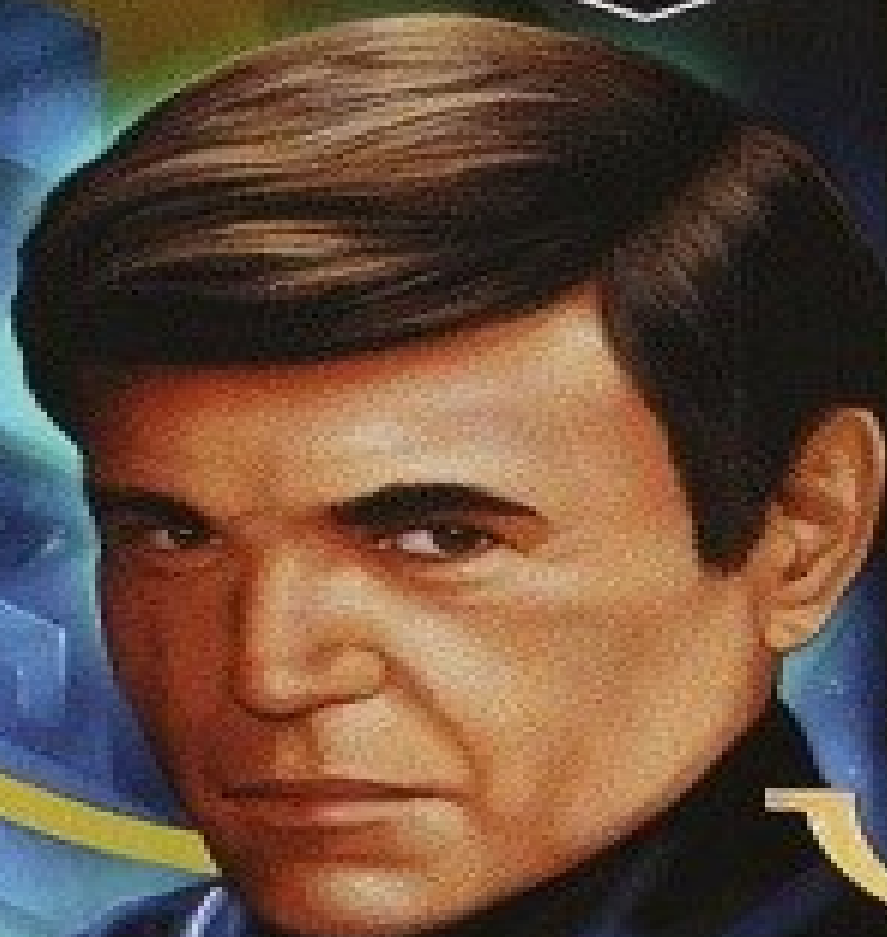


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BASED ON AN ORIGINAL OUTLINE BY J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

BABYLON™



**DEADLY
RELATIONS**

BESTER ASCENDANT

Psi Corps II

Deadly Relations

Bester Ascendant

J. Gregory Keyes

part i: Thesis

chapter 1

Al Bester strained his small body to its limit, reaching on tiptoe for the next branch. The tips of his fingers just brushed it. Above, the waxy leaves of the oak danced in a sudden warm breeze, tantalizing him with glimpses of the beckoning sky beyond. Al loved the sky. In the shapes of clouds - sometimes in the stars at night - he thought he could see the faces of his parents.

He steadied himself and looked down. The ground seemed unreasonably far away. Maybe he should be happy he had managed to get this far - most kids his age couldn't. After all, two branches down, you had to swing around the trunk, hang in space by one hand for a moment to grip the next limb up.

This limb he simply couldn't reach, and the trunk was still too thick to shimmy up. He was stuck. He would have to wait until he grew taller. If he ever did.

Or- he looked up again, speculatively. Or he could jump. The branch was thick, and he would have to jump pretty high, but if he could snag it, he might be able to pull himself up.

But if he missed, he would probably fall.

He was still staring wistfully up at the unattainable heights when he felt minds stirring below.

Hey, Alfie! Come down! We're gonna play cops 'n'blips.

Why were they bothering him? Couldn't they see he was busy?

C'mon, Alfie! He looked down reluctantly. Seven kids from his cadre stood below. Way below.

He suddenly felt a little dizzy.

"Give it up, Alfie," their leader - Brett - called up. "Even I can't get that one."

Like Al, Brett was six years old, but Brett was a good head taller. And everyone liked Brett.

Yeah, come on. Before you hurt yourself. That was Milla. Milla was his height, and he secretly - very secretly - admired her golden hair and blue eyes. He liked the way she laughed - when she wasn't laughing at him.

"Oh, Milla is worried about Alfie," another girl - Keefa - said. "Whoops. Anyone catch that? What she was just thinking?" Al strained, but caught nothing. He would love to know what Milla thought about him.

But then he did catch something. An interweaving mant from below.

He turned his face to the bark, so they wouldn't see his angry and embarrassed blush. His feelings were harder to hide, but he squeezed them in tightly, balling his left fist as he did so, for concentration.

He wouldn't be a baby. He wasn't a baby - he was too old to wet the bed, too old to go in his pants, too old to bloop his feelings all over the place. If the teachers caught you blooming, they made sure everyone knew.

That was the next worst thing to being punished by the Grins.

Frowning, he looked determinedly back up at the branch and jumped as hard as he could. That would show them.

But his timing was a little off. He got his arms around the branch all right, but his fingers never quite met up around the thick bough. There was nothing to grab onto, and only pressure and his nails in the bark kept him there - pressure he couldn't keep up for long.

He looked down, and that was worse. He was hanging above and off to the side of the limb he had been standing on. He would never land square if he dropped - no, he'd fall the whole way, and probably break something.

One nice thing, at least - he had shut the others up. Or rather, stopped their stupid manting. Now what he got was a shim- shimmer of worry and excitement, with at least two strong desires to see what would happen when he fell.

"Hang on, Alfie, I'm coming up to get you!"

Brett. Brett was coming to save him and be the hero. The taller boy was already clambering up the tree.

No way, Al thought. No. way.

He swung himself and dropped. The kids below gasped like a crowd watching a circus performer as he hit the branch feet first, teetered for a long, terrible moment, and then found his balance. He stood there, fighting the urge to hug the branch, breathing hard. Below, he sensed a restless pause.

"Wow." He peered down. That had been a girl. Milla? He wasn't sure.

"You were lucky. You should have waited for me to help you," Brett said. "You shouldn't even be trying to climb it alone - this is constructive play time. We're supposed to play together. Will you come down now?"

Al bit back an urge to dare Brett to duplicate his feat. It would be great if Brett tried and failed, but what if he managed it - or did better? Right now, at least somebody was impressed with Al Bester. A girl somebody.

"Okay," he said. "But I won't be the Blip this time." He started the descent.

He had played a Blip many times, and that part offered no real challenges.

He reached the soft grass of Alpha Quad and turned to face the others.

"You get to be the Blip, Alfie," Azmun said. Azmun was an ugly boy, with a face like a bat.

"I said I didn't want to be the Blip."

"We voted, Alfie. You have to do what we say."

"Yeah. It's for the greater good of the Corps," Milla put in.

So Milla didn't like him. His momentary elation vanished, but his stubbornness remained. "I didn't get to vote," he complained, stubbornly.

"Okay," Brett interjected. "All in favor of Alfie being the Blip, raise your hands."

All hands went up except his own. Of course.

"All against-"

"I was the Blip last time. This time I get to be a cop," Al insisted.

"But you were a good Blip. You'll probably grow up to be a Blip," Azmun argued.

Anger boiled through Al so fast it felt like his scalp would pop off. His fist actually seemed to ache with a need to punch Azmun's stupid bat-face. "You take that back. You take that right back right now," he said.

Azmun hesitated. Al realized his demand had come out calmly, not like he was really mad at all. The way Teacher Hua's voice did, when he was mad. It had a similar effect, too, because the anger behind his words was clear, despite his blocks. Weird, and scarier than someone acting mad.

He would have to remember that.

Basically, Azmun was a coward. Unless someone joined in with him and gave him courage, which could easily...

"Hey, Azmun, don't say things like that," Brett interposed. "Apologize, or I'll tell the teachers, and they'll send the Grins after you."

An involuntary thrill of fear ran around the circle.

"I'm sorry," Azmun mumbled reluctantly. "What I meant was, you're good at playin' the Blip. 'Cause you've got strong blocks 'n stuff."

"C'mon, it'll be dark soon," Brett said, "and we've already blown most of constructive play time. What if Teacher Hua or Ms. Chastain - or the Grins - scan us and find out we didn't play anything approved?"

"Tell you what. Alfie and I will both be Blips. Okay? Alfie?"

Al blinked at the older boy. What was Brett- oh. That was it. He hadn't saved him in the tree, so he would save him now. That was Brett, always trying to be the older brother.

"Okay," he said, having no choice at all.

"Three goals," Azmun said. "The statue of the Grabber, the spout at the fish pond, and the red knob at the rail station is the third. But you both have to choose the same one. Okay? But if one of us touches you, you're caught."

"No problem," Brett said. "You'll never catch us, Psi Cops. Count to fifty. No cheating. C'mon, Alfie."

"We should say the pledge first," Al pointed out.

"Oh. Yeah." Brett looked a little sheepish and cleared his throat. He hurried through the pledge, and the other kids followed, some just mumbling.

"I pledge my body, heart, soul, and mind to the service of Earth Alliance, and the people who dwell on her myriad spheres. I promise to keep the laws, to keep the faith, to keep my eyes on the truth, I pledge to serve my comrades, my cadre, and the Corps. The Corps teaches, guides, and provides. The Corps is mother, the Corps is father. We are the children of the Corps."

"Now, catch us if you can!" Brett said, and he started off. Al followed, counting under his breath. Despite himself, he began to feel the excitement. He loved hunting, but it was more challenging when the odds were against you. People were more impressed. When you won. He edged nearer Brett, *so they were almost touching. Which goal?*

The statue would be the hardest, Brett responded. *I say that one.*

Okay. I'll lead them off toward the rail station and then double back, Al told him.

No! Brett shook his head. *We should stick together.*

Why? Blips wouldn't.

Yes they would. Blips are dumb. That's why they're Blips.

You want to get caught? Al glyphed the other kids laughing at them.

No. But Blips are supposed to stick together.

That's not a real rule, Al 'cast.

No. But it's what we're supposed to do.

Right. So let's do something different.

Brett considered for a moment. *Okay, he 'cast, after a moment. Listen, we'll hide and make a quiet place.*

When we figure out which way they think we went, we'll go to the other.

Why not split up, like I said? He was beginning to get irritated. Then at least one of us makes it.

That's not how Blips think. Blips are selfish - that's why they're Blips. We have to act like Blips.

I thought Blips were Blips because they were stupid, Al rejoined, sarcastically.

Stupid, selfish - same thing. Didn't you watch John Trakker last night?

He couldn't argue with that. John Trakker, Psi Cop, often made that very point each week, as he led captured rogues off to be reeducated into productive citizens. And week after week, Blips showed how stupid they really were. Al never missed that vid - they showed it in the common room, complete with popcorn. And he had read all of the books, too.

Still, it seemed to him that some Blips might be smarter than those John Trakker came up against - like, what if a Psi Cop went Blip, one who knew all the tricks? That had happened once on the show, to John's partner Heng, but only after he had been drugged by an evil rogue, so that wasn't really the same.

No, a Psi Cop would never turn rogue while he was in his right mind.

Well, he wasn't a rogue anyway, and he didn't want to be one, even in a game. He was going to change the rules. He was going to pretend that he was a Psi Cop and that those chasing him were rogues. And Brett...

Brett might be a Psi Cop, or he might be a rogue, pretending to be his friend. He would have to keep his eye on Brett. The tell-tell would be if Brett seemed to be trying to get them both caught...

They wound their way past the 3-5 cadre house, where he had lived the year before, and it struck Al how small it was, compared to the 6-10 house where he lived now. Of course, his cadre was bigger now, too - thirty instead of the twelve last year. And there were more cadres in the 6-10 house.

Ms. Chastain said that was because some teeps didn't join cadres until they were older. They were late bloomers and had to stay in the latents' dorm. The other kids called the latents' dorm the "Basement," and nobody ever went there unless they had to.

Al couldn't imagine not having any psi. How could you have a real cadre without psi? The kids from

the Basement were good at playing normals in the games, but everyone made fun of them. Mostly they kept to themselves until they got their psi and could join a real cadre. Some got really old before that happened.

Brett had gone silent, but his blue eyes darted here and there, searching for a hiding place.

The two of them ran up one of the duracrete drainage ditches past the new construction site. Brett trotted a couple of feet out into the mud and leaped up on a fresh foundation. Then, with a running jump, he returned to the ditch, leaving what looked like a one-way trail. Al had to admit it appeared convincing. Maybe Brett was on the level after all.

From the ditch they hopped over to the lawn in front of the infirmary, and then around back.

"Quick," Brett whispered. "Let's get up on the roof, here. We'll be able to see and p'see and hear and p'hear them from way off."

Al nodded, and the two of them went quickly up the slightly creaky metal ladder attached to the corner of the building. They crawled across the roof and lay peering over the raised edge, minds alert for the faintest shim of their pursuers.

The paths of Teeptown were relatively empty, at two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. He saw a couple of women in grey suits - they weren't teachers or cops or boots, so they were probably busybodies, teeps not strong enough to be cops. There was old man Tareq, cleaning up the quad. A boot in EarthForce uniform - Al p'squinted the shim of each, and his eyes widened. The boot was a normal.

