. Which wasn't surprising, everything but the end was, after all, true. And she knew she didn't look much like a threat, so the last part would be kind of easy to swallow as well.

To be honest, she *wasn't* much of a threat. Neither she, Scar or Dagger were, really. They tried to be smarter than the rest to make up for their lack of strength and weaponry. It worked often enough to keep them with air and some food.

"Do you know anything about the particular ones trying to force the door?" the tall blonde one said. Elena, was her name.

"Desiree Lorch and her company," Crucis said. "One of the better funded and trained merc companies around. They'll get in, eventually."

"Right," Elena said. "Karri, can we rig something to surprise them when they come in?"

She'd seen the book. It was right there, on a table by the wall. Not that she'd ever seen an actual book before, but she'd seen them in history dramas. It surprised her that they'd let something that valuable lay about plain in the open like that, but she didn't exactly complain. It made her job much easier. She wouldn't have to look for it, to begin with. She discreetly patted her pocket to make sure she had her emergency bubble, and then she turned her attention to the people in the room again.

"Can't we just use that emergency thing and leave?" the short, curvy one said. "This is an emergency, right?"

"Not really," the also short but more angly-looking one said.

"That'd be a bit of a nasty surprise for Jeraldine when she comes back," Elena said. "Also, we have nowhere to go, if we leave."

They weren't paying attention to her at all. She'd told them about their crisis, and they got caught up in that. Good. They'd hoped some good distraction would appear after she got in, and a merc company in hot pursuit was about as good as they could've wished for.

Crucis looked around the room. She'd been in habitats built exactly like this one, only much less lavishly furnished. She'd spent some time cleaning one, actually, and she knew the basic layout very well. Which was very convenient. So far, this whole thing had gone almost eerily well. She started to slowly move towards the book.

"Bare wire," the sharp-faced one said. "Electrocute them."

"Can we do that?" Elena said. "We don't have much time."

This would be the dangerous bit. Crucis looked around, making sure everyone was concentrating on the trap-building and not looking her way. Once she was satisfied that none was, she took a little hologram recorder from her pocket. She turned it on and quickly swept it around the book. That done, she turned it to display mode, and a pretty good replica of the tome sprang into being around her hand. She put it on the tabletop, next to the real book, and as fast as she dared she picked the actual book up.

Her heart was beating like crazy. It'd been a long time since she was this scared. If one of them turned around, for whatever reason, she'd be caught. She doubted very strongly that they'd be particularly pleasant to a thief. She sure wouldn't be.

But nobody looked around. Nobody yelled thief. Holding the book, she walked in behind the central elevator shaft and relaxed a little. Very little, but still. The group were all on the other side, grouped around the entrance stairs. Here, she was out of their line of sight. If one of them turned around now, they might wonder where she got to, but the book would still be visible to them.

She knelt down and looked carefully at the back of the shaft. There should be... Ah, there. A thin line in the metal revealed the almost invisible outlines of a hatch. She pushed hard at it, and it sank in a few centimeters before it rose up out of sight. Maintenance access for the elevator shaft. It was narrow, dark and probably very dirty, but it would work just fine. She only had to get down to the next level, and then she'd have all the time in the world. This was, on the whole, far better than she had dared hope when Dagger came up with the plan. It had sounded impossible, but it was along the lines of their usual thing. Get into someone confidence and rob them blind. Or, far

more often, rob them very slightly myopic. The difference this time was that usually they had lots of time of to scout and plan. Now, there had been no time to plan, beyond the simple idea of helping the targets against the other mercs to gain their trust. Getting the book and getting out had been very cursorily planned, and much left to luck.

She wedged the book into the shaft above the hatch and climbed in after it. She touched the little switch that made the hatch close, and as soon as it had shut completely got the book and started climbing downwards. It wasn't far, only about four meters. Three meters of living space, one of cabling and pipes and ducts and stuff. She took it slow and careful. It might not be a disaster to drop the book, but she sure didn't feel like climbing all the way down to the lowest level and then back up again. There. The switch to the next level maintenance hatch. A touch, keeping out of the way, and it opened just as silently as the one above had. She climbed out of the shaft, reached in and touched the button again. The hatch obediently closed.

Crucis looked around, and saw just what she'd expected. She was in a small round room with the elevator shaft in the middle. In it outer wall were four obvious, almost flashy, doors leading into the main rooms. There were also two narrower, much less noticeable, doors that led into narrow storage rooms squeezed in between the larger ones. It was one of those she wanted. She held on hard to the large and unwieldy book and hurried the few steps over the one of the smaller doors. Neither of them had a lock, so it was a simple matter of touching the open plate and walking through it. The room inside had been thoroughly ransacked when the habitat was abandoned, and all that was in there now was a few crumpled-up food wrappers and a couple of power cells, presumably empty. Crucis didn't mind, it only gave her more room to move about.

In the back wall of the room was what she came here for. A fire control vent. Which was basically just a hole in the wall. Normally well covered and sealed airtight, but if a fire broke out and threatened to become uncontrollable it could be blown open to vent the entire floor's air. The habitat was built with the different levels hermetically separated, so even if she vented this floor it wouldn't affect any of the others. Which was a good thing, since Crucis didn't like to hurt people. Unless she had to. Anyway, the vent wasn't supposed to be operated from here, and it was connected to an alarm, both of which were problems for her. She wanted it to be as long as possible before the gang upstairs noticed that she was gone, and even longer before they noticed that the book was gone too. She took out a pocket multitool and started unscrewing an access panel above the vent. This part of the plan, getting out via a fire vent, was something they had not only planned for but actually used once before. She put the panel aside and looked through the wires under it. She carefully cut and shorted out the ones leading to the alarm sensor, so that the system would think that the vent cover was still there even when it wasn't. She located the wires going to the explosive bolts, but didn't cut them yet. Instead, she took out her emergency bubble. It was pretty much what it sounded like, a large, very sturdy plastic bag that'd inflate in vacuum. There was a small oxygen tube and an equally small chemical rebreather in it, which together would provide her with a breathable atmosphere for a few hours. She pulled the thing over her, putting the book by her feet. The opening and the atmosphere stuff was by her face. She wouldn't

be able to close and inflate the thing until after she'd climbed out the vent, or she would be much too wide to get through it. Which was the dangerous bit. She *had* to get out before she lost consciousness from anoxia, or she'd die.

But she looked at it from the bright side. If she died, she'd be out of Satan's Turd forever.

She cut the wires. The explosive bolts detonated, and the vent cover vanished. Air rushed through the hole. Crucis did her best to do the same. The faster she got there, the more help she'd get from the escaping air in getting through. She wiggled and wormed herself through, and faster than she'd dared hope she was through. As soon as her feet and the book left the hole, she sealed the bubble and pulled the tab on the breather. It inflated just like it should, and a few seconds later she was floating in the middle of a large, clear beach ball, slowly moving away from the habitat.

Now all she had to do was hope that Dagger and Scar would manage to pick her up before she ran out of air.

Jeraldine stood in what was essentially a boarding spacecraft. It was basically a corridor with an engine and a cockpit at one end, and a thing to fasten on to an airlock and force it open on the other end. The interior of the thing was, at the moment, stuffed with nasty people with guns. As soon as they left Terina's office, her two bodyguards had called for as many enforcers as they could get hold of. They'd stuck them all in this weird-ass short-haul spacecraft and headed for Wheel Ten. There were reports that a mercenary company had Elena and the gang besieged in the abandoned brothel, and were now only debating how to go about getting them out. It wouldn't be long before someone decided to do *something*, no matter how stupid, and Jeraldine had a hard time imagining how that could be not bad. So she wished they'd get there soon, so she at least got to shoot someone. If nothing else, it'd help her mood, even if they failed in saving the people. She wished she could see out. She hated not knowing when they'd reach their destination.

"So, you two are old infocommandos, I guess?" she said to Terina's bodyguards.

The one with the scar tattoos looked at her.

"Yes," she said. The other one, a pale woman with black hair so short it was almost stubble, didn't even look Jeraldine's way.

"Just curious," Jeraldine said. "No need for you to keep going on about it."

None of them responded at all.

"Be that way, then," Jeraldine said.

She'd never met a more boring pair of fighting comrades. It just wasn't right. They were about to go into action, they might possibly die messily in the next few minutes. They should be joking, talking, possibly doing other, more utterly basic, things to keep themselves in a good mood and feeling alive. All tense and nervous was a shit way to go into battle. However did those boring gits win the war?

With a loud metallic clang and a sudden jerk the ship hit the airlock. The kind-of docking mechanism clamped on, and then forced the station's airlock open. As soon as the opening was wide enough, the two bodyguards threw themselves through, firing at anything they moved. Jeraldine kept just behind them. No point in getting shot if those

two hyped-up elephants could do it instead. She didn't fire either, since she didn't see anything worth firing at. Shooting random civilians wasn't her kind of thing. Unless she was in a *very* bad mood.

She'd been offered an assault rifle, but turned it down. She would've wanted to put at least a few score bullets through it on a range before she took it into a firefight. She'd just stocked up on ammunition for her pistols instead. They'd do well enough inside a space station anyway. No distances to talk about. Maybe not quite as good against opponents with body armor, but in those cases she'd just have to aim for their heads.

They climbed up, against the rotational gravity towards the hub. Their ship was hanging from the outside of the wheel, with it's front pointing out. It wasn't quite as easy as one might have wanted to attack upwards, but there wasn't much choice. All airlocks were placed on the outer side of the wheel, and while they might have been able to smash through the hull on the inside that would've badly risked their targets.

The bodyguards jumped up into the inside of the wheel, still firing at just about everything. There were several corpses lying nearby. No wounded, since Terina's lap dogs used seriously unpleasant ammo in their rifles. If someone had survived the actual impact of the bullet, it wouldn't have taken many seconds for them to bleed to death.

One of them looked distracted for a moment.

"That way," she said once she looked attentive again, pointing left.

They began to run. First the two human automatons, then Jeraldine, then the twenty-five random fighters they'd brought with them. With any luck at all nobody would be nuts enough to actually fight them. With just a little more luck, someone would realize who they worked for and help them, hoping to have Terina owing them a favour.

With a bit more luck than that, they'd even arrive in time to do some good.

Karri attached the last wire to their trap and flipped the switch.

"There," she said.

It was a simple thing. A few large capacitors, a few thin but stiff wires sticking out into the entrance well. Hopefully, it'd be enough to stun at least the first couple of people to come down the stairs from above. Which was an imminent event, to judge from the sounds from outside. And from the dull red glowing line across the outer door.

"So now we just wait?" Sona said.

"Yes," Elena said. "Unless we manage to come up with something more creative."

"Can we mess with the atmosphere?" Nolan said. "The different levels in here should be separate airspaces, right?"

"Will check," Karri said. She brought up a display from the habitat system.

After only a couple of seconds, she frowned.

"Level two's depressurized," she said. "Ten minutes ago."

"What?" Elena said. "Why?"

"System says firefighting vent malfunction."

Sona looked around.

"Where's the girl?" she said.

Everybody looked around. There was no sign of Crucis whatsoever.

"It can't be her," Elena said. "Going out into space unprotected is suicide."

"Emergency suit?" Karri said. "Fit in a pocket."

"Possible," Elena said. "Wish we had a few of those, come to think of it."

"At least the book is still here," Sona said.

"Yeah, so the guys outside the door can steal it in peace once they've killed us," Nolan said. "Look, can we vent this level and retreat to another or not? If nothing else it should delay them a bit, and I'm all for delaying getting killed."

Karri nodded. "Would work," she said. "Suggest we go down to escape pod level, vent this one, watch, vent others as intruders work downwards."

"Unless someone else comes up with something better in the next two seconds, we do that," Elena said. She waited a beat before she went on.

"Right," she said. "Nolan, get to book. Karri and Sona, go down. Nolan and I follow as soon as the lift returns."

Karri and Sona both nodded and headed for the lift. Nolan reached out for the book. His hand passed right through it.

"Er, 'Lena?" he said. "I think we've been scammed."

He felt about inside the image of the book, grabbed something and suddenly he was holding a small metal cube. The book was nowhere to be seen.

Elena groaned.

"Go," she said, waving at Karri and Sona. "We still have to survive."

They entered the lift and vanished downwards.

"Got to say it was pretty slick," Nolan said, examining the projector. "Much, much smoother than the brute force brigade up there."