You didn't see many normals in Teeptown. But when you did, they were usually important.

"Hey, Al," Brett whispered. "Make a quiet place, remember?"

Brett was already doing it, glyphing himself as a part of the building. Al, slightly red-faced, joined him in the illusion.

"You're not a bad guy, Alfie, just a little weird," Brett confided.

"I'm not weird."

"You're always playing alone, always have, even when we were really little. And you don't get excited about anything. If Azmun had mouthed off like that to me, I'd have punched him, good."

"It's wrong to hit someone in your cadre," Al replied. " 'What hurts one hurts us all.' "

"Yeah, but sometimes you have to show a guy. You've just gotta- I mean- I don't know. People want to like you - the cadre's gotta hang together - but you're just a little too weird. You need to act more regular, you know?"

Al shrugged. He didn't care what Brett or anyone else thought.

Yeah. If he kept telling himself that, it might eventually be true.

"There," Brett whispered, suddenly.

P'squinting, Al could make them out - Keefa, anyway. Keefa was a weak blocker-she'd probably end up a busybody or a boot, but never a cop.

A few moments later, they came into sight - but only Keefa, Jon, and Roberto. That was a little worrisome.

Where were the rest?

"That's to distract us, I bet," Al whispered. "They know Keefa bloopers like a teek!"

"Maybe." They watched the three move up to Brett's false trail, mill about for a moment, then follow it

"All right," Brett said. "They think we went to the rail station. So we'll go to the Grabber." He started crawling toward the ladder. Reluctantly, Al followed.

Halfway down the ladder, Al caught it. A shim-shimmer of triumph.

"They're here!" he shouted.

Cursing, Brett hurried down the ladder, just as Azmun, Ekko, and Milla came around the corner.

Brett made it to the ground in time to run, but Al had to jump. He hit hard enough that breath whoofed out of him and his chest hurt. Nevertheless, he ran after Brett.

He had made up his mind now. Brett was a traitor - one of the rogues. He'd been planted in Psi Corps to betray Al. No Psi Cop would be as stupid as Brett. John Trakker would never have ignored Heng's advice, not the way Brett had ignored him.

Brett was playing his part well, though, running so hard that Al had trouble keeping up - as if Brett really didn't want to get caught.

As he ran, Al tried to drop distracting glyphs: Scooters about to cross the road, Grins stepping out of the shadows, ladders falling on their pursuers. He couldn't be sure if they were doing any good - it was hard to form the images while concentrating on running. But he sensed that Brett and he were pulling ahead.

Brett sensed it, too, because as they came to the corner of one of the dorms, he suddenly changed course, ducking down stairs that went to the lower, back side of the building. From their hiding place, Brett glyphed an illusion that had them still running, and despite his suspicion, Al joined him.

It worked. Azmun and the others whizzed past.

"Ha," Brett said. "Now..."

But Al p'heard something Brett didn't- the other three pursuers coming close behind. And Brett didn't notice Al slipping into a recessed doorway.

There, under cover, Al steeled himself, then closed his eyes tightly, calling up an image of Brett's face. He imagined himself as Brett. In his mind, he merged his own face and Brett's into one, then changed Brett's into his.

It wasn't easy, and he didn't think it was working, until he suddenly heard Milla shout, "Hey! We've got Al!"

To clinch it, he blew sparks in Brett's mind - not a nice thing to do, but then, Brett was a traitor. So instead of running, Brett just stood there stupidly, long enough for them to catch him.

Then Al bolted, feeling their confusion paralyze them as they suddenly saw two Als.

They were all behind him now. No one stood between him and the statue of the Grabber. All he had to do was run, and he could run faster than any of them except Brett.

But as he reached the statue, he slowed uncertainly. Standing nearby, looking up at it, was the normal he had noticed earlier, in the EarthForce uniform. As Al approached, the man turned his gaze from the statue to him. There was something very unpleasant about that gaze - the man's eyes were the color of pencil lead, his face very pale. When he saw Al, he seemed to not like what he saw. But when he spoke, his tone was mildly friendly.

"A little out of breath, young man?"

"Yessir."

"You look like the devil's chasing you."

"Yessir."

"Some kind of game, I hope?"

"Yessir - cops and blips."

"Oh, very good - that's one of the approved games, yes?"

"Yessir."

"Is this statue your goal?"

"Yessir."

"Better touch it, then."

Al hesitated another instant, then did so.

The uniformed man looked up at the statue again. It portrayed a man, leaping, with outstretched arms, a look of noble determination on his face.

"Tell me about this statue."

"It's the Gr- I mean, it's William Karges. He was the bodyguard for -uh- President Robinson. Nobody knew he was a teep, but one day he p'heard - I mean heard with his mind - someone who wanted to kill the president, an' he got shot warning her. Nobody liked teeps - I mean telepaths - back then, and they weren't supposed to have jobs or rights or anything. But because of what Mr. Karges did, President Robinson made Psi Corps, to reward us, so teeps would have a place they could be safe and productive."

The man smiled gently. "They taught you that in school?"

"Yessir. And we watch the movie every Birthday."

"Did they also teach you that Washington chopped down the cherry tree?"

"Sir?"

"Never mind. Here come your friends. What's your name, son?"

"Alfred Bester, sir."

He nodded, then returned his gaze to the approaching mob of children, led by Brett. Al could feel the anger shimmering from all of them. He had expected Brett to be angry, but why the rest?

"Looks like he won," the normal remarked. "Better congratulate him."

Brett hesitated an instant. Al could tell that, if the normal weren't around, they would all be shouting at him now. But no telepath was ever allowed to fight with another telepath around normals. Never.

So Brett held out his hand. "Good goin'," he mumbled. But as their hands touched, he 'cast something very different. *We're gonna get you, Alfie, you slug.*

That was bad, but it wasn't the worst thing. For a second, Al felt an intense flash of anger, hatred even. And it wasn't coming from anyone in his cadre.

It was coming from the normal.

chapter 2

Teacher Hua was explaining that the Earth Alliance had been founded so there could never be a World War IV, and had just asked a question about the importance of the Psi Corps in the Alliance, when three Grins entered the room. Al knew with cold and immediate dread that they had come for him.

Despite their nickname, they weren't grinning. Their masks were smooth plastic, with no visible openings for eyes, nose, or mouth - but like vid or AI units, they could be used to display images. The icons were usually simple - a bright yellow grin appeared when they brought awards, medals, or presents; a threatening, downturned mouth when they came to correct or punish.

"It seems someone has been bad," Teacher Hua said, noting the expressions on the "faces" of the three silent, grey-robed figures. "Now who in my class might have been bad? Who has brought shame upon the Corps?"

Al sensed a mild wave of panic rippling around him. Most everyone in the room had been bad, of course, at one time or the other - but bad enough for this? The Grins gave no clue as to who they might have come for - they just stood there, while Teacher Hua surveyed the room with grim speculation.

Al glanced at Brett, whose triumphant expression struck him like a snake. Brett had told. The Grins were after him. Knees shaking a little, Al rose from his seat.

"Alfred Bester," Teacher Hua said, softly. "And what do you think you might have done wrong, Mr. Bester?"

"I- I don't know, sir. I mean I'm not sure. But I think it was me."

In response to that, the three figures rustled toward him, hands lifting. As one, they stripped off their black gloves. The sight was worse, far worse, than seeing a nurse preparing a needle to take blood. His scalp tingled with a rush of terror.

They laid their hands on him, and he tried not to block, he really did, but it was like trying not to blink when someone swung at your face. And so it hurt even more as they tunneled into his mind, found his sins, dragged them out in bright glyphs, mindcasting them for everyone to see.

When they finally let him go, he came to himself again, gasping, sweat pouring down his face. The whole class had witnessed his misery.

They had to help him up because he was trembling too violently to walk. Tears welled behind his eyes, but he would not cry, could not, not on top of everything else.

Their gloves were still off. They weren't done yet.

They took him, alone, to where he had done it, where the others had caught Brett. They stood him in the very spot, in the door frame, and stepped back to regard him. Their masks were unadorned now - blank ovals of plastic.

"What did you do?" The Grins had strange voices, inflectionless, like an Artificial Intelligence. Some thought that's exactly what they were, robots, though robots were supposed to be illegal.

"I... I betrayed Brett."

A sharp stab into his mind. "You don't believe that. Why?"

"He was playing dumb. He was going to get us caught. I wanted to win the game."

"You betrayed a member of the Corps. You cannot win - not at that cost."

"We were pretending to be Blips. Blips betray each other."

They crowded nearer, and one pointed an ungloved hand at him. "That is a lie. The others were pretending you two were rogues. You were not. You imagined yourself a Psi Cop, chased by rogues.

"But it runs deeper than that, Mr. Bester. No matter what any of you were pretending, you are all members of the Corps. Whatever you pretend in the course of constructive - or unconstructive - play, Brett is your brother. You share the same mother and father. Do you understand?"

"Yessir," Al replied, bowing his head. "The Corps is mother. The Corps is father."

"You can't forget that Brett is your brother without forgetting that the Corps is your mother and your father. Do you understand?"

"Yessir."

"You won't forget."

It wasn't a question, but a promise. The three stepped forward and laid hands on him again, one behind him and one to each side.

For an instant, nothing happened, and then, suddenly, the world grew brighter.

The steps where Brett had hidden suddenly came alive, each grain in the stone became a universe of significance. The buildings, the lawn, the trees - all burned into his mind with terrifying, hyper-real clarity.

Shame shaped the light; fear framed the image, permeated it.

The Grins lowered their hands. They put their gloves on and led him back to class.

The trek from the classroom door to his seat was one of the longest he had ever taken. He felt like the corpse of a cat they had once found. It had somehow fallen from one of the buildings. Splattered, guts hanging out, fascinating because it was so horrible.

He avoided the questioning glances of the students as the subject switched to math, kept his head down, trying to pretend nothing had happened. It was hard; the image of the place where he betrayed Brett lingered in his mind, like an afterimage of the sun on retinas. But he made it through the day and trudged back to the cadre house, wishing he didn't share a room with Brett.

At the meal in the common room, everyone avoided him. Probably worried that if they spoke to him the Grins would come for them next. When it was time for John Trakker, Psi Cop, he had no enthusiasm for watching it and quietly slipped off, seeking solitude.

He almost bumped into Ms. Chastain. The tall, thin brunette wore a dark brown skirt and turquoise blouse.

She looked down at him over the tip of her rather pointy nose. He liked Ms. Chastain - maybe not as much as he liked Mr. King, who had been his house father at 3-5, but that might just be because he missed Mr. King.

"Al, did you have a bad day? You always watch John Trakker."

He nodded, sullenly.

She reached down and lifted his chin with her fingers. "Grins came for you, didn't they?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you deserve it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well." She seemed to study him for a moment. "I was just going to have some tea in the kitchen. Would you care to join me?" Her voice was kind.

"Yes, ma'am."

"May I tell you a story, Al?" Ms. Chastain sipped her lemon tea and nudged the plate of gingersnaps toward him. He took one.

"Yes, please."

"This is about my grandmother. She was a telepath, like me. Not as strong as me - she was maybe a P3 at best, though she was never rated."

"What do you mean? Everyone is rated, 'cept maybe Bli-" He broke off, suddenly embarrassed.

But Ms. Chastain smiled gently. "No, Al, she wasn't a Blip. She never got to join Psi Corps, you see. She was born in 2035. She never registered because she lived in New Zealand, and they didn't require it there - it was before universal registration. She was a good person, though. She didn't try to use her abilities for personal gain, but worked with the Catholic church, helping the needy.

"But one day, when my mother was just five years old, some normals came to the church and they burned it. And they took all of the priests who were teeps, and they took my grandmother, and they tied heavy weights on all of them and dropped them in the ocean. My mother was there, but she was hiding, and from where she was, she felt my grandmother drown.

"She kept that feeling in her heart, and when I got old enough, she passed it on to me. It was awful, Alfred, but I know why she did it. She did it to remind me, always, that we aren't like normal people. Even if we try to pretend we are, the normals will remind us." She smiled, and then abruptly laid her hand on his and switched to 'casting

We're special, Al, all of us. The normals know it, and they hate us for it. And there are so many more of them than there are of us, so many. If we don't stand together, all of us-if we aren't stronger and smarter and better than them-they'll do it again, like they did to my grandmother.

So when you think you've been treated harshly, remember that.

It's to make you strong and good, to get you ready for the challenges that come later. Because even though many normals hate us, it's still our job to protect them, too. From themselves, from enemies out in the stars.

And you, Al - you're really strong - you test P12, and if you train well you can live up to that potential. You will have to be more responsible than most. You'll look back one day and understand everything that happened to you. You'll see that it was for the greater good. Do you understand?

He managed a little smile. *Yes.*

Good. How about another cookie?

That night, in his nightmares, he saw the steps again, and watched himself as he betrayed Brett. But when he woke up, heart pounding, he remembered Ms. Chastain's words. *I have to be better than I am*, he thought to himself. *I have to be the best, and I have to do it right.*

But he had a hard time getting back to sleep. After a while he rose and went to the window.

Their room was on the third floor, faced away from most of the city lights of Geneva, and he had a good view of the stars. He started picking out the ones he knew, trying to remember what he had heard about them, which were the homes of men. And in the corners of his eyes - where the stars were strangely brightest - he thought he saw the faces.