Drops of molten steel started falling from the outer door. They stood watching them until the lift returned, after which they rapidly entered it and left the room.

Crucis floated in space. Even in such a crowded part of the Universe as Stepping Stone Station, there was a whole lot of nothing around. It was possible that she might hit something, but really not likely. So she just floated there and enjoyed the view. She had a splendid one of both Earth and Luna, occasionally disturbed by some triple-S enclosure or another. The big central wheels were behind her, so at least those eyesores didn't bother her at the moment.

She liked space. Liked the sense of room it gave her. She'd been born on a spaceship and grown up on various more or less dingy stations. The war made her an orphan when she was ten, and she'd somehow made her way to Stepping Stone together with a wounded friend. Her friend had had a large piece of hot metal fall on her, giving her a nasty but fortunately not lethal wound. Since it was never properly treated, it left a huge scar, which she'd chosen as her name. Crucis had also chosen a different name than the one she was born with, as a way to keep closer to her friend and to distance herself from her life before the war. That was another girl, one with parents and relatives and prospects for the future and stuff.

They'd been living on triple-S ever since, Crucis and Scar. They'd made a meagre living from petty crime. Or, well, what would've been crime if there had been laws. On triple-S, you just made sure not to annoy the powerful ones. Which, she guessed, wasn't so different from having laws, in the end.

After a few years, after they'd grown up enough that they were rather more lovers than friends, they met Dagger. She had a story much like theirs. War orphan. Managed to stay alive. No past she wanted to talk about, no family, no ties, no prospects. What Dagger had that they didn't was a smoldering anger, a need to piss the entire world off and a better than average brain. Together with her, their escapades became less petty. Slowly, they started moving up. They got a steady place to live, and even if it was a very crap one, it was better than hunting for a place to sleep every night. They had regular food, even if not very much of it. They didn't have to worry about air and water fees much.

And if they managed to pull *this* stunt through to the end and claim the reward for it, they'd be richer than fuck. A brand new ship like that was worth more than most triple-S enclosures. If they could just get the ship, they'd take it somewhere with laws and sell it, all legal and nice, and then they'd be rich.

Crucis couldn't really imagine what life would be like then, but it felt like a safe bet that it'd be better.

In the distance, she saw a small scooter approach. A simple thing, basically nothing but the smallest Casimir engine possible, a seat with controls, a metal box for storage and a bunch of anchor points where one could attach spacesuit lanyards. It had to be Dagger and Scar. If it was anyone else, they'd come in something bigger.

When they came close enough, she saw that it was indeed her lover and their friend. She grinned at them and held up the book for them to see. They smiled back through the faceplates of their suits, as old, shoddy and worn as everything else they had. Scar hooked Crucis' bubble to an anchor point, and soon they were on their way to enclosure five, dock number three.

The door to the old brothel was bloody hard. It pissed Lorch off, a lot. Couldn't the stupid gits have chosen a more normal place to stay, with a more normal airtight door to it? That they'd have had open in a couple of minutes, tops. But no. Instead they had to choose this place, which had been modified to make this kind of thing hard. Wanita and Aura were kneeling next to the hatch-like door, checking how it was fastened to the structure of the floor and trying to figure out a safer way to get it open. Across the door, several strips of slow-weld was burning, slowly weakening lines in the door. A few more minutes and they'd be through, at which point things would get interesting.

The whole thing was set at the bottom of a kind of antechamber, a fairly wide and couple of meters deep pit in the main floor of the wheel. Three separate staircases led from the main floor level down to where the door was.

She sighed. It was no more than natural that they chose this kind of place, of course. The safest place they'd found on short notice, probably. She still didn't like it. It annoyed her immensely to have the key to a fortune this close and not being able to get her hands on it *right fucking now*. She was sure that Wanita and Aura were doing the best they could to get it open, but they wanted to be at least a little bit careful, they said. Something about not getting blown up if the door was booby trapped, and also about not destroying the thing they were after. Both quite reasonable arguments which she'd grudgingly had to accept.

But she didn't have to like those either.

"DESIREE LORCH!" an insanely loud voice suddenly shouted. "YOU AND YOUR COMPANY WILL LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS AND MOVE AWAY FROM THAT DOOR."

Lorch stood up.

"Who the fuck is that?" she shouted back. Wanita and Aura stopped working. She waved at them to keep going.

"Those you are trying to attack are under the protection of Terina Heidebrink," the voice shouted, a little less loudly. "You will obey my instructions *at once*, or you will be killed."

Lorch felt the blood drain from her head and suddenly her mouth was very dry. On a list of people on triple-S she didn't want to get on the wrong side of, Heidebrink held about the top ten spots all by herself.

"Stop what you're doing!" she hissed to her people. "Stop it right fucking now!"

They had already stopped.

"Did they just say Heidebrink?" Aura said.

Lorch nodded.

"Oh fuck," she said. "If we fight, do you think they'll at least kill us quick?"

"All right," Lorch shouted. "We've stopped. We didn't know, all right? We'll be putting our weapons down and coming out now. Don't want no trouble with Boss Heidebrink."

"Get moving," the voice from above said. Lorch could see several targeting drones hovering above the pit. She frowned. That was *way* overkill. It'd be perfectly adequate for the people up there just to peek over the edge and shoot them like fish in a barrel. Yet they'd brought out the real military stuff. Somebody was very serious about this.

She dropped her rifle, her pistols and even her knives. No need to give them even a minor excuse to take offense. As long as she was alive and herself, she could always buy new stuff. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Wanita and Aura do the same.

"All right," she shouted when they'd dropped everything. "We're coming out now. No need to shoot or anything."

She waited a little for a reply, but none came. Hoping that was a good sign, she slowly walked up the nearest staircase, holding her hands well away from her body and clearly visible. When she got far enough up that she could see over the edge, she saw that they were surrounded by at least two dozen armed people. Including two that looked like Heidebrink's personal bodyguards and an Amazon parahuman. Wanita and Aura came walking right behind her, also very careful not to look threatening.

"We had no idea, all right?" Lorch said. "If we'd known these were Heidebrink's, we'd never have touched them."

"Watch them," one of the bodyguards said. Six people immediately surrounded them, weapons at the ready.

"Sona?" Lorch heard the Amazon say into a communicator. "Cavalry's here. You can open that door now."

"Over there," Dagger said, pointing towards the big sign with 'DOCK 3' written on it. Like most other docks, it consisted of a pit-like depression in the enclosure floor with stuff around it. In this case, the stuff was fairly small-scale, meant for a personell-carrying ship rather than a cargo-carrying one. It also included a handful of people in black uniforms and carrying big guns.

The three girls had just came out of a much smaller dock placed in the side of the enclosure wheel. It wasn't even a proper dock, really, it was more of a really big airlock. They'd flown their simple scooter into it, closed the door and filled it with air. Very simple, as long as you had the money for the air.

"See anyone else?" Scar asked. She and Crucis were still inside the airlock, out of sight from the huge hall outside. Dagger was leaning out, trying to figure out if the coast was clear. None of them believed for a moment that the people in the black uniforms would care in the least if the book violently changed hands right in front of their eyes, so they were playing it careful. Most likely everybody but them still thought that the infocommando and her crew had the book, so they should be safe. But better safe than sorry.

"Looks clear enough," Dagger said. "Can't see anybody but dock workers and the corporates in black."

"Let's go, then," Crucis said. "I don't want to hold on to this thing a moment longer than necessary. It feels weird."

Dagger looked at her.

"What do you mean weird?" she said.

"I don't know, really," Crucis said. "It's just... weird. As if it lagged a bit behind itself, a bit. And it glows a little in the dark."

Dagger and Scar both looked at the book.

"I could see it out in space," Crucis said. "It's too bright in here."

"Let's go give it to the major," Dagger said. "Getting rid of it as soon as possible I have no problem with, as long as we get that ship."

She walked out into the hall outside. The other two followed, Crucis still carrying the book. The didn't have anything to put it in, so it was very obvious that they had it. It felt to Dagger like they had a huge target painted on them, and she more than half expected to be gunned down at any moment.

But they weren't. They got all the way up to the armed corporates without incident.

"We're here to see major Kiner," Dagger said.

The nearest corporate, an average-height, mousy-haired and generally pretty nondescript-looking woman, touched a stud-like thing on her collar.

"Major, we have another claim," she said.

"Well, these actually have something that looks like the right book," she added after a short pause.

"Right," she said after another one. She gestured to the girls.

"You can go down," she said. "The major's waiting in the cockpit."

"Thanks," Dagger said. She walked down the stairs to the open docking port and down the further steps into the ship. The other two followed her.

The interior of the ship was kind if boring. They entered into what looked like a bigger and sturdier version of a standard seven-level habitat. It was a round room, with a staircase leading up outside. There were two lift shafts, placed against the outside walls. Next to each of them were holes with ladders. There were quite a few equipment lockers stuck to the walls, three microgravity-prepared workbenches on the floor and a number of boxes stacked near them.

"I guess the cockpit's down," Dagger said.

"Seems a safe bet," Scar said. "There's nowhere else to go."

"Lift or ladder?" Dagger said.

"Lift," Crucis said. "I've had enough of ladders today."

They took the lift. Not knowing where the cockpit was, they tried each one in turn and finally found it as number five of nine, precisely in the middle of the ship. It looked more like an office than what they imagined a spaceship's control center should look. The main difference was that the chairs in front of the consoles were acceleration couches rather than ordinary office chairs. Major Kiner was sitting in the most central of them.

"Good day to you," she said. "I hope you really have what I'm looking for. I've already been disappointed twice today, and I am getting cranky."

Crucis stepped forward with the book.

"I don't know if you'll be disappointed or not," she said. "But this looks like on the picture you gave Dagger, and the people who had not only looked like in the pictures but Lorch's crew were after them as well."

The major reached out and took the book. She looked at it, and hummed a little. She took a rod-like instrument from her pocket and held it near the book for a moment. She nodded, turned the instrument off and returned it to her pocket.

"It's the real thing all right," she said. "Congratulations, kids. You just earned yourselves a spaceship."

She put the book in a briefcase she'd had standing next to her console.

"Do you know how to handle one of these?" she said.

"Not really," Dagger said.

Major Kiner smiled.

"Didn't really think so," she said. "Did you have to fight much to get the book?"

"No," Crucis said. "Nothing at all. Why?"

"That means you're smart girls," the major said. "Which I like."

She looked them over.

"What are your plans right now?" she asked.

"Don't know, really," Dagger said. "Find somewhere to lay low for a week or so. I don't think we're going to be very popular at triple-S for a while."

"My squad and I wouldn't mind a ride home," the major said. "It's in Earth orbit, so it's only a five-hour trip. It'd give me a chance to show you the basics on running this thing as well."

The three girls looked at each other. They'd had worse suggestions.

"If you worry about me not giving you the ship," the major said, "I can just as well do that right here as back at our station. And I'm not. As I said before, I have a reputation to protect."

Dagger nodded. "Sure," she said. "We'll give you a ride."

The major smiled again.

"Thanks," she said.

She touched a stud on her collar.

"Get aboard and lock her down, people," she said. "We're leaving."

Terina's workshop looked like a combination between doctor Frankenstein's laboratory in an old monochrome horror movie and a computer repair shop, as drawn by M C Escher. There were constructor baths, disassembler tanks, analysis tanks and other kinds of nanotech tools that Jeraldine didn't recognize. Mixed in with them were serious amounts of computer equipment, much of it in a half-open state where Terina had been working on it and not bothered to put it together again. The entire workshop straddled the enclosure's axis of rotation, so the exact center of it was weightless and no part experienced more than a hundredth of a gravity. Jeraldine knew that nanotech facilities were kept in environments like that whenever possible, although she'd never learned why.

"Do you want to be awake or unconscious?" Terina asked. She was floating in front of an electronics rack, with a thick wire leading from her neck into it.

"Awake," Elena's voice said from a speaker in the rack. Elena herself was floating in an analysis tank, stark naked and with enough wires stuck to her that not much of her was visible in spite of that.

"Are you sure?" Terina said. "This is really not going to be pleasant. Some of this will involve manipulating your pain receptor centra."

"I'm sure," Elena said.

"As you wish," Terina said.

The bodyguards had brought them all from the old brothel directly up to Terina's workshop, then they'd left to retrieve the stolen book. As soon as they'd arrived, Terina had told Elena to strip and enter the tank.

"So after every merc on the station went after you, a single young girl managed to steal the book from you," Terina said. "That is actually remarkable. I'll try to recruit that girl."

"If she really gets that ship, I'll give you dollars to donuts that she won't be staying on triple-S," Jeraldine said.

"She won't leave," Terina said. She had her eyes closed and looked concentrated, in spite of the fact that she was talking. The fluid around Elena in the tank had taken on a faintly reddish color.

"Is that right," Jeraldine said. "How can you be sure?"

"I have faster spacecraft than that one. She can stay and work for me, or she can be blown to pieces. Most people choose the first."

Sona frowned.

"This is your old friend?" she whispered.

Jeraldine nodded.

"She doesn't sound very nice."

"That happens when you're at the receiving end of a genocide," Jeraldine whispered back. "You get kind of pissed off."

Although, if she were entirely honest with herself, the instant and fearful cooperation that Terina's name got from the denizens of triple-S worried Jeraldine too. Sure, she'd known that Terina wasn't exactly a pleasant or mild-mannered person, but the way people reacted here was rather more like you'd expect them to react if a vengeful goddess happened to cross their path. When people actually turn pale at hearing your name, that's quite a ways beyond nasty and unpleasant. While curious, Jeraldine wasn't sure that she really wanted to know exactly what Terina had done to earn that kind of reaction.

In the tank, Elena twitched and spasmed.

"You people were with this one in the war, weren't you?" Terina said.

"Me and Karri were," Nolan said. "Not Sona."

"You wouldn't happen to know exactly which strain of neuroaccelerant your military gave her? I can find out, of course, but if you can tell my it will save your friend ten minutes of pain."

"Glycomedes nine," Karri said. "Revised two, I think."

Terina tsked. "Old, old, old," she said. "We can improve on that."

"The pain?" Karri said.

"We can work around, maybe..."

Terina fell silent for a while, and the rest of them followed suit. Gradually, Elena's twitching subsided and she became still. Only the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed the oxygenated tank fluid revealed that she still lived.

"There," Terina eventually said. "Elena, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Elena said. Her voice still came from the speaker. She sounded tired.

"Your processing implants should be available to you now. Could you please try them for me?"

Elena fell silent. The silence dragged on until Jeraldine was convinced that something had gone wrong. That Elena had somehow broken, lost her mind or at least the ability to communicate.

"They work," Elena finally said. Her voice sounded odd. Kind of full of too many emotions. "I can... I will start working on the book's stuff, I think."

"Elena," Terina said. "You trance when you do that, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I work some more on your physio implants while you do that? Your stuff is pretty old, and I can improve it. May as well, since you're already in the tank."

Elena laughed. "Sure," she said. "Go right ahead."

"This will take a while," Terina said. "You people may as well go get something to eat or drink instead of wait here."

Controlling the spaceship looked easy enough, at least. Dagger had been afraid that even if they got it, they'd never even manage to get it away from the dock, much less get it to somewhere where they could sell it. But once her people were aboard, the major had simply told the craft to undock and leave for someplace she called "Storage Platform Nine". The ship's computer did the rest. For a few moments they were weightless, and then the acceleration gradually increased until it reached a full G. Which was a whole lot more than Dagger had lived in for a long time, so she was pretty glad that she was

sitting safely in an acceleration couch. Her friends were too. The major stood behind them, obviously quite comfortable with the high gravity, since she could have sat down in any of the three free couches, had she so wanted. Damn showoff Earther.

"As you see, the ship is highly automated," the major said. "Drive, navigation and most onboard functions are handled by a top of the line subsapient AI."

"AI?" Scar said. "Weren't those the enemy in the war?"

"Some were," the major said. "Some were on our side. But those were all sapient AI's, which are now strictly licensed. This one is, as I said, subsapient. It has no sense of self, and no will of its own. There are situations where that is a drawback, but you won't end up in any of those."

"So who will it obey?" Dagger said. "Not just anybody who talks to it, I hope."

"Certainly not," the major said. "There is of course security. Primary authentication is via voice recognition. We'll set that up in a minute. Apart from that, you can select keywords that anyone can use to get specific access rights. For example, we often specify a word that can be used by anybody to tell the ship to return to base if the fully authorized personell has been out of touch for a significant time. Since the computer is fully intelligent and to some degree able to make judgment calls, any such commands are really only limited by the computer's external senses."

"External senses," Dagger said. "Like what? It can see?"

"It can see," the major said. "It has 360-degree cameras for visual light and infrared, and audio pickups for when you're in an atmosphere. It has radio, of course, and a pretty advanced radar suite. From here, you can see most everything that's within a quarter of a light second or so. A bit further if you're in clear space, a bit less in a crowded system like Earth-Luna."

"Can we see what's out there right now?" Crucis said. "I'd like to see triple-S from the outside."

"Radar image won't be that interesting, and we're a bit far away for the cameras," the major said. "But let's have a look. Computer, bring up combined source visualization of nearby space."

"Do we have to call it 'computer'?" Scar said. "It sounds kind of corny."

"Of course not," the major said. "You can call it anything you like. You only have to let it know first. 'Computer' is just the factory default."

A display flickered into existence over the console in front of Dagger. It showed a large number of variously sized icons on a black background. She could easily tell that the cloud of little wheels and cylinders was Stepping Stone, and she guessed that the rest were spacecraft.

"Cool," she said.

"Why are those two flashing red?" Crucis said, pointing at five triangular icons near one of the larger triple-S wheels.

The major frowned.

"Because there's something about them that the computer thinks you need to know, but it doesn't have permission to interrupt vocally," she said. "Computer, vocal alerts, please."

"Acknowledged," the computer said. It had calm, pleasant voice.

"Spacecraft identifying as Heidebrink Alpha to Heidebrink Epsilon are presently on intercept courses with this vessel," it went on. "Interception will occur in eleven minutes if present conditions are sustained."

"Heidebrink?" Crucis said. "It's not *Terina* Heidebrink, is it? She only operates on triple-S, right?"

"It looks like those ships came out of triple-S," Dagger said. "And I don't know of any other Heidebrink there."

"Fuck," Scar said. "Can we run away?"

"Not a friend of yours, I take it?" the major said.

Dagger frowned. "We never had anything to do with her," she said. "We always made *damn* sure to stay out of her way. I can't think of a reason for her to come after us. It's a nice ship and all, but she's got enough money to buy them by the dozen."

"The book," Crucis said. "Must be the book."

"Computer," the major said. "Contact the database on SP9 and do a lookup on this Terina Heidebrink. Report result as soon as possible."

A couple of second passed. Given that the computer itself and the database it talked to would likely be almost instantaneous, Dagger guessed that this Storage Platform Nine really was in Earth orbit like the major had said.

"Terina Heidebrink," the computer said. "One of five Alkaia strain Amazon parahumans known to still be alive. Specialist in bioenergetics, bioinformatics, biological nanotech applications, chemical psychodynamics and intrusive biodata retrieval and manipulation. Currently resident on Stepping Stone Station. Wanted by the UNHDF for multiple counts of war crimes, AI regulation violations, nanotech regulation violations and intrusive manipulation of retired UNHDF personnel."

After the first dozen words or so, the major's face became very grim.

"Computer," she said. "Avoid interception by those five spacecraft, by any safe means. Maintaining given course is desirable but optional."

"Acceleration will be increased," the computer said. "It is advised for crew to assume positions in acceleration couches."

The major sat down in a couch and strapped herself in.

"Get ready, girls," she said. "It'll probably ramp our acceleration up all the way to our safe max of three Gs. It's a bit on the heavy side, even when you're used to it."

"Three Gs?" Scar said. "Fuck. We live in a twentieth G."

"Then this is going to be rough on you."

The ship slowly increased its acceleration. A number in the corner of the display that still floated above Dagger's console climbed from 1.0 to 2.95, then stopped. Everything got heavier. Much heavier. Dagger tried to raise her arm, and while she could do it it was hard work and she wouldn't really want to have to actually *do* something with it.

On the display, the five little triangles also increased their pace and kept closing in.

"Computer, give me stats on those ships," the major said. "Make and type would be nice, if you can get it."

"Pursuing craft appear to be Transplanetary A22s," the ship said. "It is unlikely that we will be able to outrun them. If they are armed they can almost certainly destroy us."

"Maintain best evasive tactic," the major said. "They want something we have, so they won't shoot at us."

"So what will they do?" Scar said. "Board us?"

"Doesn't work," the major said. "We can change acceleration too quickly. If they get too close, none of us will be able to maneuver, for fear of collision."

"So what can they do?" Dagger asked. "Just follow and hope we give up?"

"They may try to disable us somehow," the major said. "If they really were been sent by that Alkaia, the bitch almost certainly has some very nasty surprise for us."

"What if we just stop and give her the book?" Crucis said.

The major laughed a dry and short laugh.

"Not an option, kid," she said. "She's one of the people in this universe who under no circumstances can be allowed to have this book."

Dagger and Scar looked at each other. This had 'really bad' written all over it.

"Computer," the major said. "Contact command and control on SP9 and request immediate armed assistance. If they won't send any, try to get me a line to the UNHDF duty officer on Luna Station."

"Acknowledged," the computer said.

"Calling for help?" Dagger asked.

"Yes," the major said. "We need it."

"So," Dagger said. "How long do you think it'll be before that help reaches us?"

"Quite a while," the major said. "Four or five hours, probably. Not less than two hours under any circumstances."

"So," Crucis said, "if it's going to be that long, we're not going anywhere in particular, they're going to catch up anyway and they can't really do anything once they do, why don't we slow down to a more comfortable acceleration? That'd make them catch up faster, too."

The major looked at her.

"Clever, aren't you?" she said. "Computer, slow down to one G."

She got up from her couch as the gravity lessened.

"So," she said. "Do any of you girls play go?"

Elena felt more alive than she had for a long, long time. She hadn't quite realized how limited she'd felt in the years since the military blocked her implants and took her powers away. How dull everything had looked, how muted everything sounded, how overwhelmingly fast things happened. She'd drop something, and more often than not it'd hit the floor before she could grab it again. How weak she felt, how slow, how vulnerable. For the first year or two, anger had propelled her through life. She'd thought that she could change something, and that hope had been the fire that drove her.

But then that petered out. She wasn't even properly defeated. Nobody ever really fought her back. She was beaten by silence and disinterest. She settled into a life where she worked at something she cared only a little about, mostly saw friends from way back when she was alive and drank in places that catered to disillusionment and nostalgia.

Sona left her, and she couldn't really blame anyone but herself for it. Elena didn't even enjoy her own company all that much, so how could anybody else?

And then Terina's wires retracted from her, the oxygenated nutrient nanomachine-saturated liquid drained from the tank and the world was *back*.

"How do you feel?" Terina's voice said via her implants.

She felt *wonderful*. Like she'd been dreaming, and just woke up. Like she'd been blind, and got her sight back.

"I feel fine," she said.

"Good," Terina said. "There's a shower a couple of meters to your right, where you can wash away the last of the nutrient solution. We're just a level down when you're finished."

"Got it," Elena said. "See you there."

She floated out of the tank. A few drops of the liquid moved away from her, tiny globes of pale yellow moving ever so slowly in the near-total lack of gravity, along trajectories she could predict totally but for slight air current movements. She moved into the very similar tank the shower was housed in, and for a few glorious minutes a big fan blew warm air and hot water over her body. Clean and dry, she dressed in her old clothes.

The hatch down to the level below on the other side of the room, maybe twenty meters away through the air. There were plenty of handholds on the equipment racks, to make it easy to move around in the weightlessness. Elena smiled, put her feet to the wall and with a single immaculately calculated kick propelled herself through the room without touching a single thing on the way, into the hatch. She grabbed a ladder rung to change her movement vector and orientation, and landed perfectly feet down on the floor of the level below. The gravity was still very weak, but enough to provide a sense of direction and to stay on the floor unless she moved.

The others were all there. Karri and Nolan sat in chairs by a table, eating something brown that smelled of many spices. Terina sat in a throne-like leather-covered armchair under a panorama window, a finger-thick cable running from her neck into the chair's armrest. Jeraldine lounged in a sofa, and Sona rested against her.

Unusually, Elena felt jealousy surge through her when she saw Sona lying like that. She pushed it down. She and Sona were long-past history. Sona had every right to be with whoever she chose.