When he focused on them, they always went away, so he could never see them directly. He knew the woman had dark red hair, and the man had black hair. They were the faces of the Corps, the mother and father.

Sometimes, when he was alone, he would talk to them, ask them questions, but they never answered. He heard their voices sometimes, when he was asleep, but when he woke up he was never sure what they had said. Only that they loved him.

But of course they did. They were the Corps.

Sometimes he wondered what he would see if a Grin took off its mask. Would he see those faces, but clearly? Where were they, if not behind the Grins?

Maybe in the big buildings. Maybe the director was his mother.

A soft rustling behind him interrupted his thoughts.

"You okay, Alfie?"

It was Brett.

"Yeah."

"Alfie- Look, I'm sorry. I didn't know it would be so bad. The way you looked when they brought you back. I'm sorry I told."

"No," Al replied. "No, you did right. I shouldn't have done that to you."

There followed an awkward pause. "I just wanted you to know," Brett finished. Then he brightened.

"Anyway, Birthday coming up. What do you think you'll get this year?"

"I don't know. I don't really want anything."

"I do. I hope I get a John Trakker PPG. Wouldn't that be cool?"

"Yeah." He tried on a smile. "We better get some sleep. 'Sleepy boys are no good to the Corps.' "

"Yeah. Good night, Alfie."

By the time it came, Al was excited about Birthday, though not for the same reason as Brett. It was Birthday, naturally, when new kids joined the cadre. Al had mixed feelings about it - things had been easier when the cadre was smaller - but there was always the hope that someone really neat would join. Maybe a girl who would like him.

He knew he really wasn't supposed to like girls, but he did, and he couldn't help it. The problem was getting them to like you back. And hiding the fact that you liked them from the others...

He still liked Milla, but had sort of given up on her.

Anyway, Birthday was always a lot of fun, and there wasn't any schoolwork on Birthday.

Birthday started at seven, but everyone was up well before that, eagerly awaiting the opening of the common-room doors. When they finally swung wide, there was whooping and cheering at the decorations that festooned the room, especially the pinatas. Al got to break one of those - it was easy, even blindfolded, because everyone glyphed to you where it was. After that, some kids from another cadre - an older one, from the 11-13 house - came in and did a play for them. It was a story they all knew, from one of their world readers, but it was still fun to see it acted out.

There were only four new kids, a girl and three boys. The girl was pretty, with dark hair and green eyes.

Brett was already talking to her, though, as they watched the play.

"They aren't saying anything," she noted.

"They won't," Brett said. "You have to p'hear."

She shut her eyes. "I can almost hear..."

"P'hear," Brett corrected.

"I've never met another mind reader until a few days ago," she said, softly - apologetically.

"It's okay. We call ourselves 'teeps,' though. Link hands with me and Alfie. We'll help you. Alfie?"

She looked at him with her mossy eyes, and when he took her hand, his face felt funny. Warm.

Al focused on the play. The story was from the Central African Block, he remembered, from the Wayo tribe, or something like that. There were two main characters, Hornbill and the Elder, and besides them, three villagers - though the audience was supposed to play villagers, too.

Hornbill was lying down. The actors wore little in the way of costumes, instead glyphing their

appearances.

Hornbill was a bird with a very small beak.

Hornbill: *I don't feel like going to a funeral today. It's such a long business, with the procession and all. I would much rather lie in my hammock and take a nap.*

Village: *LAZY HORNBILL! HE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT THE VILLAGE! HE don't do nothin' for us ONLY what HIS CARES he PEOPLE! ABOUT should HIMSELF is selfish!*

Elder: *Shame!*

Hornbill: *No, no, you go ahead.*

Village: *WE ARE YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS! DO RIGHT BY US!*

mother father obey

kith kin respect

(Glyph of the calendar flipping, days passing.)

Hornbill: *Ah, no, my own son has died! Surely the people of the village will come to help me bury him!*

Village:

Elder: *You have never helped in a funeral. Now no one will help you!*

Hornbill: *But I don't even know where the graveyard is!*

Village: *BECAUSE YOU NEVER CARED BEFORE!*

Elder: *Find it yourself, lazy Hornbill!*

(The actor mimed the hornbill, carrying his son's coffin on his back, a heavy burden, searching for the graveyard. Glyphs of calendars flipping, days, months, years passing. Putrid ooze leaking out of the coffin as it gradually transformed into the hornbill's cumbersome beak.)

Hornbill: *Where is the graveyard? Where is the graveyard?*

But the words were a cry, the sound of the hornbill's call, repeated forever as he paid for his sin. The sin of standing apart from the village, the sin of selfishness.

The play ended, and they clapped. The older kids took a bow.

At that moment, four Grins walked in through the open door.

For a moment, Al felt a cold spot form in the pit of his belly, but then he saw that this time, the robed figures were grinning, huge happy smiles, and each carried a large sack. It was time for presents!

Brett got his PPG - not a real one, of course, but it looked real and whined like one warming up. Al got a book on John Carter, the founder of the Mars colony, and they all got plastic Psi Corps badges. After that there was cake and cookies, and pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey with half the cadre trying to help the blindfolded player and the other half trying to hinder him.

For supper they had a picnic on the lawn and watched the stars come out in the evening sky, while Ms. Chastain played the auto-harp and sang from the cadre songbook.

Al was enjoying himself. Everything seemed right. The Grins had brought him a present, so his own sin must have been forgiven. He wasn't going to be like Hombill, cursed forever.

Maybe it was time to try the tree again. He walked toward it, humming Happy Birthday to Us.

At the base of the oak, he noticed he was being followed. It was the new girl.

"Hi," he said. "So what's your name?"

"Hi." she answered. "My name is Julia." She pronounced it hoo-lee-yah.

"My name is Al."

"I thought it was Al-fee."

"That's what they call me. I like Al better."

"Okay. I just wanted to thank you for helping me with the play."

He nodded, unable to meet her green eyes. " 'S okay."

And then she just stood there, smiling, and he was supposed to think of something to say. But he couldn't.

And in a minute she would get bored and leave.

"Watch this!" he said, and without waiting for a response, he ran over to the tree and started to climb it. He got to the swing-around branch and kept going. He felt strong, like he could do anything. Higher, and he found himself under the branch again.

He didn't look down this time, but he imagined Julia, watching him as he climbed higher and higher. He steadied himself, bent his knees, and jumped as high as he could. His hands came together - And caught around the branch. Grunting, grinning, he pulled himself up and over the branch, tempted to shout to the others, to let them see that he had done it. He looked down to see how Julia was taking it.

She wasn't there. She was walking off, hand in hand with Brett.

His feeling of triumph evaporated like rubbing alcohol.

What's the use, he thought. That was it. He was giving up on girls. What did they know? Here he had climbed the tree for her, risked his life...

And he was just realizing how much farther down it was from here. Birthday stank.

He awoke with a hand over his mouth and a Grin staring down at him. He tried to scream, but the hand and a fierce psi command stopped him. He breathed hard, the chemical scent of the glove in his nose.

The Grin was blank, expressionless - no smile, no frown. When his breathing slowed, it motioned him to silence, removed the hand from his mouth, and handed him a robe.

Follow, it commanded.

They moved through the empty streets of Teeptown like will-o'-the-wisps, passing familiar places made strange by the hour.

Teeptown was just that, a small town. It had a Common - a center with shops and such - and lots of quads, each with their own, smaller commons. Al really only knew Alpha Quad. When he was a baby, of course, he had lived in the creche, in the hospital quad, but he didn't remember that. He got his psi early - again, before he could remember - and so he had never lived in the Basement, but had gone straight to the first cadre house.

Though he had twice changed houses as he got older, they were all in Alpha quad.

Now he and the Grin moved out of that familiar quarter and into the quad with the Minor Academy. Off that - farther right - was the Major Academy; Al had never had the nerve to go that far afield, but he had wandered the grounds of the Minor, watching the older kids, trying to figure it out. He still wasn't clear exactly how it was put together, though he heard cadres got broken up there, and people were reassigned to "schools." That didn't sound like much fun, but nobody went to the Minor Academy until they were twelve or so, so he had a while before he had to worry about it.

Once they had passed through the academy grounds, he found himself in territory he really didn't know.

There was a sort of invisible line, past the stanchion field, that kids knew they weren't supposed to cross, and for the most part, they didn't. There were apartments for the married couples, and for the grownups who ran Teeptown - some of them normals. And government buildings, he guessed.

The Grin led him on through the no-kids land. Al worried that it might be a trick-that the Grin's mask would change to a frown, and he would be chastised, suddenly, for crossing the unseen demarcation.

But through his fear, he began to feel a new sort of excitement. *Maybe I'm going to see the mother and father*, he thought. *The faces from my dreams.*

The Grin took him into a large building, through winding corridors of dull pearl, to a large office of nearly the same shade - or which probably would be, if the lights were turned up. Tonight, they were very dim. The Grin ushered him through the door and left, closing the portal behind him. Al was left standing uncertainly in the near darkness.

"Come forward, Alfred Bester."

There was someone behind the big desk. He noticed, as his eyes adjusted, that the room had many shelves, filled with paper books - and not a whole lot else. No pictures, like the painting Ms. Chastain had in her office, nothing like that. Books, and walls, and a desk.

And behind the desk was the oldest man Al had ever seen. His hair was cut so close to his head, the only way Al knew he wasn't bald was because it was whiter than milk, whereas the rest of his head was like a brown paper bag that had been crumpled, smoothed, crumpled again, smoothed again, then stretched tight over a skull. Al found himself wishing that he could touch that face, to see what it would feel like. Would it be hard, like leather - or delicate, like tissue paper?

"Do you know who I am, Mr. Bester?"

"No, sir."

"My name is Kevin Vacit. I am the director of Psi Corps."

The director. "Pleased to meet you, sir. The Corps is mother. The Corps is father."

"Indeed. And it seems that mother and father had to discipline you, a few days ago."

"Yessir." The vague fear in his chest tightened.

"Come closer."

Al stepped even closer, and suddenly he saw the director's eyes, cold gems, colorless. Like- like he didn't know what.

And he felt a shadow go through his mind. It wasn't like a scan, not even a light one. He wasn't even sure it was real.

But the director smiled. "You felt something?"

"Yessir."

"Interesting. Most don't."

Al waited for the director to explain what it was that most people didn't notice, but instead the old man leaned forward and clasped his hands together. "Listen to me, Alfred," he said, his voice rather low and scratchy, but still perfectly intelligible. "What do you want to be?"

That was easy. "I want to be a Psi Cop, sir."

"Why?"

That was harder, and Al thought about it for an instant. He had heard that the director of Psi Corps was always supposed to be a normal, appointed by the EA senate. So he might be able to get away with lying- No. He had already shamed the Corps once, he would not do it again.

"I know I'm supposed to want to be a Psi Cop so I can serve and defend, and all of that. And I want to do all that, I really do, but-"

"It's not the real reason."

"No, sir. It's because to be a Psi Cop you have to be the best. The very best."

"And you want people to know you are the best."

"Yes, sir."

"You know that's the wrong answer, don't you, Alfred?"

"Yessir."

The old man nodded thoughtfully. "Everyone has different strengths, you know. No one is better than anyone else. A good business telepath, a good military telepath - as long as you perform to the best of your abilities, it's all the same."

Al could think of no reply, so he said nothing.

"You don't believe that, do you?" the director asked.

"I... no, sir."

"Well."

The silence stretched so long and thin, Al was afraid something would break. Then the old man sighed.

"Don't tell anyone you came to see me, Alfred. You can return to your bed now." He made a sign, and the door opened again. The Grin was waiting for him.

"Sir?" Al asked, as the masked person moved to lead him away.

"Yes?"

"Will I get to be a Psi Cop?"

"That remains to be seen, Mr. Bester. But-" He paused. "Do not think that being the best will make you happy. The very qualities that allow the one, preclude the other."

"I don't understand, sir."

"I know. You're too young. When you do understand, it will be too late, won't it?" His face wrinkled up, oddly. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Alfred. I think - yes, in a way I think you would have made your parents proud."

"My parents, sir? You mean the Corps?"

The ancient face smoothed out again. "I mean your parents, your mother and your father."

"My mother and father are the Corps, sir."

"Quite right" He sighed. "And I knew them all."

"Sir?"

"Never mind me, Mr. Bester. I am an old man, and my mind wanders. In fact, I don't expect we'll meet again - I'm going away soon, and someone else will become director in my place. The Corps is your mother and father, as you said. And the Corps is proud of you. That's all I meant."

But it wasn't, and Al knew it. For just an instant, he thought he had seen a woman's face - the woman's face...

But he retreated from that thought. If anyone suspected he had read the director's mind, even accidentally, there was no telling what would happen to him.

"One other thing, Alfred."

Al's throat tightened. Had he been caught?

"Sir?"

"Things may - change - after I'm gone. Remember who you are. Remember how you were raised. It's important. The Corps is important. It has a purpose more important than anyone can possibly dream. Can you remember that?"

"Of course, sir."

"Remember this, too, then. Watch for the Shadows. Watch, and beware." When the director said Shadows, something seemed to form in Al's brain, an image, kind of like a spider. Then it sank into something and was gone.

"Good night, Alfred. And good-bye."

chapter 3

"Hey, Alfie," Brett called from across the common room. "What do you think the Grins really are?"

Al looked up from his book toward the little knot of kids around the table. He had been trying to tune their conversation out.

"What? How should I know?"

Brett shrugged and Julia giggled.

"What's funny?"

Julia seemed to sober, but it was Milla that said, "Because you're kind of like a Grin, Alfie. Nobody can ever tell what's up with you."

Al sighed and laid his book down. He decided to ignore the comment. "First of all, they're called monitors, not Grins-"

"Vidflash!" Brett snorted. "We all know what they're called. That's not the question."

"Well, it's not for us to wonder about who they are," Al said. "They're Corps, and they're here to help us. That's all that matters."

"See what I mean?" Milla said.

"Okay. What do you think they are?" Al responded, drawing himself up. At twelve, he was still the shortest boy in the room, and shorter than most of the girls, but he knew some of the others still found him physically intimidating. He had given some of them reason to.

"Robots," Julia opined.

"Humaniform robots are illegal. The Corps wouldn't have robots."

"That's what I say," Brett agreed. "Besides, who ever heard of a telepathic AI? So what are they?"

Al considered them all for a moment, then lowered his voice. "I think they're brain-wiped criminals."

"Huh?"

"Rogues who couldn't be reeducated. Students that asked too many of the wrong questions. They wipe

their brains and program them to do what they do."

Julia shuddered. "You really think so?"

"What I think is that we shouldn't be talking about it," Al responded. "It's not our business. If the Corps wants us to know what they are, they'll tell us."

"Maybe we're supposed to figure out what they are. Maybe it's another test - did you ever consider that?"

There had been a lot of tests lately, with Minor Academy admissions coming up.

"I think I know a test when I see one. Unlike some of you."

Julia and Azmun paled. They knew who he was talking about.

"That wasn't nice, Alfie," Brett said. "You don't have to be such an ass about things."

Like any of you are nice to me, Al thought. Like any of you care how I feel. But he kept it blocked and locked. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing that they could hurt him. After all, they were just jealous. Even Brett couldn't outdo him on the tests - except in some of the normal stuff, like running, and then only just barely.

He just shrugged, knowing that would annoy them more than any verbal response.

The final tests started tomorrow. Those who passed would move to the Minor Academy. He would be one of them, and he would finally be where he ought to be. In the Minor Academy people would appreciate him.

He wouldn't let Brett and the rest distract him from that goal. From finally escaping them.

"Take a few minutes to get ready, Alfred. Simon," Teacher Roberts said, with an absent air. He made a few marks on his notepad.

Al opened his envelope and glanced at the photograph inside. It depicted a brick-red groundcar, a Cortez JumpPoint. He closed his eyes, held the image for a moment to make sure he had it, then sealed the envelope and laid it on the desk in front of him. Ten meters away, across the room, Simon did the same. Al took a moment to size Simon up. He was the same age, twelve, but from a different cadre. Fox-faced, auburn hair to match.

Al closed his eyes again and took deep, slow breaths as he shut the world down. The telepathic white

noise was the first to go, that sort of distant ocean sound produced by the millions of minds in the Greater Geneva area. Layered above that were the hundreds of thoughts near enough to be half intelligible - a word here, a few brushstrokes from a landscape there, traces of mood like aromas, some sharp, some subtle.

Gone. Leaving only the nearest thoughts, investing themselves in his brain almost with the ease of his own thoughts. He remembered himself as a child, wondering, *Am I really thinking that, or is it someone else?*

It was the most dangerous confusion a telepath could face.

Deep slow breath in, deep slow breath out. The voices going out like stars at sunrise, till only one was left - Simon's. You couldn't really see a mind, of course, but to Al, Simon's appeared for the moment as a hard black sphere, encased by larger, silver-translucent balls, nested within one another.

Al had never really imagined this required any sort of explanation, but Teacher Roberts had talked about it often enough. He liked explaining things that didn't seem to need explanations.

"Basically, we're just fancy monkeys," he'd told them, the first day of class. "Our ancestors didn't evolve like wolves, or horses, or whales, specializing their digits into claws or hooves or flippers. Nope, evolution left us with the same feeble five digits that our reptilian ancestors had. General, not specialized. All of the primates followed that pattern - never committing to specialization, always trying to stay the jacks-of-all-trades.

"The only real change from the lizard hand to the monkey hand was opposability, the ability to grasp - and we needed that, running around in treetops. The other thing we needed were eyes in the front of our heads, bifocal, so we could triangulate, see depth - be able to actually catch that next branch when we jumped at it

"But that turned out to be a big change, after all. Our bifocal eyes needed all this new hardware to run. As a result, primate brains got bigger. Sight got better, hand-to-eye coordination got better, and the other senses suffered, but so what? Because with those big brains came unexpected benefits.

"For sixty million years or so, primate brains have been built around vision - vision and manipulation of our generalized, lizard hands. As a consequence, we learned to express ourselves with pictures first. Words came later.

"Telepathy is a very new evolutionary step, and evolution always has to work with what it's given. Birds didn't just grow wings - their forelimbs were modified. Likewise, we do telepathy with those same old monkey brains, and the primary modality is still visual. So we 'see' the unseeable, picture the unpicturable.

"Think about dreaming. Dreaming is caused by random surges in neuroelectricity. These jolts go

through the brain and release images; our brains then try to organize these images, make sense of them, release or build more images to fill in the gaps. When we awaken, we try to assign linear, logical meaning to them. We don't 'see' random surges of electricity jolting into our brains - we see ourselves, sitting in class in our underwear or running in slow motion from angry Grins.

"When a rogue tries to fry your brain with a mindblast, you won't 'see' an inchoate, deadly force, or a pattern of electrochemical reactions triggered in your neural net. You'll see a sword coming to cut your head in two, a car about to run you down, the sky falling. That's fine, because that's how we work, we fancy monkeys. The trick is to not get confused, and that's a big deal. We relate to things we don't know in terms of things we do know - by analogy. If you've never seen a snake, but you do know worms, you will see the snake and think, 'Aha! It's like a big worm.' But if you make the mistake of thinking that a cobra is an earthworm, you make a very foolish - and terminal - mistake. If you actually think that a mindblast is a sword - well, I can take you to see some people who made that very mistake. You can take turns spoonfeeding them and changing their diapers."

He tried to keep that in mind, as he focused on the sphere that signified Simon's psyche. As he watched, the translucent shells began opaquing.

He was confident that his own blocks were in place. They were familiar friends. Still, general blocks were of only so much use in this test.

"Proceed," Teacher Roberts said.

Simon came at him in a storm front, a roaring, crackling mass. Amused by the crudity of that approach, Al met him force for force, and they collided like twin hurricanes. Jagged blue-white bolts condensed into coruscating ball lightnings, eddying, sputtering out, sometimes erupting into whirls of purple fire. Simon couldn't beat him like this, and he must know it. What was he up to?

A terrible fear gripped him. Then a sense of defeat. The test was already over. Somehow Simon had already found his hidden image, was about to tell Teacher Roberts what it was...

No. Simon had been clever. The frontal assault was a feint; the real attack was this awful despondency, sneaking down the slow, tropical river of his limbic system. Emotion so basic and colorless he hadn't recognized it wasn't his own.

But to project despair so well, Simon must own some of it.

Al tightened the feelings, intensified them, and launched them back to their source, in a fluid bolt that dug quickly through the outer shells of Simon's mind. It stopped short of the inner sphere, but like an oil strike in reverse, started pooling there, flooding and poisoning Simon's outer blocks with gloom. As his own false sense of failure faded, Al caught a surge of panic from Simon.

He worried for a moment this might be another feint - an attempt to exaggerate his confidence - but his deepest instinct told him it was real. The acid of Simon's attack was dissolving his own guards.

Simon's psionic thunderhead boiled away, but Al's was still there, and finding itself suddenly unchecked, it hurled toward the deconstructing blocks. One, two, three shells cracked and sublimated, and Al snatched greedily at the glyphs leaking through, as bright and effervescent as oil on a sunlit pool. Simon attempted to distract him one last time by triggering an involuntary motor response - a desperate move because if discovered, it was easily reversed. It was a clumsy attack, and Al simply reflected it without knowing what it was.

The last of Simon's blocks shattered, and his secret stood revealed: a photograph of a knight in armor.

Laughable. Al opened his eyes.

"It was a photograph of a knight," he said, briskly. "Fourteenth century, I think."

Simon's eyes were wide and dazed. He was looking vaguely at his lap, and as Al caught the scent of ammonia, he suddenly realized what motor response Simon had been trying to provoke.

Served him right, then.

"Very good, Alfred," Teacher Roberts said. "And good try, Simon."

"May I be excused, sir?" Simon choked out.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better."

When Simon was gone, Teacher Roberts' lips twitched in a little grin. "That was well done," he said. "Now, I didn't see what was in the envelope you chose. I still don't know what your image was."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm coming for it Now."

Before Al could blink, an egg of molten pain cracked against the nape of his neck. He had already relaxed his battle guards, of course, and this smashed through his habitual ones as if they weren't there. Desperately, he tried to enfold the pain, but Teacher Roberts' Humpty-Dumpty would not be put together again.

Instead, he just gritted his teeth and swallowed it. It was only pain, and nothing real was happening to his body. Nothing real, though he felt his hands clutch and spasm with the force of it.

Teacher Roberts' mind didn't look much like Simon's. It was part spider and part octopus, spinning out a hundred tentacle-legs of black concertina wire. One of these was already wrapped around his neck, razoring into it, and more were enveloping him.

Vision and manipulation. The two shaping forces of telepathy. He pushed back his fear and hesitation,

grasping the scalpel strands with imaginary hands, knotting them to each other. Many faded as he did so, but not quickly enough. More came, splitting like roots digging into loose soil, now tipped with throbbing green scorpion stings. He couldn't stop them all, and he knew it More wrapped around him, and pain was a hot filament through his axis.

Don't be confused. He was letting Teacher Roberts control the imago. The instructor's mind was no more a monster than Simon's had been a spherical fortress, but Al had let himself be convinced it was, tried to fight the metaphor on its own terms - treating the tentacles as if they were real.

He twisted his perspective, twisted it again, and the radial monster collapsed around itself, formed the knight from Simon's photograph, save that it had four arms instead of two, each equipped with a massive sword.

This was a perception he could deal with a bit more easily; one of the weapons was buried in his neck, but he slid off of it, made each of his fingers a rapier and flicked them out.

The knight fell back beneath the onslaught, sparks striking on his armor from Al's needlelike fingers, then lashed back even stronger than before. Three of the blades grew longer and heavier as the fourth condensed away. They hammered at his rapiers, shattered them, and Al was forced to replace them with bucklers just to fend off the merciless battering.

Still, he was planning a new attack when he suddenly noticed that the fourth "sword" hadn't vanished at all, but merely reshaped itself into a gun. It winked a red eye, as Al threw everything he had - everything - into a final, impossible defense. Something in his skull seemed to explode, and silence followed.

He blinked his lids open. Someone was patting him on the cheek. The rasping in his head was his own breath, and his lips had a salty taste on them. The bright copper smell of blood clogged his nose.

"Sorry about that, Alfred." It was Teacher Roberts, with a concerned look on his face. "I let you push yourself too hard."

Al swallowed shakily. He noticed that he was on a gurney, that not far away a nurse was fussing about.

"Where am I? That was..." Words failed him.

"This is the infirmary. You're okay, they just wanted to watch you for a little while. You've been out for about two hours." He hesitated, then gripped Al's hand. "I want you to understand that I wasn't trying to hurt you, Al. But in your contest with Simon, I noticed a certain self-congratulatory smugness. You're good for your age, and you push yourself harder than anyone I've ever seen - too

hard, in fact, as this incident demonstrates - but there are mind rippers out there who can make what just happened to you seem like a thump on the nose. It would be a disservice for me not to help you understand that, now, before you make a habit of overconfidence."

"I think I understand, sir."

"I don't think you do. But it's a start." He paused. "You grasped part of my lessons, Al. You tried to control the imago, the metaphorical construct I attacked you with, and did a good job. It's one approach, but it has its dangers. It's a sort of a shaman game-"

"Sir?"

"Shamans. Tribal doctors and magicians. Worldwide, they were said to go into trances and fight battles of imago, transforming as their opponents transformed. One would be a wolf, the other would become a lion. Then the first would become a bear, his opponent a T-rex or something. Often it was even more subtle than that; one becomes fire, the other becomes rain, the drowned fire rises as a mist - and so on.

"The winner is the one whose form plays most cleverly and convincingly against his opponent's form. It only works because both combatants allow their minds to accept the rules, to be bound by what they know of the normal world. And that brings me to one last point. Have you ever played paper, scissors, rock?"

"Yes, sir." Al was mystified by the sudden change of direction.

"Let's play. On three."

They shook their closed fists three times. Al kept his clenched - rock. Teacher Roberts' came out two fingers - scissors.

"Well?" the teacher said.

"I win. Rock smashes scissors."

Teacher Roberts reached out, very quickly, and grabbed Al's hand at thumb and little finger, twisting it around. Al yelped, involuntarily, in surprise and pain.

"I win," Roberts said. "I win because I don't acknowledge that there was a rock or scissors. Only our hands. And my hand is bigger, faster, stronger, more skillful than yours. You see?" He released Al's hand as quickly as he had taken it.

"Yes. I see," Al said. *You cheated. You broke the rules.*

Teacher Roberts caught that, and his eyes glittered. *Exactly, Al. Exactly. You have a decision coming. This is the end of this session, and you'll be going to the Minor Academy next, if you pass. If you aren't comfortable with breaking rules, I suggest you take business prep courses. If you want to be a Psi Cop, though...*

He smiled and stood up. "I'll see you tomorrow for your written final. It's a take-home. Discuss - let's see - I want you to compare Yakut shamanic battles, the Flight of Loki, and the exploits of the lively Lemminkainen. And be ready to transpose them in action, should I ask. Yes?"