They all looked at her.

"I'm back," she said.

"Did you manage to crack that data?" Sona said.

Elena had plain forgot about that in the exhilaration of having her full senses again.

"Yes," she said. "It was surprisingly easy. The key may actually have been specifically chosen to be easily found with war-time codebreaking techniques."

"And?" Terina said. "What is it?"

"It's incomplete, to begin with," Elena said. Which it was, after a fashion.

"What there is seems to me to be a hugely complicated blueprint," she went on. "I don't understand much of it, but as far as I can tell it seems to be for a machine that does something with some very basic physics. And it includes something that looks like a circular doorway."

Terina and Jeraldine briefly looked at each other.

"I think," Terina said, "that it may be a device for accessing something very valuable that was hidden near the end of the war. A treasure map, if you like."

"Access it from just anywhere?" Elena said. "Sounds unlikely."

"It is," Terina said. "You'd have to use it at a certain place in Neptune orbit."

"Neptune again," Nolan said. "You wouldn't happen to know what the treasure itself is?"

"No," Terina said. "Sorry."

"We need the full blueprint in any case," Elena said. "Which I suppose is in the book. Have your people managed to retrieve it yet?"

"Unfortunately not," Terina said. "It's in the ship the major Kiner offered as the prize for retrieving it, and the ship is accelerating at one gravity straight outwards from the Sun."

"Neptune?" Karri said.

"As a matter of fact, yes".

Elena laughed.

"So what are we waiting for?" she said. "Let's go to Neptune already!"

"Er, we kind of don't have a ship," Nolan said. "Unless you want to use the brothel's escape pod. We should get there in, oh, two months or so. If we can hold our breaths that long, and chose to do a really hardcore weight loss regime."

"I have a ship," Terina said. "One that can take us there in comfort."

"You'll want a share of whatever we find, I suppose," Elena said.

"Of course," Terina said. "But I'd want that anyway for saving your asses and getting the book back."

Elena looked at Sona and Karri. They both shrugged.

"All right," she said. "It's a deal."

The ship sped on. About an hour since they set off, and they were moving at almost forty kilometers per second. Steadily increasing, of course, since they were continuously accelerating at one standard gravity. Nine point eight one meters per second per second. With the Casimir engine creating energy and thrust by stealing it from the foam of virtual particles continuously creating themselves in high-grade vacuum, they could keep accelerating for a very long time. In time, some component in the engine would degrade and stop working. But that time lay many decades in the future, as guaranteed by the Casimir Corporation. By then, they would be infinitesimally close to the speed of light, much closer than the major cared to figure out in detail.

They'd also be quite dead. They were eight people in a ship rated for six. With the above-limit strain in the air recycling system, the hundred days it'd last for six people would be cut to something closer to fifty. At which time they'd be doing fourteen percent of the speed of light. Fast enough for relativistic effects to be noticeable

It'd almost certainly not get that far, though. By then, something would have happened. Their pursuers would've got tired of pursuing and done something rash. Which would almost certainly end in disaster for them all, but then at least it'd be a quick end. Or the backup the major had called for might arrive and save them. Maybe a fifty-fifty chance there, since that backup consisted of about as many ship of about the same power level as the pursuers. They were maybe a little more powerful, but then they'd have to be more careful so they didn't hit the major's ship.

Or the major could call for the UNHDF. Given time, she could reach one of her old friends who were still in the service. Once she explained to them about a strange artifact from the war and an Alkaia going all-out to get it, they *would* come after them. In force. Which would hugely piss off the major's employers, and probably sink her mercenary career.

On the other hand it might save her life and possibly save the human species as she knew it.

She sighed. Oh well. There was no hurry to make her mind up. The situation was stable, and would be for some time. She could take a couple of days to think about it, if she wanted.

"Are we in trouble?" the girl with the cross on her head said.

"Kind of," she said. "Nothing desperately urgent, though, so if you like we can take a look at the rest of the ship."

She wasn't sure where the girls would fall in a contest between humans and parahumans. Best distract them as much as possible, so they didn't think about what was going on. If they even knew. Or, if they knew, if they understood. But they were street kids, so they probably both knew and understood more than other children their age.

"What's in the book?" the hard-eyed one with all the knives at her belt said. "Must be something pretty important, to bring all these ships out after us."

"Honestly, I don't know," the major said. "But it's something left over from the war, we don't understand it and one of the smartest and nastiest of the enemy from back then wants it real bad. Altogether, we really don't want her to get it."

There were holes in that story large enough to drive the ship through. She'd never been much good at lying, unfortunately.

"I see," the girl said. "Well, let's look at the ship then, shall we?"

She got up from her couch, slowly and carefully. The other two followed suit.

"Ok," the major said. "I'm a bit hungry, so I suggest we start with the galley."

"Do you think we could do the thing with the voice lock first?" the hard-eyed one said. "Just so we don't forget it later."

Clever kid. But she couldn't really refuse, it was supposed to be their ship now. And she had her override authority code anyway, just in case.

"Sure," she said. "After I instruct the computer, say your names loud and clear and one at a time. Ready?"

They all nodded.

"Right," the major said. "Computer, record and assign full command privileges to the next three voices."

She pointed at the girl with the hard eyes.

"Dagger," she said.

"Scar," the silent one said.

"Crucis," said the one with the cross tattoo.

"Voices recorded and privileges assigned," the computer said.

The major smiled at them.

"So," she said. "Now it's your ship."

"Yeah," Dagger said. "Would feel better about it if we weren't being hunted, though."

The major sighed. "I understand," she said. "I wish I could do something about it."

"That's all right," Dagger said. "Now, what about the galley?"

"Right," the major said. "It's on level three, to begin with."

She turned and pressed the call button on the lift. As fast as she could, Dagger pulled a knife from her belt and threw it at her. It sank into her neck with a wet thudding sound. The major remained standing for a few moments, then she collapsed to the floor. Blood rapidly pooled around her head and shoulders.

Crucis and Scar looked at Dagger, surprised and slightly shocked.

"Only meant to knock her out," Dagger said. "Damn gravity threw my aim off."

"Her pals are going to be mighty pissed off," Scar said.

"Computer," Crucis said. "Do you know where the other people on the ship are right now?"

"Yes," the computer said. "All four of them are in stateroom five."

"Lock the door to that stateroom, and stop accepting any commands from inside it."

"Done."

"Is she dead?" Scar said, looking at the major.

Dagger was also staring at the prone body.

"I guess so," she said. "I must've hit both the spinal cord and an artery or something, for her to drop that fast and bleed that much."

Dagger was no stranger to death. She'd seen more than enough of it while she grew up, and she'd even killed before. But it had always been in self defense and in fights. She'd never before hit someone from behind in cold blood like that. Although, in a way, this too counted as self defense. The major almost certainly would've got them all killed by refusing to give Heidebrink what she wanted.

"We should contact Heidebrink's ships at once," Crucis said. "Those women in stateroom five may have some way to override our control of the computer, so we want them gone as soon as possible."

"What do we do with that?" Scar said. She seemed unable to look away from the body.

"Ask Heidebrink's people if they want it," Crucis said. "If they don't, dump it in space."

"I'll talk to them," Dagger said. She sat down in the couch by the central console. Her hands were shaking. She tried to will them to stop, but it didn't work.

"Computer," she said. "Contact the pursuing ships. Tell them we want to discuss surrender."

Chapter 5: Space

The private yacht Evolution's Edge rushed through space, pushing at exactly one standard gravity towards Neptune. It had set off from Stepping Stone Station a couple of days earlier, and was now about to cross the orbit of Mars. It was a big ship, about the size of some apartment blocks down on Earth and bigger than some of the enclosures that made up Stepping Stone. It had entire suites for its passengers, large common areas and the necessary technical parts stuck out of sight. It could comfortably room up to fifty people for short journeys, and about a dozen for voyages of more than a year. Its air recycling was almost loss-free, and its galley had a state of the art nanotech maker that built seemingly fresh ingredients for the chef to use as well as basic beverages. For more sophisticated drinks, there was a well-stocked wine cellar.

Terina refused to say where and how she'd got it. The others didn't press the issue. There were just glad she had it, since it made the two-week trip to Neptune far more comfortable than it would otherwise have been.

The entire top level of the ship was covered by a nano-built diamond dome. Even produced that way, the thought of what it must have cost to build something that big in a single piece from the atoms up staggered Elena. She was lying on a lounge next to the swimming pool that took up almost half of the top level. The air was warm and moist, and the view of the stars outside was as clear and impressive as it only ever gets in space. Somewhere far ahead was Neptune, but it wasn't anywhere close to being visible to the naked eye yet.

"There," Karri's voice said in her head. "Should be able to talk safely now."

Karri was lying on a lounge next to her. Like Elena, she was dressed in a swimsuit. Unlike Elena's, hers was dry. On her neck, a palm-sized black bulge covered her implant socket.

"Are you sure?" Elena thought.

"Short range, low power, heavy encryption," Karri sent. "Safe from outside, far as we can tell. She may have bugged your implants, but no protection against that."

"Right," she thought. "And if she messed with my implants like that, she already knows anyway."

She was still getting used to having the full use of her implants. This kind of telepathy-like wireless communication was one of the things she hadn't been able to do for the last seven years. She couldn't understand why the military didn't want her to have it, but for some reason they didn't.

"Knows?"

Elena hesitated.

"I was a little less than entirely straightforward about the contents of the data from the book," she thought.

Karri just waited.

"It is a blueprint for a machine all right," Elena thought. "And we don't have the whole blueprint. That much is entirely true. What I didn't say is that the blueprint includes instructions for building the tools with which to build the parts for the final machine."

"Interesting ones?"

Elena swallowed.

"You could say that," she thought. "It's dry nanotech. Including instructions for, as far as I can tell without understanding the details, bootstrapping from late-war technology to utility fog."

Karri was silent for so long that Elena started to worry.

"*Fuck!*" she sent, eventually.

"Yeah," Elena thought. "You can see why I didn't want Terina to know?"

"Can I see the bootstrapping instructions?"

"Sure. You ready to receive?"

"Yes."

It took some discipline not to nod or use other gestures while talking like that. They'd practiced it, years and years ago. Elena with her implants, Karri and Setsuko with external transceivers like the one Karri was wearing now. They'd been good at it, then. It was a useful technique, when on a mission. But that was all long ago, and they were very much out of practice.

With a thought, she told her implants to transmit a certain set of documents to Karri. It took some time. The bandwidth on their wireless link was not stellar, and there was a lot of data.

"Later," Karri said, with her voice, when it had all been transmitted. She got up from her lounge and left the room.

Elena stayed for a while longer, and swam more laps in the pool. With her old machine self working again, she'd suddenly found the incentive and will to get her bio parts in shape.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Sona said.

She and Jeraldine were standing in the bedroom of Sona's suite. It was large by any measure, and absolutely enormous by spaceship standards. It had a bed large enough for three or four people, or more if they were friendly, and closet space to hold the wardrobe for a medium-sized theater production. The furniture and decor were done in an old style, with much dark wood and carved decorative parts. The carpet was thick and a deep, deep maroon. The walls were dark green, with leaf patterns made out in leaf gold. One entire wall was transparent, looking out into space.

"Er, well, I thought we'd be going to the infirmary," Jeraldine said. "That's where one usually does medical things, right?"

"Oh, yes," Sona said. "Certainly."

"And there's nothing wrong with it, is there?"

"Nothing whatsoever. It's great. The best I've ever seen outside of a hospital. You'd have to go pretty esoteric before you hit a procedure you couldn't perform there."

Jeraldine looked confused.

"So why," she said, "do you want to do this in your bedroom instead of there? I mean, not that I mind being in your bedroom, but I got the impression that you really want to do an examination for real."

Sona walked up so close to Jeraldine that she had to tilt her head back to keep eye contact with the warrior woman.

"Because," she said, "if I ever need to know in a hurry what's normal for you, I won't have a superbly equipped infirmary nearby. If I have that, I'll have all the time in the world to figure things out. When I have to know is when you're hurt and bleeding on a floor in some station or ship out by Neptune and I have nothing but my wits, my hands and the clothes I'm wearing. So will you please undress, lie down on the bed and let me prod you all over?"

Jeraldine's expression was somewhere in between amused, disappointed and embarrassed.

"For medical reasons?" she said.

"For medical reasons," Sona confirmed.