"Yes, sir." Though he had not the faintest idea what a Yakut was- or who "Loki" or "Lemminkainen" were.

That kind of assignment was typical of Teacher Roberts.

"How'd you do?" Brett asked, as Al came into the room with an armload of books.

"I stunk. And he gave me a take-home." Al closed his eyes for an instant; his psi contest with Teacher Roberts had left him feeling as if he hadn't slept in days.

"Hmm. Well, don't wear out - we have the inter-cadre tournament day after tomorrow. I think we've got a good chance."

"Sure we do."

Brett turned back to whatever it was he was doing. Al opened his books and began trying to sort out what to skim through first. Brett was only sucking up to him because he did want the cadre to win. That was Brett, always thinking about his position as leader.

Not that anyone had ever elected him, or anything. They just accepted it, which was all wrong. Brett was neither the smartest nor psionically the strongest. Why should he be the one everyone paid attention to?

But that was the way it was, wasn't it? For now, anyway. When they got to the academy, where positions were officially awarded by merit and ability, he would come into his own.

He had just a week to wait.

He focused his attention on the book, and to his surprise, he found himself enjoying it. He was entirely absorbed in the weird duel of two Yakut shamans when the door suddenly burst open.

He hadn't heard or felt them coming. You never did.

Grins. Angry Grins.

What have I done this time? He was afraid he'd let it slip out. Fear mingled freely with his anger, and he certainly wanted to keep that in.

In the last year or so, the Grins had become more and more arbitrary with their punishments and scans. It should be obvious to everyone how unfair it was, but the adults never seemed to notice the change, even when it went on right in front of them.

He tried to remember what he had maintained that very morning, that they had no business questioning the Grins, but it was hard, very hard.

"Take off your clothes. All of them," the Grins commanded, in their flat, less-than-Human voices.

He and Brett complied. Al might resent them, but there was never any question of obeying them. They were a fact of life.

It got worse. The Grins herded the two of them, naked, from their room into the common room, and there was the rest of the cadre, all naked as slugs, girls and boys alike. Al had always supposed he might like to see some of the girls without their clothes on - especially Milla, who had taken on an intriguing shape in the last year or so - but he found that faced with it, like this, he was horrified. They didn't seem pretty, or sexy, or whatever - they seemed like sea creatures, yanked from their shells, left to shiver and die naked on the beach.

In other words, they looked exactly as he felt. Sick.

From the common room, they were all forced outside. The expressions on the masks of their tormentors became less pleasant by the second.

chapter 4

The Grins led them down what seemed miles of sidewalk, surrounded on every side by older kids, academy students, adults. Al felt himself being measured, weighed, scrutinized. Though the watching crowd uttered not a single sound, telepathic gibes and insults made it clear they found him wanting.

Little guy, isn't he? A little rat.

Hey, kid, what's a six-year-old doing, doing the walk?

Are those your arms, or soda straws?

And now the Grins were grinning, and Al suddenly realized that all along their smiles had been ironic - even when they were bringing presents or awards, they had always been smiling at him, not for him. Laughing at him, behind their masks.

At last the "walk" was over, and they were led into a darkened room, spacious, a little musty. It wasn't so dark that he couldn't see the others, who, like him, were starting to shiver with the cold, wanting to huddle together. But they were kept apart by nakedness and terror. A lot of them were crying, and many were blooping like crazy, all their lessons drowned by shame and humiliation.

But they couldn't do that to him. Not to Alfred Bester. He didn't know what was going on here - whether the Grins had gone insane, or whether this was some horrible plot somehow perpetrated by mundanes - but when the Psi Cops found out about this, somebody would pay. They would pay, and he would be there to see it.

He jerked, suddenly, like the fish he had once seen a man pull out of Lake Geneva. A scan blasted through his defenses as if they weren't there. He rallied a defense - and let it drop. No one was allowed to challenge the Grins.

But if the Grins had gone insane...

It was too late, anyway. They were dragging glyphs from his mind, scattering them to the other kids: Him looking longingly at Julia. Wetting his pants when he was six. Stealing a candy when no one was looking.

The things he kept locked away - black spiders in secret jars, bright hopes he hoarded like jewels. All were torn from him and thrown into the air like confetti shredded from his soul.

And the air was suffocating with such confetti. There was Brett, peeking through a cracked door at Ms. Chastain as she bathed. There was Milla, bleeding between her legs and crying, so humiliated

she couldn't think straight. Azmun, sitting in class, suddenly losing control of his bowels, afraid to let anyone know, unable to admit what he had done, as the smell got stronger and stronger...

It went on and on, the wailing and bawling worse and worse, until finally, something cracked in Al. He stood up, and it was like his mind was on fire, like he was shooting comets out of his brain instead of thoughts.

STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! YOU STINKING GRINS, STOP IT!

The other kids took it up, first one, then another, then all of them, screaming at the Grins to stop. Al felt suddenly as if he were an atom of water in a huge wave, a tsunami of anger and justice.

And the Grins - stopped. But the kids didn't - the wave grew and grew, crushing down on the Grins, as they psionically gorged on each other's anguish, fear, and hatred.

Then a terrible white light filled the room, blinding, and everything broke off into confusion again. When the light came back down, when they could see again, they were so stunned that no one said or psied anything.

Because the Grins had taken off their masks. Al knew them.

Teacher Roberts. Teacher Hua. Ms. Chastain. Ms. Kitsuru. Teacher Alverado. Mr. King. Nurse Childress, who had held him and talked softly to him, sung him bedtime stories. They were all Grins. All of the adults.

All of the people who had raised him. The Corps.

Teacher Hua, the oldest, stepped forward into the stunned silence.

"Now you see," he said, gently. "And now, hopefully, you understand. The Corps is mother and father - and we are all mother and father to one another. We are the ones who raised you, taught you right from wrong, pleased you - and yes, frightened you. This is all to the good, and in the future you shall understand, even if you don't now.

"You are Cadre Prime. All telepaths are special, but you are the most special. The powers of most children do not bloom until they are eleven, twelve, older. Most of you manifested almost as you were born. Only five percent manifest before puberty. You are all rare.

"Cadre Prime. Telepaths born, and you have raised each other as much as we have raised you. When you move from here, from cadre dorms and into the academies - it will be different. You will live and work beside those who were raised as normals who realized their abilities later in life, who do not understand the Corps as you do. They say the words but do not understand in their hearts what it is to be Corps. It is your special gift to be able to teach them that, to show them by the example of how you live, how you learn, how you work together and apart.

"All of us - all of us who stand before you - we were once members of Cadre Prime. We are your mothers and fathers, we are your sisters and brothers. We stood before our elders as you now stand

before us. We were frightened, humiliated, angry - as you are. And together, as you did, we took up the cry, threw off the yoke, became mothers and fathers ourselves. Then they revealed themselves to us, as we have to you.

"Now it comes full circle. You were children. Now I say, you are not. You are us, and we are you."

Teacher Hua began taking off his clothes. The others did, too. Without the grey robes, teacher Hua was a scrawny old man with a potbelly. He did not look scary at all. He knelt before them, and the other adults followed suit.

"A moment ago, your minds were violated. That was to show you one reason the Corps was formed, why one must never invade the mind of another without their permission. That law must be inviolate. It will not be done to you again, and you must not do it to others, except in very special circumstances.

"One of those is now. Our minds are open. Our barriers are down. Do what you will."

For a long moment, it was impossible to believe. No one moved. They just stared at the kneeling adults, their teachers and friends, who were also their tormentors.

Then some began reaching out, understanding that it was true, that the barriers were indeed down. That the adults would do nothing to stop them. First one, then another of the kids nibbled at the unprotected minds, darting in to find some secret, and then out again, as if they feared some trap might be sprung.

Then, with the suddenness of critical mass, the room exploded, once again, with pain and shame, But this time, it came from the adults.

Al found he couldn't participate. He stood there, blinking at the world turned upside down, his heart clattering weirdly in his chest. Why were the adults allowing this? They were the ones in control - who would give that up?

But then he caught something, a presence - watching. Approving. The director?

It didn't matter, because he suddenly understood. The teachers weren't in charge, any more than he was. The Corps was mother and father, not any of the individuals in it. Teacher Hua's words began to make more sense.

When it was over, they were given black robes to wear, and more important - gloves. Al pulled his on, felt them close about his fingers. Gloves, at long last.

He was no longer a child.

Teacher Hua had said a lot, some of which Al understood, some of which he did not. But the thing he understood most clearly of all was something Teacher Hua had not said. It was a very simple thing, really, something he should have known all along.

Adults were no different from kids. They were not to be trusted, not as individuals. Teacher Hua could not be trusted. Ms. Chastain, despite all of her kindness, could not be trusted.

Only the Corps itself could be trusted, and only the Corps itself - its laws, its institutions, its entirety - deserved his loyalty.

He trusted the Corps. He would never trust another human being again.

That night, when he looked at the stars - when he dreamed - he looked for the face of his mother, with her dark red hair, he looked for his black-haired father. The ones he had always pictured when he said, "The Corps is mother, the Corps is father." Maybe they were his parents, his biological ones - he knew other kids had them.

Milla's even came to visit, though not very often anymore.

He had asked about his own, once, and was told they had been killed when rogues bombed Teeptown.

Maybe his infant mind remembered them, or maybe he had made them up, or lifted them from another kid.

Whoever they were or had been or had never been, they were gone now. There was nothing in the night sky but stars, nothing in his dreams but silence.

part ii: Antithesis

chapter 1

The backfist snapped to within an inch of his face, but Al didn't blink. He had known before Jackson flung it out that it would never connect.

The reverse punch was another story, that was the real attack, and Jackson drove it at Al's solar plexus with every ounce of his considerable strength and weight. Al wasn't there, though. He stepped aside and 'cast his next move: a ridge-hand to the back of his opponent's head. Jackson caught the thought - Al meant him to - and twisted to avoid the blow he knew was coming.

Al dropped into a crouch, both palms flat on the floor, extended his back leg like a boom, and spun. Since he was turning to avoid a blow to his head, Jackson's first indication of this came when his feet were clipped neatly from beneath him. A head taller and twenty pounds heavier than Al, he made a satisfying thud as he landed on the mat.

"Halt!" Sensei Kaplan called, stepping onto the mat. Jackson was struggling to his feet. Al could feel his frustration and hostility, and hoped the match would go on; Jackson lost all control of his strategy when he was like this.

But Kaplan ended the match. "Take note," he said. "Mr. Bester used the minimum motion necessary. He fought the battle where it really takes place - in the mind. He won before he began his attack. Mr. Jackson is a bigger man, but his mind is weaker." He gazed around at the group - all second-year students in the Minor Academy. "Attention. Class dismissed." They all bowed in unison.

Jackson glowered at Al before walking off, and Al answered with a thin smile. He could afford to be generous.

"Nice match, Al," said Raphael, a wiry young man with luminous black eyes.

"Thanks." He paused for an instant, trying to think how he might expand on the other's overture. It was an instant too long.

"Raphael," called Susan, from across the room. "How about some lunch?"

"Sure. See you tomorrow, Al."

"See you." He shrugged mentally. He had a class next hour anyway, and Raphael probably knew that.

Probably that was why he didn't ask Al along for lunch.

Probably. Al headed for the showers. He didn't have time for a lot of socializing, anyway. Standing in

the Minor Academy was absolutely critical, if he wanted to get into the MetaPol prep classes in the Major. That was just three years away.

Al was so deep in thought he almost bumped into Julia in the hall. He caught her signature just about the time he found himself face-to-face with the deep brown of her startled eyes.

"Oh- hi, Al," she said.

"Hi, Julia." Her face had narrowed, her features sharpened, though at fifteen the curves evident beneath her gold-and-umber uniform still hesitated between girl and woman. "How- how are things?"

"Pretty good," she allowed, her eyes straying around the white, almost antiseptic hall, as if searching for someone else in the hurried mass of students. "How about with you? I heard that you won the Karges award last year."

"Yes, I guess I did."

"I'm not really surprised. You were always the best in the cadre. We were wondering about you the other day..." She trailed off, probably just realizing that she had said "we." He knew, of course. The Minor Academy was large, but not that large. He had often noticed Julia, Milla, Brett, Azmun, Ekko, and most of the others from the cadre having lunch or playing soccer on the quads.

"Have you decided yet?" he asked. "Which school you might end up in?"

"Oh, well- yeah, I'm looking at the business school. Guess I'll be a busybody, like you always said. And you? You still want to be a Psi Cop?"

Al nodded. "Yes."

"Well- good luck at that. It won't be easy."

"Thanks. I..." As with Raphael, he wanted to say something else, but he wasn't sure what. It was a distinctly unpleasant feeling.

"I have to get to class," Julia said. "I guess I'll see you."

"Yeah. Me too. Well, nice running into you." He flashed her a smile he didn't feel, then started off.

"Hey, Al?" He turned, surprised to find her still regarding him.

"Yes?"

"I- some of the old Cadre Prime is going on a hike, up in the Alps. Sort of an unofficial reunion. You're welcome to come, if you want"

He blinked. "Sure," he said. "That might be fun."

She smiled, a bit shyly. "Saturday? We're going to meet out by the Grabber, about seven in the morning."

"Okay. Okay, I'll be there."

She hurried off, and he went on to statistics, wondering why his step felt a little lighter.