"All right," Jeraldine said.

Here on the ship she felt safe enough that she'd put on a tan blouse made out of plain old cotton and red leather pants instead of the trauma cloth top and pants she usually wore. She'd even left her coat in a closet in her suite, leaving her without most of her weapons and machinery. She still had a basic wearable in the form of an earring, and her belt buckle unfolded into a small but serviceable knife, but that was all.

She started to take it all off. It was surprisingly hard not to make it at least a little bit showy, but she did her best to look matter of fact about it. Once she was naked, she climbed up on the bed and lay on her back near the middle of it. Sona came crawling after her.

"Did you have to lay down so far from the edge?" Sona said. "Now I'll have to be in the bed with you rather than stand at the side."

"Is that a problem?" Jeraldine said, doing her best to sound innocent.

"I will just have to use my extensive medical training and remain professional in the face of adversity," Sona said.

Jeraldine snorted.

Sona took her wrist and felt for her pulse. She held it long enough to get a good count.

"Yow, that's slow," she said. "You are feeling all right, aren't you?"

"Well," Jeraldine said, "in fact I am feeling a little tense. If I were to relax totally my pulse would probably be even slower."

"All right," Sona said. "So I won't worry about that unless it gets really ridiculously slow. Your temperature feels pretty much normal, and your breathing is pretty much as I'd expect too. And why are you feeling tense anyway?"

"I'm stark naked in an attractive woman's bed, and she's got all her clothes on," Jeraldine said.

Sona smiled at her.

"Would you get less tense if I got naked too?"

"Probably not."

Sona quickly bent down and kissed Jeraldine very briefly.

"I won't do that yet, then," she said.

"Yet?"

"Yet."

Jeraldine laughed.

"You're a terrible tease, do you know that?"

"It's been pointed out to me before, yes."

While they were talking, Sona's hands poked, pinched and prodded at Jeraldine. Despite what it might sound like from the banter, it looked to Jeraldine like Sona was actually doing exactly the kind of examination she'd said she wanted to do. Which, paradoxically, turned her on more than if it had just been an excuse to get her into bed.

Sona sat up straight and sighed.

"This is no good," she said. "Your pulse and respiration rate are rising all the time. You have to calm down. Really."

"I don't think I can," Jeraldine said. "Self control is not really an encouraged skill among Pantariste. Sorry."

Sona suddenly straddled Jeraldine's stomach. Jeraldine could feel quite clearly that the doctor had nothing on under her white skirt. Sona quickly pulled her yellow sweater over her head. She didn't have anything on under that one either.

"I guess I'll just have to *make* you relax somehow, then" she said.

Nolan prowled the ship. While Elena swam lap after lap in the top-level pool, Karri had shut herself in the ship's workshop and Sona was busy in her suite with the muscular parahuman, Nolan walked ceaselessly from room to room. He walked through the public ones. The gym. The dining room. The sauna. The music room. The empty suites and staterooms. He nodded to the bodyguards, the chef and the two general servants that Terina had brought along. He didn't talk to them. They wouldn't have answered even if he'd tried. Which was kind of scary. A part of him wondered what kind of hold Terina held over them to make them behave like that, and another part of him fervently wished that he never find out.

By now, he'd be hopelessly lost in his online world. His castle would have fallen into disrepair, his vassals gone, his treasures stolen, his friends moved on to new adventures. He tried not to think about it, but there was so little to think about instead. There was just the ship, where all the different people were busy with all their different things. Outside, there was literally nothing. Light seconds of absolutely nothing in every direction, possibly excepting the occasional hydrogen atom or, once in a very long while, a microscopic grain of sand.

"You were a pilot, weren't you?" a voice suddenly said as he was on his way into the dining room for the fifteenth time that day. He spun around. Terina was standing in the doorway to the bar.

"Yes," he said. "I was. I lost my license long ago."

"A pity," she said. "Your record from the war says you were very good."

"Well, yeah," he said. "If I hadn't been I wouldn't have been in Elena's squad."

She came closer. There was something unpleasant about the way she looked at him. It wasn't quite predatory in the way that Jeraldine's movements were. It was something more arrogant. Something that said that he was much less than she was. A pet, perhaps. At best.

"What happened?" she said.

He shrugged. "I fucked up," he said.

"Anybody get hurt? The baselines are very afraid of getting their own people hurt, in my experience."

"No," he said. "Nobody got hurt. A few got a little scared, but no more than that. But it was enough for them to do a drug test on me, and that was that license."

"Ah," Terina said. "Was it a bad drug for flying?"

He shook his head.

"A concentration enhancer."

"I thought almost all pilots used those."

"They do," Nolan said. "But officially, there's a zero tolerance policy. No drugs and no infomorphs in cockpits. So out I went."

"Hardly sounds fair," she said. "If everybody's doing it anyway."

Recruiting, he thought. She sounds like she's recruiting.

"Well, I knew the rules," he said. "Couldn't really complain."

"Are you still a good pilot?" she asked.

"Don't know, actually," he said. "In VR I am. Why?"

"I has occured to me," she said, "that after the somewhat dramatic and obvious way in which major Kiner tried to get away with the book, we may have caught the attention of the UNHDF. While Neptune is quite far from Jupiter Station, they may still have sent a ship or two to wait for us when we arrive. In which case I'd like to have this ship under the control of a really good pilot."

"I thought it was controlled by an infomorph?" he said.

"It is," she said. "But it's only a subsapient AI, and one designed for pleasure cruises rather than combat. I'd much rather have a fully sapient combat-experienced pilot, in case something happens. Which, hopefully, it won't."

"Yeah, well, I guess it'd be something to do," he said. "What, more precisely, would you like me to do about it right now?"

"Visit the cockpit. Adjust the acceleration couch to yourself. Familiarize yourself with the VR controls. Read the ship's manual. That sort of thing. Make yourself ready to take over, if need be."

"All right," he said. "Where is the cockpit in this thing? I've been walking around a lot but I haven't seen it."

She smiled.

"Passengers aren't meant to stumble into it," she said. "It's hidden a little, and you need clearance for the door to open. I'll take you there."

She walked away, not even looking back to see if he followed.

Which he did.

A week later, Elena was working out in the gym when Karri came to see her.

"Got a moment?" Karri said, vaguely gesturing towards her own neck.

"Talk away," Elena said.

She didn't stop moving the bar up and down on the bench press machine. Karri leaned forward and checked what resistance she had it set on.

"Feeling angry?" she said.

"Just. Pushing. My. Limits," Elena forced out in between breaths.

The gym, like everything else on the ship, was about the best it was possible to get. Not that that really meant much when all you used it for was an odd session now and then, or a few intense sessions during a single voyage. The thing was designed to help you keep in shape over a significant period of time, and to that end had a dedicated subsapient AI to keep track and give advice. Elena had turned its voice outlet off.

"Made you a present," Karri said. She held up a fairly heavy and not bad-looking silver metal necklace.

"My birthday isn't yet for a few months," Elena said. "What's the occasion?"

"Had to do something," Karri said.

"Metal's all nanomachines," she thought to Elena. "Changes shape to a gun."

Elena stopped moving the bar. She sat up and held out her hand to receive the necklace. Karri gave it to her.

"Looks nice," Elena said. "Thank you."

"A *gun*?" she thought. "Where's the ammo? Or the barrel?"

"Spread out through the mass," Karri sent. "It should show up on your implants. Just send 'change' at it."

In Elena's hand, the necklace morphed into a gun. It was strange-looking, with an open framework for a handle, a smooth organic shape to it and no markings whatsoever.

"This is from the book's data?" she thought.

"I thought that was blueprints for some sort of machine?"

"It is. An example, a simple test that a stage is working. Only two shapes. Three bullets."

"I'm going to take a shower," Elena said out loud. "If you hang around we can go eat together after."

"Ok," Karri said. "I'll wait."

Elena stripped off her training clothes and walked into the large and luxurious shower stall.

"Are you still receiving?" she sent.

"Yes," Karri sent back. "Elena, if we go home with this tech we'll own the world."

"Yeah, I know. Particularly if you can really build utility fog. I was told in school that that was thermodynamically impossible, for crying out loud."

"I can. No doubt any more. But, Elena, *somebody designed this*. Somebody already *has* this tech. Scares me fucking witless."

Elena carefully shampooed her hair, rinsed and repeated. The longer she took, the longer they'd get to talk without it looking suspicious.

"Why haven't they shown themselves?"

"Book has blueprint for gate with far beyond state of the art tech. Think somebody wants to use gate, from other side."

It did make sense, when she thought about it. Somebody trapped. Somebody who possessed this insanely awesome technology, this Holy Grail of nanotech, but couldn't use it. So they sent the information out, in the hope that someone would use it and set them free.

"So do we try to just grab the tech and go home? As you say, with this we can own the world. We don't even have to go the way of patents and corporations, if we have utility fog. If we can just remake anything into anything at will and take some time to plan, we can pretty much just set up shop and rule."

"Why did Terina come?"

Elena frowned.

"What?"

"She had good position. Powerful, rich, feared. Dropped all and came with us. Why?"

She hadn't thought of that. Which didn't surprise her all that much, Karri had always been the smartest one of them.

"I give," she sent. "Why?"

"From the war, do you remember rumor of super-secret ultimate Transhumanist research station?"

"Yeah, of course, we picked up some info on that on that horror-run at Mercury. It was supposed to be staffed by uploads of all their smartest people, and hidden in some other dimens..."

She fell silent in the middle of the word.

"Fuck," she sent after a little while. "I see what you mean."

"Help her let them out?"

Elena turned the shower off and stepped into the hot-air dryer.

"Damned if I know, Karri. That's not an easy question. It could start the war all over again."

"Short war," Karri sent. "If they give us the fog, what did they *keep*?"

All dried, Elena came out from the shower and started putting on her normal clothes.

"Maybe it'd be best to let them stay where they are."

"Maybe."

"I'm starving," Elena said out loud. "Exercise, I guess. I want to eat something big with lots of meat in it."

"Glutton," Karri said.

"Just trying to stay healthy," Elena said.

"Let's talk about this later," she sent to Karri as they walked out the gym door. "I can't make my mind up right now. Got to think first. Oh, and maybe you should try and see if you can get more out of the book."

"Sure," Karri sent back. "Later."

"What do you think we'll find when we get there?" Sona said.

She was sitting on the floor in Jeraldine's room, looking out through the big panorama window at the seemingly motionless stars outside. The window was looking out the side of the ship, so she couldn't see in the direction they were going. Not that it mattered much. At the speed they were traveling at, every direction looked pretty much the same to her: lots and lots of blackness with lots and lots of little glowing pinpricks in it. Out here, there were far too many stars for her to be able to pick out any of the star signs she knew from back home.

"Out where?" Jeraldine said.

She was lying on her side on the bed, watching Sona. They were both naked, and a certain scent of sex permeated the room.

"Neptune, of course," Sona said. "Where else?"

"Oh, right," Jeraldine said. "I don't know. I'm just a stupid grunt. I don't think about things like that. I just kick ass and shoot the hell out of."

Sona turned her head and looked at Jeraldine.

"Aren't you even curious?"

"Military life, baby," Jeraldine said. "You learn not to be."

"You seemed to be when we were on Earth."

There was a pause before Jeraldine replied.

"I was on my own then," she said. "Now I have Terina."

"Was she a friend of yours during the war?"

"We never even met until several years after the way. But she's an Alkaia. They were always the ones who thought. The planners and deciders. We Pantariste just went where they told us and killed what they told us to kill."

Jeraldine frowned a little.

"Old habits die hard, I guess. And that was the way I was brought up."

Sona looked thoughtfully at her.

"Do you like it like that?" she said. "I mean, you've tried being on your own, so you know what that's like too."

"Never really thought about it. I guess I did like it or I'd never have stayed on Earth for as long."

Sona got up and joined Jeraldine on the bed.

"So you never even thought about what will happen when we get to Neptune?" she said. "Not even a little?"

"Not even a little," Jeraldine said. "Either we'll find something, or we won't. In the process of finding or not finding, somebody's ass may need kicking. Which I will then do. It's all very simple, really."

"You are a strange one," Sona said. "I can't imagine not being at all curious. It's just not in my nature."

Jeraldine looked curiously at her.

"How do you know?" she said. "What is and isn't in your nature, I mean."

Sona frowned.

"What do you mean how do I know?"

"If I want to know what's in my nature, I check the design specs and the field deployment records of my sisters. How do *you* do it?"

Sona fell silent for a bit.

"That designed bit still weirds me out, you know," she said.

"Well, at least you know where to send any complaints," Jeraldine said. "Or, I guess, you would have known if the designers hadn't been killed."

Sona got up from the floor and stood next to the bed, looking at Jeraldine.

"Hm...", she said. "No, I can't find anything to complain about."

Jeraldine stretched herself a bit.

"Well," she said. "Maybe if you investigate a bit more closely?"

Terina lay in an acceleration couch in her control room, a thick cable snaking from her neck to a connector in the couch. It was a small room, hidden away near the bottom of the ship, in between the four large Casimir engines that powered it. From it, she had overriding connections to all the ship's systems. From it, she could monitor and control every aspect of the ship itself.

It annoyed her that she couldn't control more. She could tell that Elena and Karri were communicating privately, via implant-based communicators. She could even see and follow the signals. What she couldn't do, or at least couldn't do with the resources available to her on the ship, was to crack their code and hear what they were saying.

But she could see what Karri was doing in the workshop, locked door to it or not. She could get copies of the data from the instruments there, replicas of the plans and instructions sent to the assemblers. She could see what was being built, and she could make copies. Next to her couch lay a necklace exactly like the one Elena had recently taken to wearing. In Terina's databanks subsapient infomorphs were poring over the building instructions for it, preparing modifications and countermeasures. Terina could see signs of late-war Transhumanist front-line research in some of the techniques used, even though they here were very much more refined and advanced.

Not eighty year's worth of more refined and advanced, though. So either this was old technology, and the infomorphs in Ascension Point had plans for much more advanced things ready to use once they were let out, or something had gone wrong in there and this was as far as they'd come in all this time. Terina hoped for the former. And she hoped that she'd be able to get them out.

Towards that end, she'd almost certainly have to do something about Elena. The old commando was the one most likely to object to releasing a group of Transhumanists with access to unknown powers. Jeraldine would do as she was told. The little doctor was kept busy and content by the Pantariste's usual randiness. Nolan lay in the pilot's couch, totally lost in the fabricated realities she'd given him under the guise of being pilot training material. Karri was a bit of a wild card, but Terina needed her until she felt confident that she could build the machine to open Ascension Point without the technician's help.

Elena had no use to her, and posed something of a threat. Terina's bodyguards should be able to defeat her in a straight battle, since they had the same kinds of modifications. But anything that obvious would immediately turn at least Karri against her. So something else would have to be done.

She regretted not having built safeguards into Elena while she had her in the tank back at triple-S. But there hadn't been time, hadn't been opportunity. Something else would have to be done.

Methodically, she looked through her drug database.

Chapter 6: Neptune

"Where do you start?" Sona said. "I mean, I know it's only a single planet and its moons, but that's pretty darn big when you come right down to it. Particularly when you don't really know what you're looking for."

They had all gathered in the dining hall. It took up almost half of one level of the ship, and three whole walls of it were transparent. In empty space, this had been mildly interesting. With the ship hovering above Neptune, it was spectacular. The huge methane-blue orb hung outside, covering more than half the visible sky. In the distance beyond it, the planet's fragmentary rings glinted darkly against the total black of space. Terina had turned down the internal lights, and their meal was mainly lit by the weak and ghostly reflected light from the gas giant.

"We have at least one clue," Terina said.

"We do?" Sona said. "Did I miss something?"

To celebrate their safe arrival in the Neptunian system, Terina had had the chef prepare a full seven-course meal for them, complete with suitable wines from the ship's wine cellar. They'd ate their way through meticulously recreated seafood, fowl and meat dishes, and were now rounding it all off with a rich chocolate mousse.

"The name of the book," Terina said. "The Proteus Manuscript. One of Neptune's moons is called Proteus."

"Of course," Elena said. "Obviously."

"Cool," Sona said. "Is there anything interesting on that moon?"

"No," Karri said.

"Your taciturn friend is quite correct," Terina said. "There is nothing of interest on Proteus. It's a dark, cold place orbiting too close to Neptune to be healthy but too far away to be useful. I think there are still remains of a gas-mining operation from pre-Casimir days, but that's about it."

"Sounds like a perfect place to hide something," Jeraldine said.

"Yes and no," Terina said. "If you need a huge blob of mass, yes, it is. If you don't, space is better, particularly a relatively dirty part like a gas giant system. You could hide pretty much anything in orbit out here and nobody'd ever find it."

"That doesn't sound very promising for us," Sona said.

"Apart from that hint, we have one more advantage," Terina said.

"Yes?" Sona said.

"Whoever created and sent that book wants to be found."

"Not by just anybody," Karri said. "So answer is in book."

"Exactly," Terina said. "So the question becomes, how are you doing with the book, Karri?"

Karri took another spoonful of the mousse.

"Proceeding," she said. "Not done yet. Very tricky stuff."

"I see," Terina said. "Do you have any idea what we will be looking for?"

Karri kept eating for a few moments.

"Patch of empty space," she said just before somebody else got impatient enough to say something. "Emitting blackbody radiation. Should look like that, I think."

"Thank you," Terina said. "I'll have the ship's systems keep a sensor out for that. Do you have a guess as to when you'll have the machine ready to use? Is there anything we can do to help get it finished?"

Karri looked at Elena.

"Yeah, about that," Elena said. "Are we sure it's a good idea to turn the machine on? I mean, we really have no idea what will happen. It might be something bad."

"Bad how?"

Elena shrugged. "It might be a trap of some kind," she said. "I don't know."

"If it's a trap they sure used very complicated bait," Terina said. "No, I really don't see a problem here. We build the machine, we get access to the treasure. We go home rich."

Elena sighed.

"Yeah," she said. "I guess we do."

"Three days," Karri said. "Machine'll be ready then."

Elena spent the next two days training like crazy. She swam lap after lap in the top-level pool. She worked her muscles in the gym until she almost cried from exhaustion. She ran, up and down the wide, decorated stairwell that reached from the top to the bottom of the ship. She wasn't sure why she was doing it. Her body had readjusted to the implants already, she was in as good a shape as she'd ever been.

Maybe it was just a way to keep herself busy. Karri was building the machine. Nolan was jacked into the ship. Sona and Jeraldine kept to themselves in Jeraldine's suite, where Elena's imagination was much too eager to visualize what they might be doing for her peace of mind. Terina... Elena had no idea what Terina was doing. She'd vanish from sight entirely for entire half days, coming back looking tired and worn but pretending not to be. The parahuman was doing *something*, and it worried Elena that she obviously didn't want them to know about it. She didn't get any less worried when Karri called her down to the workshop on the second day after the arrival dinner.

She came into the workshop panting and sweaty. Karri's call had come while she was running up and down the stairs, and she hadn't bothered to shower and change. She dropped into a chair.

"What's the deal?" she said. She frowned when she saw that Karri had put her encrypted implant communicator on.

"The machine," Karri sent. "Know what it does."

"I guess it's not good?" Elena sent back.

"Builds utility fog," Karri sent. "As a start. Uses it to assemble something even smaller-scale. Picotech, I guess. Not quite physical. Looks way more powerful than the fog."

"Let me get this straight," Elena sent. "Utility fog can take any random atoms and rearrange them into whatever you like, and this things builds stuff that is more powerful than that? What does it do? Change the laws of physics?"

"Yes."

Elena stared at her.

"You're shitting me."

Karri shook her head.

"Haven't built it yet, so some guesswork. But seems that it adjusts basic physical constants, on sub-nano scale. Does things normally impossible."

"And all this to get at something the Transhumanists left at the end of the war? How the fuck did they *put* it there back then? If they'd had stuff like this available, no way we'd ever have won."

"Not just to get at it," Karri sent. "Both fog and super-fog ideal substrates for infomorphs. Gate thing downloads data from para-dimension."

"Data?" Elena frowned. "Infomorphs?"

"What else? Gets control of super-fog."

"Holy fuck."

Elena got up from the chair.

"We can't turn this thing on," she sent. "What if they start the war again? We couldn't fight something like that."

"Could turn it on, send blueprints to UNHDF. Both sides, equal tech."

Elena laughed out loud.

"UNHDF! Like I'd want *those* fuckers to have something like this!"

Karri looked her in the eyes.

"Then who?" she sent. "Info's here. Keep it to ourselves? Terina won't. You want to kill her? Jeraldine won't like, so Sona won't like. Would you trust Nolan with super-fog? Me?"

Elena closed her eyes and groaned.

"Karri, I can't make a decision like this," she sent.

"Ain't nobody else, lieutenant," Karri sent. "Me, I'm just a grunt."

She took something from a bench and tossed it to Elena, who caught it. It was a rounded-off shiny metal cylinder, about as long as Elena's palm was wide. It had a seam near the middle.

"What's this?" she sent.

"Universal disassembler," Karri sent back. "Gray goo. Open it, eats the ship in an hour. Kill us all."

"Fuck, Karri!"

Karri shrugged.

"An option," she sent. "You decide."

Jacked in to the ship's systems, Terina watched the two baselines talk in secret. She'd seen the plans for what Karri was building. She'd seen the picotech parts, and even if she was a biochemist she knew more than enough physics to understand what it represented. If her sisters and friends in Ascension Point came out into the normal universe, they'd come as gods. It made Terina wish she had uploading equipment on the ship, so she could give herself a body like that. To get that kind of power.

And while Karri had done the development of the thing she gave to Elena on an isolated system, it wasn't hard to guess that it was some kind of weapon. Probably something that would take out herself, and possibly Jeraldine, without damaging the others. She could sympathize with that. If she'd been one of them, she wouldn't have wanted herself to have that technology either.

But she wasn't them. She was herself. She was one of the last of her species, and if she wanted that species to go on, she had to win over them. There just was no other option. Simple survival of the fittest. They would try to kill her, she would try to kill them, and those who more deserved to live would.

She opened a voice connection to Jeraldine's suite.

"Jeraldine?" she said. "Terina here. Can I see you alone in the music room for a few moments?"

While it didn't have a lot of other people present like Nolan's usual games, the ship's VR controls were actually not an entirely bad substitute. He'd be feeling different, the ship's exterior sensors and inputs mapped onto his own sensorium. The ship also processed the raw data for him, so he could see projected orbits rather than just masses and movement vectors.

"Hey, dude, I think there's something interesting coming up here," one of the ship subsapient said.

That was another thing that made it nice. The ship had several subsapient AIs that ran things, and most of them had pretty good personality simulators. While not actually people, he could sometimes forget for hours that they weren't. It eased the longing for his realms back on Earth.

"Interesting how?" he said. "There's nothing but rocks out here."

"Yeah, well, this ain't no rock," the subsapient said. "It's kind a bit of empty space that's radiating like a 447 Kelvin blackbody."

"So?"

"So, that's not something that appears in nature, usually. And it's what Karri said to look for, isn't it?"

"Oh, right, it is," Nolan said.

"Should I announce it?" the AI said.

Wait a minute, Nolan thought. We *found* it! That means we can do whatever it is we're going to do to open it, and then we can go home!

"No," he said. "I'll do that myself."

He flicked the virtual switches that connected his voice to the ship's real-life communications systems.

"Hey, guys!" he said. "We found the place! Bring out your fabulous machines and let's get rocking!"

Elena walked the stairs all the way from the workshop up to the pool. They were covered with thick blue carpet, which was held into place with highly polished brass rods at the sides. She walked up right next to the diamond dome, where it looked like she might fall over the edge and drop all the way down into the blue gas giant below them. Where they would fall, if she opened the little container in her hand and the nanomachines ate the engines. They'd stop their ceaseless pushing against nothing, Neptune's gravity would win and they'd fall. Or maybe they'd end up in an orbit around it somehow. She wasn't familiar enough with orbital mechanics to say.

She still hadn't made her mind up. That Karri had boiled it all down to such a simple choice only made it harder. If it had been choosing between trying to take out Jeraldine and Terina, she'd had to do things like evaluating chances and ponder tactics. There would be many more things to think of. But now? One simple choice. Do you open the container or not? Do you open the vial of nanotechnological death?

Would it hurt when the microscopic machines took you apart an atom at a time?

The lift doors swished open. Elena turned towards them.

"Hi," Sona said. She stepped out of the lift dressed in a light white dress, barefoot and happy.