He made it through class, and managed to absorb a moderate amount of what Professor Diebold said. When the buzzer sounded, he headed, as usual, down to the West End MetaPol station.

The MetaPol Central Station was in the administrative complex. Students weren't barred from the area, but they were discouraged from it unless they had a specific assignment. The West End office was smaller, more intimate, and much more accessible. There were usually only six cops stationed there, and three of them were on assignment at any given moment.

A long-boned man with a heavy, angular face one shade lighter than ebony greeted him with a fierce, somewhat disconcerting smile. "Ah, Mr. Bester. And how are you on this fine day? Come to make your usual rounds?"

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant Van Ark. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. But- ah- I'll let you in on a little something."

"Sir?"

"We don't call each other by rank. That's for normals. We teeps, we know who we are."

"Oh. But on the vids-"

"Well, yes. But a lot of normals watch vids, stuff like John Trakker. They feel more comfortable with titles and ranks and that kind of thing, so we leave them to their illusions."

"Got you," Al said. It made sense. "So what do I call you?"

"Mr. Van Ark will do."

"Okay. Mr. Van Ark."

Van Ark chuckled. "How long have you been coming in here anyway, Mr. Bester? Four years now? You follow these Blips like some kids follow baseball or soccer."

"Yes, sir. When I become a Psi Cop, I want to know who they are."

"When? Not if? You've certainly got no problem with confidence, Mr. Bester. Anyway, it's good to see a youngster taking such an active interest. You're a good example. Still-" he widened his hands expressively "-you're in here every day, rain or shine! Don't you ever just take a day off? Fly a kite, take a girl on a picnic? When you get to be my age, you'll regret it."

Al reflected - very carefully, very controlled - that when he got as old as Van Ark, he intended to have a much higher rank than lieutenant, whether the title was spoken or not

"I'm going hiking this weekend," he remarked, to cover any hint of his reaction.

"Hah. Sounds like more work to me. But to each his own." Then he glanced at his computer screen. "Well, the monitors are there, if you want to look." It seemed to Al that the big man had adopted a devilish look on his face.

"Wow," Al said, his eyes widening as he scanned down the list of names. "They got Kashiwada, D'Amico, and Enoch. They've been on the hunt lists forever."

"Enoch since before you were born," Van Ark observed.

"All at the same time, too, it looks like. This morning. Hey, and there's Deitz, too." He frowned at the screen. "Something's up, isn't it? Something big."

Van Ark's laughter boomed for a few beats. "Well, I shouldn't be telling you this before it hits the vids, but I will if you swear to keep it quiet"

"The Corps is mother, the Corps is father," Al observed. "I would never betray the Corps."

Van Ark lowered his voice a bit. "They just hit a big underground cell in the United Islamic Nations - Kazakhstan, I think. The reports are still coming in. That's where they got those three."

"Can I see some more of it? Some of the reports?"

"Sure. Provided your oath of silence covers this, too."

"It does."

Van Ark reached his indenticard over and slid it through a slot. "Okay," he said, "You have access. Have fun."

Al nodded, and Van Ark moved to a seat nearby. What appeared before him was a précis of the strike, a list of Blips suspected to be at the site, and then a progress report. It was only level 4, of course, so all of the really nifty details were missing - sources, casualty reports, detailed tactical information and the like.

Nonetheless, it was instructive to compare the projected list against those registered captured. Enoch and Kashiwada they had expected to find; D'Amico had been a bonus. Those were the big boys.

On the second tier he recognized Klassen, Brazg, and Nielsson, all of whom had been on the general hunt lists for more than five years. Of these, only Klassen seemed to have been captured in today's raid. Did that mean that Brazg and Nielsson had slipped through the Corps' fingers, or that they had never been there in the first place?

Interesting. With a nod from the lieutenant he called up their individual files, wondering if their histories would provide a clue.

Lara Brazg was thirty and had been born in Canada. She had registered with Psi Corps at the age of fourteen, a P5, and gone on the sleepers. Disappeared at twenty-one. She was implicated in two assassination attempts and one package bombing, and had kidnapped at least two teeps from reeducation facilities. A classic type A Blip, she might even be a good person who had been led astray, brainwashed by some highly organized and cynical underground.

Her type could be shown the truth, saved, reeducated, and end up a useful member of the Corps. It had happened more than once. In her picture she looked pretty, a dirty blonde with a face smudged by light freckles.

Portis Nielsson was a different story. Born in the UK, he was a year younger than Brazg, but had a much longer rap sheet. Several felonies: two murders during a holdup, one count of manslaughter from a bar fight in Madrid, numerous petty and two grand theft indictments. He had spent six years in jail as a juvenile, but had never tested positive for telepathy.

Toward the end of his stay, the prison psychologist nevertheless had become convinced that Nielsson had psi abilities, but simply did not have the mitochondrial marker - not that unusual; after all, thirty percent of telepaths lacked it.

En route to a reeducation facility, Nielsson had escaped and had been at large ever since. In the past four years, his criminal activities had shifted focus to underground-related offenses. Nielsson looked like a type C Blip, a sociopath who had found an organization to validate him. While any teep could be brought around by reeducation, Nielsson's type - a born criminal, used to abusing his powers - was the toughest to change.

His photo seemed to confirm that - even on the vid screen, his eyes 'cast malice, and his square jaw was set in an intractable smirk.

"A nasty customer," Van Ark remarked, walking up behind him. "You'd be pressed to find even a mundane as ruthless as that one."

"The cops will get him," Al said

"You'll be interested in another little tidbit I picked up, too," Van Ark said, a bit conspiratorially.

"What's that, sir?"

"Stephen Walters has resurfaced."

Al scrunched a skeptical face. "He's been dead for twelve years."

"That's what we thought, but he was clever. He should be, he's the only Psi Cop to ever go rogue-"

"-only after he was mindblasted and reprogrammed by the Dexters," Al reminded him.

"Ah- yes," Van Ark replied. "Anyway, those bits of him they found at the blast site in Nicaragua must have been cultured tissue, because they just found some strands of his hair in this UIN raid."

"But not the man himself."

"No."

"Couldn't the hairs be pretty old?"

Van Ark wagged his head. "Living skin cells attached. Walters was there."

"Wow. The legend lives."

"Looks like it."

Al squared his jaw. "I almost hope he hangs in there until I'm a cop. I'll get him."

"Mr. Bester," Lieutenant Van Ark said, "I would never put it past you."

Al thought about rogues as he ran, a little later. He was trying to push his run to ten kilometers at six minutes a klick. He was on the third klick - always the worst - so he pushed himself faster and tried to occupy his mind with something other than the pounding of flesh and bone against duracrete.

Why would anyone go Blip? What did they hope to gain? Oh, men like Nielsson were easy to explain - they were just criminals using fellow criminals to help them stay out of jail. But what about the others? What could they possibly hope to find that Psi Corps couldn't give them?

He tried to picture himself, outside the Corps, a later, raised like a normal. Say he was twelve when he got his psi - what would he do out there in the mundane world? Take the sleeper drugs? That way he could hide his abilities, keep leading the life he was accustomed to - except that normals would find out, through personnel records, or official files. He couldn't get a job or even get housing without disclosing his nature, and the normals would still hate him, sleepers or no.

Or he could join Psi Corps, get a free education, room, board, job placement, protection from mundanes, the company of others like himself.

So rogues didn't want the sort of life normals had, and they didn't want the opportunity to hone their powers to the utmost, to live and work as telepaths. They don't want to be normals and they don't want to be teeps.

What do they want?

Well, they blew things up. Maybe that's all there was to it. They just wanted to cause trouble. There were certainly people like that.

He mulled it over more, but he seemed to have hit a wall. The answer was probably something pretty obvious, he mused. The problem was, you didn't want to go around asking questions like this about Blips - not if you wanted to be a Psi Cop. You were supposed to catch them, not understand them. Yet- wouldn't it be easier to catch them if you did understand them?

He was starting to feel his second wind coming, and that was always nice. He shelved the internal discussion in favor of the view, as his trail reached the top of the hill. He could see beyond the walls and wire that protected Teeptown to where the Rhone was leafed with sunset gold. A small smile on his face, he pushed himself into a sprint, felt like a galloping horse or a charging bull, invincible, immortal. Eventually he had to slow, but the feeling remained. And wedded to it, a pleasant-sounding name - Julia.

"Al! It's good to see you. I'm glad you could make it." Brett's smile was dazzling.

Al smiled thinly and took the other boy's glove in his own for a brief, firm handshake. "I haven't been hiking in a while," he said. "It sounded like fun."

"Did Julia tell you where we're going? Up near Mount Blanc. Ever been there?" He paused. "You did manage to get a pass, right?"

"Yes- to the pass. Not to Mont Blanc."

"We aren't actually going on Mont Blanc - but pretty near. You'll like the hike. The place where we camp has a great view, and we might be able to catch a few fish."

Al nodded, since that didn't seem to require any other response. Brett had grown in the bone - he was two heads taller than Al, with the sort of ruggedly handsome face one saw on Psi Corps recruitment posters.

Al took note of the "we" and the past tense in Brett's comment. These guys had made the hike before, maybe often. It wasn't, as Julia said, a reunion. They were already unified; it was only Al Bester, the outsider, who was rejoining them. But why? What did they want with him?

The others - Milla, Azmun, Ekko - greeted him, but their enthusiasm was guarded, and this sharpened his suspicions, but Julia was all smiles. He allowed himself, reluctantly, to consider what he hoped to be the truth: that Julia liked him and had invited him on her own, even knowing that the others might not be all that happy about it.

"We'll take the train up to Chamonix, and hike from there," Brett was explaining, as they moved on line to purchase their tickets. "When we come down, we can get another train back at St. Gervais."

"Sounds good."

"And, um- did you bring anything else to wear?"

Al glanced briefly at his standard issue brown outdoor pants, gold shirt, and light academy jacket.

"Sure, I have a change."

"No, I mean- you know, not issue?"

"Why shouldn't I wear issue?" Al asked, noticing, suddenly, that none of the rest of them were.

"In case we run into normals," Milla said, very simply.

Al shrugged. "What if we do? I'm not ashamed of the Corps."

"It's not that," Brett said. "It's just better- I mean, you can never tell what normals will do."

"Hey," Al said, with a rare burst of old pride. "We're Cadre Prime. Let them do their worst."

The moment he said it, it rang wrong, awkward, and he was sorry he'd said it. But Brett's eyes widened, and he said, "Well, yeah! Darn right! I forgot, we've got the winner of the Karges award with us. With you, we can handle anything."

"Come on, Al, you sit by me," Julia said, as they went through the sliding door and onto the train.

The first leg of the hike was a breeze, though Al found he had to pace himself down so the others could keep up. As a result, he found himself springing up slopes, then waiting for the others. It was clear that, even physically, he trained harder than they did.

As the day wore on, a little of the awkwardness wore off. After all, they had grown up together, even if he hadn't seen them a lot lately. They were cadre. They had faced the Grins together. He was used to them.

The same couldn't be said for the other academy students. Oh, some were from the secundus or tertius cadres, but even they had grown up mostly as normals or in the Basement. Most of them - almost all of those in his classes - were actually laterals, hadn't gotten their psi until they were twelve or older. He hadn't really tried to make friends with most of them; they thought he was weird, he could tell, or

were maybe even a little afraid of him. That was probably for the best - it left him more time to train, to better prepare himself for the Major Academy.

The hike was pleasant. Wildflowers spangled the sunlit meadows and upland pastures, and the forest was an evergreen cathedral. Al had rarely been in the woods - a few picnics and field trips when they had been kids, not once since entering the Minor Academy. It was something he kept meaning to do, but never quite felt he had the time for.

They were taking a rest against an old stone wall - for a moment silent, perhaps in appreciation of the day - when they heard voices coming up the trail behind them. Al could sense weak, undisciplined minds - normals, of course. He started to shut them out, then out of curiosity he didn't. He hadn't had much contact with normals.

They came over the hill soon enough. Five young men, maybe a few years older than he. Two were tall and lanky, enough alike that they might be brothers. One was no taller than Al, but a good deal thicker, almost bulldoglike, with a single, long, black eyebrow. The other two were of middle build, a redhead and a blond.

They were chattering cheerfully about something in French, and briefly acknowledged the telepaths with almost imperceptible nods as they passed.

All but one, Bulldog-boy, whose gaze, tracking with interest over the girls, suddenly fastened on Al.

"Q'est-ce que c'est que ça?" he asked, rather abruptly. He was pointing at Al's academy clothing. "Eh?" He jabbed the finger as if spearing something. "What's the matter, you? Can't read my mind in French?"

His friends had turned now. "Viens, Antoine," one of the lanky ones said.

"No, no," Antoine snapped, waving them back. "For so long I have wanted to meet one of these little prodigies. Are all of you mindscrewers, or do you just carry this one as a pet?" he asked Brett and the others.

Al tightened his lips and said nothing, but Brett answered him in French. "Look, fellows, we're just on a hike. We don't want any trouble."

"Trouble? Are you saying we're trouble?"

"No. I didn't say that."

"Just go on your way," Al advised.

"Oh, is that an order, Captain Mindscrewer?"

"It's a suggestion," Al said. He noticed his knees felt funny. The whole scene had become a little unreal, as if the light had abruptly changed. His heart was beating faster. Almost without thinking, he flexed his knees.

"Oh, a suggestion. Well, I have a couple of those myself," Bulldog-boy said. "I suggest that you stay in your kennels back in Geneva, and not wander up here where decent folk might have to see you. I suggest you stay out of my damned mind."

"Psi Corps regulations forbid unauthorized scans," Al pointed out. He paused a beat, and then was surprised to hear himself continue. "Besides, I wouldn't read your mind any more than I would step in dogshit on purpose."

Bulldog-boy-Antoine grinned, revealing teeth like piano ivories. "Aw, that's cute. Psi-Ko made a joke." He pronounced the p.

Julia attempted a smile. "Come on, guys--"

"Hey, boys, the pslut can talk. What else can you do, pslut?"

Al gave the boy a curious look, reached out, and thumped him on the nose.

What happened next was a blur. Al expected the boy to attack him - he had been working up to that anyway, that was clear. He had expected to know where the blow was coming from, like when he did a karate or fencing drill with a weaker teep.

But this wasn't a drill, and Antoine didn't think at all about what he did next - a javelin of pure rage speared Al in the brain, blinding his mind, and sledgehammer fists were just an instant behind, slamming into Al without focus, but with amazing violence. He pulled his arms up reflexively, so his forearms took most of the percussion meant for his head, but he still reeled back, was still backpedaling when his opponent's head butted into him and slammed him into a tree. Then Antoine was on top of him, battering down with those hamlike fists - And then he was off, howling and gasping for air. Al blinked his eyes open to see Brett standing by, fists balled, radiating a cold determination.

"Leave," Brett said.

Bulldog-boy's friends had him now. "C'mon, Antoine," one of the tall ones said. "He isn't worth it. He'll get you arrested, and then what?"

Antoine glowered and came slowly to his feet. Al managed to climb shakily to his own. His breath was choppy, and he tried to slow it, as he had been taught.

Antoine grimaced a terrible, smilelike expression. "Bet you don't think you're so hot now, do you, mindscrewer? If it hadn't been for your friend, I'd have pounded you senseless, eh?"

Al reached out with his psi. He could feel the hot, stupid little mind. He could do almost anything with it.

Push it any way he wanted. He could give Antoine a seizure, he could fill his mind with nightmare, he could rip his thoughts to...

But no, that was against the rules - it would be betraying the Corps. So he had to watch as the boys hiked on, Antoine sneering back at him until they were out of sight. He could p'hear their coarse laughter well after he couldn't hear it anymore.

chapter 2

"Don't let it get to you, Al," Julia soothed. Al watched new wood starting to scorch on the campfire, unconsolated. How could a normal have beaten him? In front of Julia, in front of everyone?

If he had planned to humiliate himself, he couldn't have done a better job.

"I felt his mind," she went on. "He was like an animal."

"Yes," Al replied, "he was. A dumb animal. One I should have beaten."

"Hey," Brett interjected, "bullfighters have to be trained to fight bulls. We haven't had much practice against normals."

"You beat him."

"I blindsided him. And I wasn't trying to beat him, just get him off of you. Come on, cheer up. You'll know better next time."

"I could have mindblasted him in a second," Milla grumbled. "We could have taken them all. What's the point of having superior brains if we can't use them?"

"Because that would be selfish," Al muttered. "We're supposed to protect and serve, not use our powers to satisfy our own needs."

"You believe that?"

Al looked up at her, startled. Not so much that she had thought it, but that she had said it

"Yes," he replied.

"We're supposed to protect and serve guys like Antoine? Give me a break."

"Look it up," Al said. "It's in the handbook."

"Normals wrote the handbook, Al."

"The Corps wrote the handbook. The rules are good." *I just screwed up*, he thought. *I could have taken him.*

Next time... He sighed. He had already replayed the fight in his head a hundred times. It wasn't

helping.

What stayed with him was the sick feeling of fear, the awful realization that there was a real difference between facing someone on the dojo floor and facing someone who really wanted to hurt you. The physical blows hadn't really damaged him - he doubted that he would even bruise. But the memory of his fear was like a dead star in his belly, and everything in him was falling into it.

He looked up at Brett. "Anyway, thank you." He hated saying it.

"We have to hang together," Brett said. "Cadre Prime."

Al remembered his boast, earlier that day, about Cadre Prime being able to handle anything, and Brett's remark about how they must be invincible if they had Al Bester, winner of the Karges award, along with them.

The dead star ate another bite, and Al suddenly felt queasy. "I'm going for a walk," he murmured. "I'll be back soon."

He wound his way up through the trees, skirting the edge of a twilight meadow, found a spot in the violet-brocaded field and lay on his back, watching a cloud skewered by twin contrails with dull eyes. It was vaguely heart-shaped, salmon bruised mauve by the shadow of the Earth crushing down upon it. For a moment he felt absolutely still, and there were no voices at all. He experienced an unexpected, melancholy peace, watching the sky fade. His body felt heavy, as if he were becoming stone, and as he petrified he could sense the ponderous, slow wheeling of the Earth through space.

He had lost track of time, somewhat hypnotized by the feeling, when he heard voices near, hushed ones, whispering. The sounds were too faint, but he knew from their surface thoughts that it was Brett and Julia.

They were excited about something. Looking for him? Worried? He closed his eyes, trying to get them clearer, and suddenly- Warm lips, pressing against his, and arms reaching around. A body, prickly-warm, slim, a joy in the arms, breath tickling against his neck- He shut it out, blocked and locked, returning to a now artificial silence. Julia and Brett. Of course.

The stars came out, and still he didn't move or relax his blocks. He did not want to feel, even for an instant, what he had just felt or what might follow. He waited until he was sure, as the air chilled, and his rock body lost even its Human warmth.

Finally, tentatively, he opened again, blessedly to silence. Feeling sore and weary, he stood and made his way back toward camp.

He stopped when he saw the firelight. They were all there, their faces picked out in fine detail, even at this distance, like a faraway painting by a Dutch master. They were smiling and laughing, and he could sense something emanating from them. He tightened his control, and suddenly knew beauty.

He could never explain it to a normal. He could barely explain it to himself. He could sense the signature of each individual, but there was something more, a tapestry of thought and feeling they

wove together, impossibly intricate and familiar. like the mants they had done as kids, but infinitely more complex, more practiced, and yet at the same time more natural. They were different, each of them, but they were also one in the thing they created together.

And in all of those weaving lines, in the subtle word-and-image play, in the shared secrets and emotion, there was not a single empty space. They were full, complete, a living organism. There was no place or need for Al Bester.

It's always going to be like this, he thought. Me, out here, in the dark. Sometimes I can look into a window, see people in love, see people with friends. But I'll always be out here.

He also realized that it was okay. One had to be stronger out here. His allegiance to the Corps could remain untainted. How could he really protect and serve all humanity if he went in there, inside? If he loved anyone-if anyone loved him-it would only serve to weaken him. If he were a part of their tapestry, of their song, their power to betray him would be almost infinite.

But they were beautiful. He would protect them - Julia, Milla - yes, even Brett. He would protect all of them, all of his people. But to do that, he had to be what he had been tonight. Stone.

Antoine couldn't have hurt stone. Julia couldn't have hurt stone.

I'm glad I feel this way. I'm glad to admit it's over.

But he did have a question to ask.

"That must have been some walk," Julia said the next morning, as they packed up the camp. "You didn't come in until we were all asleep."

"I was just- thinking," Al told her. He took a deep breath. "And wondering."

"About what?"

"About why you asked me along on this trip."

"Because you're our friend, Al. Because we miss you."

He paused. "I don't think that's the truth. Won't you tell me the truth?"

She wouldn't meet his gaze. "I- Al, we were worried about you."

"Why?"

"Your professors are worried about you. They don't think you have any friends. And you didn't stay in touch with us-"

"You didn't stay in touch with me," he corrected.

"Al, you never liked us. We never thought you did. We thought you were happy to be away from us. But the teachers worried, and-"

"-and they asked you to do something with me. You bumped into me on purpose, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Are you angry?"

"No." It was the truth - he didn't feel angry at all. "No, I'm grateful. I used to worry about having friends - everyone else seems to. Sometimes I think it would be nice to have people to talk to-" He broke off, remembering watching them the night before, remembering also the stolen feel of Julia's lips. "Anyway, I don't care about that anymore. I'm over it. And you can tell the teachers not to worry."

"Al..."

"It's okay, Julia. Thanks for asking me along. I've learned a lot."

He didn't speak anymore on the trip down the mountain, and after a while nobody really tried to speak to him. When they reached the train station at St. Gervais, he broke his silence to say that he would buy their tickets if they wanted to grab some lunch at the restaurant on the corner, and he would join them there. They accepted the offer; he knew they would talk, and Julia would tell them everything he had said. He didn't really care.

The line was surprisingly long, but he supposed it was Sunday - there must be a lot of people returning from the country.

Surrounded by normals, he felt a little dirty. He almost imagined that they smelled different, earthier. He caught an older woman in a black shirt buttoned to the top staring at his clothes, her distaste undisguised by what, a moment before, he had taken for pleasant features. A dark, rotund man, who had also taken note of him, wore a stonier expression. Al returned the old woman's gaze, narrowed his eyes, then smiled faintly, nodding as if to himself. She reddened and looked away. He had not scanned her - not even touched her surface thoughts - but he let her wonder about that, about what dirty little secret he might have uncovered.

He found himself slightly cheered by this.

He was three back in the line now, and the longhaired woman buying tickets turned and hurried off, preoccupied. She didn't see him at all, but he caught a vague whiff of-fear?

He glanced after her. He knew her, he was certain, he just couldn't quite place the face. Something about the hair wasn't right, and the eyes.

He felt a little catch in his throat, an acrid taste on his tongue. It was Lara Brazg. A rogue. A Blip.

The raid had been in the UIN. He pictured those who had escaped, radiating outward, rats fleeing a sinking ship, searching for another place to hide.

Brazg had been there after all, and gotten away. And now here she was, hurrying off to catch a train.

He didn't hesitate for an instant. It all seemed so clear, what he should do. The next person was done, and he stepped up to the window.

"Five for Geneva, please," he said, and at the same time, lightly, glyphed the image of Brazg at the woman.

She didn't seem to notice anything unusual - probably because Brazg had been there so recently - but the information bounced right out of the ticket seller's surface thoughts. Paris. Brazg's ticket was for Paris.

"And one for Paris," Al finished. He passed her his card. This would nearly clean out his meager allowance, but what better way to spend it?

At the restaurant, he paused for an instant, wondering if he should tell them, but no. Brett, at least, might want to go along - or more likely would call the Corps. That didn't fit Al's version of the immediate future. So he smiled and put the tickets on the table.

"We got you a sandwich," Julia said, a little too brightly.

"Thanks. Just let me go wash up."

But he went straight past the washroom, hoping there was a rear door and finding it. He went out and jogged quickly back to the station. There, he used the few credits left in his chit to buy a black overshirt and pulled it on, hiding his academy garb. Then he was off to catch the train to Paris.

He felt a peculiar humming in his blood, a sort of fierce joy that washed through his disappointments like a cold, cleansing stream.

He was on the hunt.

chapter 3

Al watched the farmland of Bourgogne whip by, startled by the quality and quantity of green, intrigued by the small hamlets with their ancient churches, by the antique feel of the landscape. A hundred years ago - three hundred years ago, if he had taken this same train ride, how different would it have been?

It made him feel smaller. His own history began and ended with Teeptown. His biological parents had died in a terrorist bombing, and he had never known them. His earliest memories were of the creche. For Al, Teeptown was like an album of memories; any route he took through it jogged constant reminders of his childhood and the lessons he had learned. He still flushed with shame when he passed the steps where he'd betrayed Brett - that place haunted him. Crossing the sidewalk between the old cadre dorms and the Minor Academy never failed to remind him of that terrible and wonderful day when the Grins revealed themselves.

The statue of William Karges held new significance each time he saw it, as did the parade ground, the quads.

His personal story was a thread in the tapestry of Psi Corps history.

But out here, he felt unraveled, a strand drifting on an ocean of time. A million years of normal history, a landscape that held no clear meaning for him, a huge book written in a foreign tongue.

He found he did not entirely dislike the feeling. It was frightening, but it was a challenge, as well.

He found Lara Brazg the old-fashioned way, by walking up the train until he spotted her. She sat pressed against the glass like a fish in an aquarium, seemingly oblivious to the interior of the train. Al was not deceived; even with his blocks as tight and subtle as they could be, he sensed that she was watching quite carefully through the eyes of those around her. He passed on through the car at a measured pace, trailing a faint- hopefully "normal" -feeling that he was in search of an unoccupied toilet.

Two cars up, he relaxed a bit. Teeps could often sense each other over great distances, especially if they wanted to, but it required a mutual and cooperative effort to exchange any real information without line of sight.

Well, he knew where she was, what now? The safest thing would be to call the Corps station in Paris and have cops waiting to pick her up. But that would defeat his whole purpose in following her. He wanted to catch her himself. He wanted the Corps to know that they had done a good job in training and raising him.

He wanted Cadre Prime to know what he gained when he lost them - and thus what they had lost. He couldn't bear the thought of Brett and the rest feeling sorry for him, which at the moment they almost certainly did.

But how to collar her? Psi Cops carried weapons, which he didn't have. He might be able to subdue her physically, but his encounter with Antoine had left him a little dubious of his abilities. That left psi attacks, and he knew several that ought to work - she was, after all, only a P5. He could push her, or maybe spark out her cortex and while she was out of it, tie her hands behind her back with the cord in his backpack- While a bunch of normals screamed bloody murder. She would keel over and they would see him start tying her up. He didn't have a badge or anything other than his Psi Corps ID. Probably he would end up getting arrested himself, by railroad security.