"Oh," Elena said. "Hi."

Can you kill your old girlfriend?

"What are you doing?" Sona said. "You look kind of down."

"Just thinking," Elena said.

"Yeah, that usually brings you down," Sona said. "Old war stuff again?"

"Kind of. Aren't you with Jeraldine?"

"Terina wanted to see her about something urgent," Sona said. "So I thought I'd walk around a little. Stretch my legs a bit."

"Urgent," Elena said. "I wonder what that could be about."

She wondered how safe hers and Karri's communication really was. If Terina had heard what they said to each other, she almost certainly would try to kill them all. And she'd want Jeraldine to do it for her, almost certainly.

"Don't know," Sona said. "She didn't say. Hey, can you see that glowing spot of space from here?"

"No," Elena said. "It only glows in the infrared."

"Pity. I'd like to see it."

"Sona," Elena said. "Do you think the Transhumanists deserve a second chance?"

"What?" Sona looked confused.

"You know the war against them was a setup. That they never deserved what they got. If you had the chance to give them a second chance, to start the war all over again in a way where *they'd* almost certainly win, would you do it?"

Sona looked out into space.

"No," she said. "The war was wrong, but so would another war be. Two wrongs don't make a right."

Two wrongs don't make a right. So no war. No opening the gate. Which meant stopping Terina and Jeraldine, at the least.

She could always give it a shot, before she killed them all. If she could get rid of the parahumans, she and Karri could take care of the secrets themselves.

"Here," she said. She threw the little metal container to Sona.

"What is it?" Sona said.

"Something Karri made for me," Elena said. "I'm going down to see Terina. If I'm not back in ten minutes or so, would you please open that for me?"

"I guess," Sona said. "Why?"

Elena smiled wryly.

"If I told you, it'd spoil the surprise," she said. "Oh, and also open it if Jeraldine shows up, will you?"

"I will," Sona said.

"Thanks," Elena said. "I'll be back in a little while."

This time, she took the lift down.

"They don't trust us," Terina said.

She was sitting at the grand piano in the music room. It was a marvelous instrument. Like so much else in the ship, it had been assembled atom by atom in a nano-assembler bath. This particular bath had been in Yamaha's most modern factory in Japan, and every last molecule of the piano had been specifically designed to produce the most perfect sound possible.

Too bad she couldn't play. She could tell that the thing produced notes of a clarity and precision she'd never heard from any other piano, and she'd very much like to hear what proper music from it sounded. Maybe she should start taking lessons, when they returned home.

If they returned home.

"Who doesn't?" Jeraldine said. She stood leaning against the piano, dressed in nothing but a tank top and a pair of shorts.

"Elena and Karri," Terina said. "They've been using covert communication between them, and Karri has been building machines disconnected from the ship's systems and using them to build things that I don't know what they are."

"You've been monitoring them?"

"Of course I've been monitoring them. I don't trust them either. The difference is, I've only been keeping an eye on them while they have been acting against us."

Jeraldine grimaced.

"At least Sona isn't in on anything," she said. "I'm quite sure of that."

"Yes," Terina said. "I can see how you would be. Pity that it wasn't Elena you kept busy like that."

Jeraldine looked sideways at her.

"That's not why I've been with Sona," she said. "I actually like her."

"Oh, of course you do," Terina said. "It's just that things might have been easier if you'd liked Elena."

She smiled at Jeraldine.

"Just wishful thinking on my part, dear," she said. "No criticism implied."

"Anyway she's not in on anything."

"Nor is poor Nolan," Terina said. "But I do fear we will have to do something about Elena and Karri, or they may prevent us from saving our trapped relatives."

"Don't we need them?"

"Not any more," Terina said. "I've been keeping close track of what Karri's been doing in the workshop. She was essentially done two days ago. What remains is basically just a matter of activating the device."

Jeraldine frowned.

"But at the dinner she said she had three days to go."

"Yes. She lied."

"Damn!"

"Indeed. What's worse, I think Elena has a weapon that Karri made for her with that assembler I can't monitor. I suspect it's made to take out us specifically, since we're their only possible opponents. I would prefer to strike before they do."

Jeraldine jumped up and sat on the edge of the piano.

"I can't believe it," she said. "They always seemed to friendly."

Terina raised her eyebrow at her.

"You've known them for, what, three weeks now?" she said. "Not very long."

"I guess, but still. They never seemed hostile."

Terina ran her finger along the piano keys, then shivered at the resulting sound.

"They are the enemy, Jeraldine," she said. "An infocommando and her weapons tech. You know as well as I do what the likes of them did to us during the war."

"Yeah, I know. It's just... I thought all that was over."

Terina shook her head.

"It's never over," she said. "Not as long as both we and they live. As a group, we are better than them. Not because of what we've made ourself, not because of any way in which we've improved ourselves, but because of what we are *willing* to do. They try to adapt to circumstances by modifying individuals, by giving them implants and surgically rebuilding their muscles. But they aren't ready to go all the way, not ready to redefine human. We are ready to build a person for a task. They are not. Given time, we will always out-compete them, for where they have somebody changed and rebuilt for a task we have someone *born* to that task. So in order to survive as a culture, they must not allow us to have any time. They must kill us all."

She looked up at Jeraldine.

"I'd rather we didn't let them," she said.

Jeraldine jumped down from the piano again.

"Do you trust your bodyguards to protect you while I try to take Elena?" she said. "They are baseline, I mean. They might change sides."

Terina smiled. It wasn't a nice smile.

"No, they won't," she said. "They'll protect my life with their own."

"All right. Do you want me to stay until they get here?"

Terina shook her head.

"They can be here in seconds," she said. "I just didn't want them to hear this conversation. You go do what you need to do."

Jeraldine nodded and left.

Three bullets, Elena thought as she stepped out of the lift. Three bullets was all she had to take down two Amazons, one of them a Pantariste. It wasn't nearly enough. At least not for any kind of fight resembling a fair one. She'd have to try to take them both by surprise, and then deal with Terina's bodyguards as well as she could. She didn't think they'd be a problem, really. Terina had some kind of hold over them, and Elena had found over the course of the journey that whatever it was left the two old commandos a little slow. Not much, but enough that Elena was confident that she could beat them both. Even if the fight was fair.

She grabbed the necklace Karri had given her and ordered it to change. The thing squirmed strangely in her hand, and a few seconds later she held a small pistol.

She drew a deep breath, turned to enter the music room and found herself face to face with Jeraldine.

"Ship," Terina said after Jeraldine had left. "Get me Nolan."

"Yes?" Nolan's voice said after a little while.

"We're getting ready to turn the machine on," she said. "Could you please maneuver the ship so that the emitting space is centered on the ship's workshop?"

"Certainly," he said. "It shouldn't take more than a few minutes, I think. It's in orbit, though, so we will lose gravity while we're tracking it."

"Yes," Terina said. "We will. No matter. The ship should cover the pool and take care of most other things necessary for that. It'll just confuse us humans for a while."

"I'll make an announcement before I start maneuvering," Nolan said. "So people won't get taken by surprise."

"Don't bother with that," Terina said. "I'll take care of it. You just concentrate on flying."

"All right," he said. "Thanks."

There was a soft chime as the connection was broken.

"No," Terina said to the empty air. "Thank *you*."

She looked up from the piano. Her two bodyguards had entered the room and were discreetly standing a few meters away from her.

Terina stood up and turned to them.

"Let's go see a weapons tech about turning on a machine," she said.

For a few moments they just stood there, looking at each other. Jeraldine cursed inwardly when she saw the weapon in Elena's hand. Really not any kind of pistol she'd ever seen before, which kind of fitted what Terina had said about a special anti-parahuman weapon. Adrenaline flooded into her bloodstream, and she felt herself slide into involuntary overdrive. Which was good, since that meant she didn't have to take the time to go into it voluntarily.

Elena's gun hand started rising. Fast. Very fast, much faster than any ordinary human. Not quite fast enough to get by Jeraldine. She hit the gun backhanded. It flew aside, hitting the wall and bouncing away somewhere. At the same time as she hit the gun, Jeraldine turned and kicked Elena in the stomach, sending her tumbling away down the hallway. She tumbled and landed just in front of the stairs, on her feet.

Again, they looked at each other. Jeraldine dared a brief look to the side. The gun was lying right there, under a small table with a lamp on it. She dove for it at the same instant Elena jumped towards her, hands stretched out to grab. She tried to kick Elena in the face when she landed, but the commando dodged and managed to grab Jeraldine's leg instead.

Which would've been a problem if Jeraldine hadn't managed to grab the gun right then. It felt like a perfectly ordinary pistol, except for being very light. But it had a handle, a trigger and a barrel. While Elena tried to twist her knee in a direction it wasn't meant to go, Jeraldine bent at the waist, stretched her arm out and fired straight into Elena's neck from less than a handspan away.

The entire front part of the neck tore apart. Where the throat had been there was nothing but a ragged hole, with blood fountaining from below and wet gurgling coming from the exposed windpipe. Elena's hands went to her throat. The look on her face was surprised more than anything else. Her lips moved for a few seconds, as if she tried to say something. Then her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell lifeless to the floor.

Slowly, Jeraldine came down from her overdrive. Her lungs burned and her heart raced like crazy. It was an effort just to drag herself away from the corpse, and when she tried to stand her right knee didn't hold her weight. She leaned against the wall, gun still in her hand and Elena's blood all over her.

Well, so much for the hard part. Not at all like she'd planned, but she was alive while her enemy wasn't, so planning be damned. She wished she'd had her trauma cloth pants on to deal with the knee, but that was no big deal. Her knee would heal, which was more than could be said for Elena's throat. And she should be able to easily take Karri out even with a busted knee. The small woman might be a wizard with machinery, but she was nothing beyond normal in a fight. Probably would be a good idea to take care of her as soon as possible, actually, to make it more of a stand-up fight and less of a siege. If Karri found out what was going on and got a chance to barricade herself in the workshop, things could get unpleasant. With all the stuff she had in there, she could live there for months.

Jeraldine hobbled down the stairs, leaving progressively less distinct bloody handprints on the railing.

Sona abruptly stood up when she heard the gunshot.

She'd been sitting in one of pool loungers, which she'd turned outwards so she got a good view of Neptune. The sight of the gas giant fascinated her, and she never seemed to get tired of watching the cloud streamers on its visible surface slowly change.

Could it really have been a gunshot? She wasn't sure if they even had guns aboard the ship. No, that wasn't true, she knew there was. Jeraldine had at least two in her coat. As far as Sona knew, Elena might have one or more as well. They were fighter types, they liked to have that kind of thing around.

But why would either of them use weapons aboard the ship? They were all here together, working for a common cause.

The cause of getting insanely rich, though. And she supposed it wasn't entirely impossible that someone had decided they didn't want to share the riches.

Elena had gone to see Terina. She'd said she might not be back in ten minutes, but what if she'd meant she might not be back at all. What if she'd found out that Terina intended to do something bad, tried to talk to her about it and got killed for it? Terina had those two bodyguards, who were as augmented as Elena. Maybe *they* had been the ones to shoot.

Sona looked at the little metal cylinder that lay in the lounge where she'd been sitting. Elena had said to open it if she didn't return in ten minutes or so.

Insurance of some kind?

"Ship," Sona said. "Get me a connection to Elena."

"Trying," the ship said after a few seconds. She'd never heard it do that before. "Trying. Trying."

"Come on!" Sona whispered. "Answer, damn you!"

"Passenger Arden does not seem to be responding," the ship said.

"Can you tell where she is?"

"Passenger Arden is lying in front of the stairs going from level eight to level nine," the ship said.

"Is she all right?"

"Hallway sensors can not determine health status, but cameras indicate a substantial amount of blood on the carpet."

Sona went cold. That was about as wrong as things could get, as far as she could tell from here.

"Get the lift up here," she said. "I'm going down."

She grabbed the metal container Elena had given her and twisted it open. If Elena wanted it opened if something went wrong, Sona would trust that she had a good reason for it.

There was a thick, viscous liquid inside the container. When she pulled its halves apart, the liquid slowly poured onto the lounge. It looked pale grey and had a strange sheen to it, almost like mother of pearl.

The lift chimed to indicate its arrival. Sona dropped the two halves of the container and ran for the lift.

"Karri," Terina said. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Karri looked up. She was sitting on a bare metal stool, in the center of a circle of projection displays. What Terina could see of them looked like gibberish to her.

"Sure," Karri said. She looked at the two bodyguards flanking Terina, but didn't say anything.

"It has come to my attention," Terina said. "That you have been a little less than honest about how far your work with the book's machine has proceeded."

"Yes," Karri said.

Terina was slightly taken aback. She hadn't expected the technician to admit to it that readily.

"Why?" she said.

"Doubt."

Terina frowned. "Doubt? About what?"

"You. The book. The gate. Things, generally."

"All right," Terina said. "I can see how all those would be worth some thinking. But you are ready to turn the machine on now, I hope?"

The ship lurched. It suddenly felt like the floor leaned sharply towards one wall, and the gravity fell to less than half of normal. Karri had to stand up abruptly to keep from falling off her stool.

"That's Nolan maneuvering," Terina said. "He's bringing the active zone right in here."

"Just one question," Karri said.

"Yes?"

"What's on the other side of the gate?"

"What makes you think I know?"

"You came here. Must be important to you."

For a moment, Terina considered denying it. That she'd come along only for the promise of technology inherent in the book. But there really was no point. Karri would see through it at once.

"My sisters," she said. "My sisters are in there. They was trapped there, at the end of the war."

Karri nodded. "Thought it was something like that," she said. She reached out a hand and touched a control surface on a console near her. A fraction of a second later, the door to the workshop slammed shut. Somewhere in the room, a whistling sound started.

"What are..." Terina said. When she got that far into the sentence, her ears popped from lowered pressure and she understood exactly what Karri was doing.

"Kill her!" she said. "Kill her *now!*"

Her two bodyguards fired almost simultaneously. The bullets from the large-caliber handguns slammed into Karri and threw her body off the chair and through the room like a rag doll, trailing streamers of blood. Terina ran towards the control console. There must be a way to stop the air from being vented into space, to open the door and get out of here.

One of the bodyguards ran up to Karri to make sure she was dead. The other one stayed at the door and tried to get it to open. She kept pressing the control surface next to it, over and over again, as if she might somehow convince it to work by sheer weight of repetition. Terina decided to have her replaced, as soon as they got back to civilization.

The console Karri had used to spring the trap felt hot and none of the control surfaces on it worked. Terina frowned at it. Had the baseline somehow keyed it to herself?

Smoke started leaking out around the edges of the console panels, smoke that smelled of burnt electronics. The air in the room was getting thin, and she had to make an effort to get enough air into her lungs.

Frantically, she tore at a maintenance panel in the console. Surely Karri couldn't have been *that* determined to not open the gate?

The panel opened. Smoke billowed out, followed by a few flames that quickly died in the thinning air. Terina's head swam. Karri had been that determined. Rather than open the gate, she'd killed herself along with Terina.

Terina looked around, panic closing in. There must be something to breathe, some way to live long enough for help to arrive! Every room in the ship as supposed to have emergency bubbles in them, where would they be in here? Near the door?

She looked towards the door. Her bodyguard stood there, a small door in the wall open next to her. Inside the door was a large sign with very clearly printed instructions on how to put an emergency bubble on. In the bodyguard's hands were plastic ribbons that had used to be the bubbles.

Her vision was failing. Blackness was closing in from the sides. She could see the bodyguard's mouth move, but no sound reached her. Her ears had stopped popping. Her mouth tasted of blood.

No air left. Nothing to breathe. She could live for twenty or thirty seconds on the oxygen already in her blood. No, probably less, she hadn't been breathing proper air for the last couple of minutes.

The blackness closed in. At the very end, she felt like she was floating.

When the ship suddenly accelerated in a new direction, Jeraldine put all her weight on her bad knee, which promptly buckled and made her fall uncontrolledly towards the wall that was suddenly down. She hit it quite hard, and ended up lying in the corner between the wall and the floor. Slowly, the floor returned to being a floor again. Jeraldine cursed and got back up on her feet.

Something was not right with the ship, but that was hardly news. She hobbled on towards the workshop, and after a few more minutes she got there.

The door to it was closed and locked. More than locked, actually. When she tried the door control she didn't even get the red 'denied' light. She banged on the door, just on general principles, but got no response.

"Computer, give me voice contact with the workshop," she said.

"Unable to comply," the ship said.

"What? Why?"

"The workshop's systems are no longer connected to the main ship systems."

Jeraldine groaned. So it was to be a siege, then.

"Computer, can you say anything about what's going on in there?"

"All human activity has ceased. Air pressure is negligible."

What the fuck?

"Who are in there?"

"Known to be present in the workshop are owner Heidebrink, passenger Bozych, staff bodyguard 1 and staff bodyguard 2."

Jeraldine deflated like a punctured balloon. She sank slowly to the floor.

"Ship, can you detect any life signs in there?"

"The workshop's systems are no longer connected to the main ship systems."

She tried to think of something to do. Opening the door would be suicide as long as the workshop was depressurized. Before she could do that, she'd have to figure out which way it had been vented, block the vent and fill it with air again. Then she could try to break the door open.

It would take hours, at best. Even if Terina was in a vacuum suit, Jeraldine would have to be lucky to get the workshop under pressure before Terina ran out of air. And she could see no reason why Terina would've brought a vacuum suit to visit Karri. It must have been a trap.

She got up again, using her arms and her good leg, and started working her way towards her room. It seemed all plans were off, and she badly wanted her work clothes and her coat.

Elena was lying where the ship had said, face down, in front of the stairs to the level below. She was quite dead. Sona had seen enough dead patients to tell even from a distance. There was far too much blood on the floor for any other alternative.

Just to make sure, she knelt at her friend's side to check for her pulse. A point which quickly became moot when the entire part of the neck where the pulse point should've been was missing. With that much gone, Elena's brain would've lost blood pressure and consciousness in seconds.

She felt strange inside. Everything felt distant. Unreal. As if she was dreaming, although she knew she wasn't. She stroked Elena's hair.

"Farewell," she whispered. "Wherever you are now, I hope your nightmares didn't come with you."

She stood up. She had to see someone. Tell someone.

Karri.

There was no alternative, really. The technician was in many ways Elena's closest friend, and even if she had a nearly violent aversion to making decisions she might at least give Sona enough advice for her to make them.

Determined, Sona set off towards the workshop.

Maneuvering the ship so the radiating piece of space coincided with the ship's workshop turned out to be trickier than he'd thought. Yes, the piece of space was orbiting. But it wasn't quite orbiting like a piece of mass would. It completed an orbit around Neptune in exactly the time it should, but in the course of that orbit it moved a little too slow at times and a little too fast at other times. Which made for some really interesting flying to keep up with it.

It was the most fun Nolan had had in *years*.

You never got flying like this in a commercial liner. In the military, yes, he'd often pulled insane stunts of various kinds in order to get Elena and the gang undetected to places where people didn't want them to be. That had kept him interested. Commercial flying, on the other hand, had bored him out of his skull.

Literally.

"Communications failure on level two," the ship's main voice said. That voice wasn't very interesting, all flat and businesslike. He wished he could reset it to something more interesting, but apparently that was against some regulation or other. He'd have to ask Karri to do it for him.

"Self-repair systems unable to compensate," the ship went on. "Failure is spreading. Failure is approaching pilot's station."

What the fuck?

"Ship, what's causing the failure?"

"Unknown. Failure is spreading. Pilot station may lose contact with ship systems within one minute."

"But that's me!"

"Yes," the ship said. "Pilot is strongly recommended to leave primary station and move to backup station."

"Like hell," Nolan said. "I've worked hard to keep this orbit, and I'll stay with it until Karri or Elena says we don't need it any longer."

"Communications failure on level three," the ship said. "Failure is spreading faster than anticipated. Pilot is *strongly* recommended to leave pilot's station *now*."

"Fuck you! I'm staying!"

Everything around him went black. All his VR inputs vanished, leaving him in a completely empty virtual void. He could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing. He screamed his frustration into the darkness. He ranted and raved at the ship. He ordered it to come back, to give him back his control.

He kept the screaming up right to the point where a sudden searing pain came and took everything away.

Jeraldine was on her way up the stairs when she met Sona coming down. They both stopped and looked at each other.

"Elena's dead," Sona said, after a little while. Her eyes were looking a bit lower than Jeraldine's face, and under the circumstances Jeraldine suspected it was the large bloodstains on her shirt rather than her chest that she was looking at.

"I know," Jeraldine said. "She came after me with a gun. I defended myself. Managed to get the gun from her and got a shot off. Mostly luck, really."

"Why?" Sona said.

"Why what?"

"Why did she come after you?"

"Not sure," Jeraldine said. "I think she and Karri didn't trust Terina, and me by extension. Karri and Terina are dead too, as far as I can tell."

"Oh," Sona said. She looked shocked.

"Look," Jeraldine said. "Elena busted up my knee pretty bad. I'd like to get back to my suite and do something about it. Wouldn't mind some help in getting there."

"Elena attacked you first?" Sona said.

"Yes, she did," Jeraldine said. "Admittedly, I was on my way to get my combat gear in order to confront her about she and Karri building weapons and lying about the book's machine being finished. But she *did* attack me before I got around to attacking her."

Sona climbed the few steps down to where Jeraldine was standing. She put an arm around the parahuman's waist, and Jeraldine put hers across Sona's shoulders. They started climbing up the stairs, Jeraldine leaning rather heavily on Sona.

"Fuckheads," Sona said. "You're all damn paranoid fuckheads."

"Can't really argue with you there," Jeraldine said. They reached the next level up and set off down the hallway to Jeraldine's suite.

"What was that about weapons and the machine?" Sona said.

"Terina told me," Jeraldine said. "Karri had finished the machine but lied about it at the dinner. She'd also built some kind of weapon, she said. Which I guess was that funny little gun Elena tried to shoot me with."

"Weapon?"

"Yeah. Terina made it sound like a big deal, but I guess she didn't know everything."

They reached the suite, and Jeraldine hobbled over to her wardrobe. She took out her black trauma cloth pants.

"Aren't you going to clean yourself up first?" Sona said. "You'll get half-dried blood all over those."

"I just want to put one leg on long enough to get some painkiller and stuff into the knee," she said. She sat down on a nearby chair and started to do that.

The ship shook.

Both Sona and Jeraldine looked first up, then out the window. Outside, Neptune was rapidly moving across the sky.

"That's not good, is it?" Sona said.

"Can't see how it could be," Jeraldine said. "Ship, what's happening?"

"Control circuits have been damaged," the ship's voice said. "Self-repair systems are trying to compensate."

"Damaged? How?"

"Unknown."

"Um, Jeraldine?" Sona said.

"Yes?"

"I don't think that gun was the weapon Terina was talking about."

Jeraldine frowned. "So what was?"

"Ship," Sona said, "can we get a video feed from the top deck?"

A projection display flickered into existence. On it, they could see the top deck with a huge hole where the pool had used to be. Through it, they could see a similar but smaller one in the level below.

"Before she went down to see Terina, and I guess encountered you on the way, she gave me a small container to open in case she didn't come back," Sona said. "I opened it after I heard the gunshot."

"Damn," Jeraldine said. "What is that? Some kind of disassembler?"

"Don't know," Sona said. "Can those do that?"

"Don't think so, but there was supposed to be all kinds of new stuff in the book, wasn't there?"

They could see the hole growing while they watched. It wouldn't be long before it reached the diamond dome.

"Ship," Sona said. "We're about to get punctured. Please close all pressure doors you have."

"Pressure doors closed."

They stood there looking at the display for a little while.

"Ship, cut video feed," Jeraldine finally said. "I don't want to see that thing."

The display vanished.

Sona lay down on the bed.

"There's nothing we can do, is there?" she said.

Jeraldine lay down next to her.

"There's an escape pod," she said. "But it was on level two."

Sona turned over on her side and put her head on Jeraldine's shoulder.

"Even we could get to it, where would we go?" she said.

"There's a habitat around here somewhere," Jeraldine said. "Astropolis. I visited it once. Don't think I'd be welcome back."

The suite's lights changed from white to red.

"Hull breach," the ship said. "Depressurization alert."

The ship lurched, and suddenly they were floating weightless. Sona put her arms around Jeraldine and held on to her as hard as she could.

"Do you think it will hurt?" she said.

"Yes," Jeraldine said. "I think it always does."

Faster and faster, the disintegrating ship spiraled down towards the gas giant below.