Maybe he should just have a talk with security first, explain who he was, and all of that. That seemed like a good compromise. He would still be the representative of Psi Corps, making the collar, because the train cop would be a normal, and a normal couldn't risk going up against a Blip by himself. Even a P5 could make a mess out of a normal.

He continued toward the front of the train. The security man wasn't hard to spot, a middle-aged fellow whose balding head was nearly hidden by his long-billed cap. Al sucked up his confidence and approached him.

"Sir?"

Watery blue eyes met his gaze. "Yes, son?"

Al lowered his voice. "Sir, my name is Alfred Bester. Is there someplace we can talk in private? I think there may be trouble on the train, and I don't want to panic anyone."

Al didn't need surface thoughts to catch the mixture of skepticism and concern on the man's face, but after a moment, the cop nodded. "Up here, in my office."

A few moments later, they closed a narrow door behind them and stood in a cabin with a coffeemaker, a surveillance camera system, a table with an AI and a half-eaten sandwich on a plastic dish, and a narrow bunk. "What's this about, son?"

"You have a rogue telepath on the train."

"A rogue?" His eyes widened perceptibly.

"Yessir. I'm a student at the Psi Corps academy in Geneva, and I recognized her from her picture. She's been on the hunt lists for some time, and she's considered dangerous."

"Well. Have you called ahead to the Psi Cops in Paris?"

"No, sir. I think that the two of us could take her - I'm a P12, and I can run interference with pretty much anything she might try, while you take her into custody. Do you carry a side arm?"

"I have a shock stick. Here, you know her name? Can you pull her up on my database? We need to find a match with her ticket."

"Yessir." Al turned to the keyboard and began shifting to the requisite screen, hoping the cop would go along with him, rather than calling the Corps station in Paris.

Paris? This train had half a hundred stops, some before Paris, some after. How had the security man known Brazg was getting off in Paris? Al hadn't mentioned that he even knew where Brazg was going.

Without that thought, what he sensed next might have come too late. As it was, everything clicked at once, and he hurled himself to the side, crashing into the bulkhead, as a shock stick crackled through the space he had just occupied.

This time, his first reaction wasn't fear but anger. Mauled by two normals in as many days? No.

The train cop lifted the shock stick for another try. Al noticed, with the odd clarity of adrenaline-heightened perceptions, the pucker of wrinkled skin on the cop's elbows, the storm-tang ozone scent of the weapon.

He struck. The normal had no guards at all. His mind was watery and open and- delicious. It was as if Al had been shelling walnuts his entire life and was suddenly offered a plate of them, already shelled...

What he did wasn't fancy- he just sparked him, sent a powerful jolt into the cop's ancient, limbic, lizard backbrain, the first rock in an avalanche that roared forward toward consciousness, gathering fears, images, and pains in an unstoppable cascade of waking nightmares that obliterated his thinking mind in an instant.

He groaned like a lost soul, his pupils suddenly became pinpricks, and he dropped the shock stick, lurched back against the door.

Al grasped and lifted the shock stick carefully, and touched it to the man's temple. The cop jerked, fell prone, and kept jerking. Al found a pair of handcuffs in the man's back pocket and snapped them onto the unresisting wrists.

Now what?

For a moment he didn't care. He felt like the unstoppable Juggernaut of Hindu legend, an elemental force that had been contained for too long. He just stood there, grinning, hands clenching and unclenching, wishing another normal would come at him, just try something. He felt- He sipped in a deep, calming breath. He felt too good. This was exactly why Psi Corps had the rules it did.

He had always considered himself controlled, strong- compared to most he knew, he was. And yet this could be addictive, more addictive than a drug. Only his training had saved him, and the strong principles taught by the Corps.

It suddenly occurred to Al that he now understood some of what it might be that rogues desired -

freedom to exercise their abilities whenever and however, on whomever they wished. That could be a powerful incentive, as he had just learned - but not an admirable one.

So indeed, what now?

He took off the cop's shoes, then his socks, balling up the last and placing them in the fellow's mouth. The cop was starting to come around, and once his eyes were somewhat clear, Al came to the painful decision that he was going to have to break a regulation. He probably had already - pushing a normal, even in self-defense. Still, at this point it would probably be for the greater good if Al Bester survived.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, aloud, and then scanned for both the willing and unwilling response.

He got it, and nodded grimly. The cop's name was Alistor Hech, and he was a rogue sympathizer. That's why Brazg was on this train to begin with. Even so, if he turned Hech in, the cop likely would report him for unauthorized scanning.

Well, that was for later. He probed a little more, but the normal didn't know anything else, or if he did it would take a deep scan to find it. Even under the circumstances Al wasn't willing to go that far.

What Al knew was what he had started with: Brazg would get off in Paris, and from there on out only she knew her plans.

The door rattled, suddenly, and Hech started making frantic gagging noises. Gripping the shock stick, Al dithered for an instant. The door was locked, but if the person on the other side had a key- He placed his fingers against the door and concentrated.

"Hech?" he heard, muffled.

He's not in here, No one is in here (glyph of the room, empty; glyph of Hech, walking though the aisles of the train). No one is in here. The room is empty.

He kept it going, his limbs beginning to shake with the effort.

"Huh." Someone on the other side of the door grunted, finally, and Al heard footsteps receding.

Hech glared up at him from the floor.

"Make noise again, and I'll be forced to make certain you are silent," Al said, quietly. He wasn't at all sure what that meant, but he let the normal think the worst, for now.

His legs had gone noodly, so he sat down at one of the small chairs. He was going to have to stay in here, with Hech, until they reached Paris, that much was clear. If he left the compartment, someone would find the cop and they would then find him. Despite some vids he had seen to the contrary, he didn't think anyone could hide effectively on a train.

Al began to regain some of his strength and all of his confidence. A little more searching of Hech

turned up a pocket phone and a 9mm snub-nosed Dayak. He had a pistol and shock stick now, and he had proven that he could handle a trained security man without the aid of any weapon at all. He could handle a Blip, too.

An almost imperceptible deceleration - and the info-strip on the wall - alerted him when the next stop was Paris. He tucked the pistol in the waistband of his pants, folded a day-old copy of Universe Today around the shock stick, took a deep breath, and started for the door.

He paused before opening it, staring down at Hech. He knelt by him, wondering if he could plant a compunction to keep the fellow from talking about him. Maybe, but probably not. Anyway, that would be going way, way too far. He was in trouble enough as it was. But perception could be as powerful as the real thing, couldn't it?

"I'm planting a compunction in your mind," he told Hech. "You won't feel it, or know it's there - unless you try to talk about me or this incident. If you do that, you will find yourself having a nasty recurring nightmare each and every time you close your eyes. It won't be pleasant"

Then he just probed a bit, ran his mental fingers over the contours of Hech's mind-enough so the cop could feel him. Almost as an afterthought, he touched him with the shock stick again. That should keep him quiet for the next few minutes, anyway.

He opened the door, saw and felt no one in the corridor. He went out and locked the door behind him. Then, straightening, he walked back the way they had come, trying to exude confidence. "Act like you belong somewhere, and people will think you do." Teacher Diebold had told him that, years ago.

Outside, city rushed by, the jumble of the industrial district, with buildings like giant pipes and vast, rusted machines - and glimpses of the skyline now and then. He made his way to where he had spotted Brazg, and his heart fell.

She was nowhere to be seen.

chapter 4

For a moment he stood rigid. Had she been warned somehow? She might have detected him the instant he walked past her on the train, gotten off five stops back while he was hiding in Hech's cabin.

Suddenly things were a lot less promising than they had been. He had assaulted a train cop and had nothing to show for it. Once Hech figured out that Brazg was gone - and his connection to her as improvable as his assault on Al - he could bring charges with impunity. Scans weren't admissible in the courtroom, so it was just Al's word against his. Any jury would favor a mundane - after all, teeps weren't allowed to serve on juries.

The relief was almost dizzying when he realized that Brazg had left her seat only to join the impatient crowd waiting to deboard.

Got you, he thought, breathing for the first time in a significant number of moments. And he followed her off of the train into a chaos he could never, in his wildest dreams, have imagined.

Al had read about Paris, of course, the City of Light. He had imagined it as a place of ancient, eldritch beauty, a sort of fairyland of beret-capped artists and thinkers basking leisurely and thoughtfully in the gentle glory of the past. At night it would be a city made of stars, a constellation brought to Earth. That was what he had imagined. It wasn't what he saw.

The Gare de Lyon was a severe and spacious building, rebuilt sometime after the last World War, when it - like much of the city - had been blasted by terrorists. Al's first impression was of a large oven full of rats, just beginning to warm up. The rodents - instinctively beginning to understand their fate - were squirming, writhing, clamoring to get out. Except their dim little rat brains didn't know where "out" was, so they just formed a struggling mass.

He had never encountered struggling masses before - not in Teeptown, not in Geneva. He lost sight of Brazg within seconds, caught a glimpse of her moving quickly, lost her again. She was in a hurry. Al picked up his pace, trying to weave through the crowd. He cracked his blocks so he could get a telepathic whiff of Brazg.

It was as if a thousand people all tried to shriek something very important at once. He gasped, involuntarily slapping his hands to his head, his head which was expanding like a balloon, stretching thinner, thinner. The crowd became a series of vid stills, each different, the thousand motions between each unseen. The mindroar went in and out, as if he were a radio with poor reception.

Then he managed to shut it all down and realized he had slumped to his knees. People glanced at him with expressions ranging from neutral to irritated as they made their way around him.

He shook his head and stood again. That had been stupid. And he had no idea how long he had fugued.

Probably only seconds, but - he glanced at his watch, then remembered he had not glanced at it before, so he still didn't how much time had passed.

He looked wildly around, wondering what to do. He had two options - he could descend the escalators into the underground, or exit up to the street. If he chose the wrong direction, he would certainly lose any chance that remained of finding Lara Brazg.

He glanced at the torrent of people passing into the depths below the city and shuddered. He could not go that way, not right now.

He came out of the station on the Rue de Lyon, a narrow, bustling cobblestone street surrounded by dirty grey buildings that looked as if they should have crumbled long ago. It had just rained, and a peculiar stench mingled with the tang of wet stones, a stink made of a thousand stinks, as if somehow, impossibly, the city remembered open sewers, burning diesel and petrol, the sulfur of ancient gunfire - every chemical that had ever oozed or diffused on it since the beginning of time.

It was another alien scene, more threatening by far than the countryside - and yet somehow thrilling, as well.

More exciting still was his glimpse of Lara Brazg, vanishing around a curve. This time, better prepared, he telescoped a tight, tunnel-like probe in her direction and got it, an impression of her mind as individual as a fingerprint, or perhaps more appropriately, as a scent to a bloodhound. He wished he could risk a light scan, to maybe catch where she was headed if he lost her again, but he couldn't. A teep of Brazg's abilities would never notice him tracking her, but anything more blatant might set off some alarms in her head.

Al hurried up the street, on the hunt again. He followed her sign, crossed a deeply recessed canal on a small iron footbridge. To his faint surprise, the canal vanished into a vaulted tunnel not far to his right, running underneath a broad plaza. An emerald pleasure boat arabesqued with gilded lilies was just passing beneath the arch. He stared into it for a moment, but had no sense that she had gone there, either on the boat or the narrow footpaths flanking the waterway.

He looked around for street signs, and realized, with the surprise of a tourist who happens upon a place he's heard of, that it was the Place de la Bastille, where once had stood the city's most famous prison. It was gone now, the square now dominated by the looming Opéra Bastille, itself nearly three hundred years old. The plaza seemed to have been built over the canal.

Where once the prisoners of the French kings had languished, vendors hawked trinkets and souvenirs, and tacky shops and cafés looked inward to the July Column with its gilded statue of Liberty. A small cluster of Centauri tourists - dressed in immaculate and ornate garb, and accompanied by what looked like an armored guard with a sword - picked their way through the shops. It was hard not to be distracted by them - he had never seen a live extraterrestrial before - but he tried to keep his mind on the task at hand. Nonetheless, once again the Blip had vanished from sight

But not from mind. She was here, somewhere- he could feel her.

He stood for a while trying to sort her out of the colorful crowd of tourists and entrepreneurs. He managed the roar better this time - people were farther apart, but more, he was quickly adapting to the new conditions.

He caught the catlike thoughts of a pickpocket moving up on unsuspecting marks; the passion of two young lovers; the hatred an old woman harbored for holiday season and the locustlike swarms of gawkers it brought. The slightly odd feel of the Centauri minds, their amused disdain at almost everything they saw.

Still he couldn't pinpoint Brazg. She was still, cocooned, probably in one of the buildings.

And he must look a little suspicious, he realized, standing in the open, staring like this.

He walked around the edge of the square, and when he thought he felt her strongest he took a seat at a small sidewalk café. He tried to cultivate a relaxed appearance, to separate his expression and body language from his purpose.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when a fluid male voice said, "What do you want?" nearly in his ear. It was French, harsher than the gentle dialect of Switzerland, but still perfectly intelligible.

"A cup of coffee, please," Al said, in the same language. "And what else do you have?"

"Eh?" the waiter said.

"A cup of coffee," Al repeated, "and I would like to see a menu."

"I am sorry, sir," the waiter said, "I do not speak German, or whatever that is. I speak only French."

Al frowned up at the man. He had Brazg's scent as firm as a beacon in his mind, now, and it still wasn't going anywhere. He could spare a moment to touch the surface thoughts of the waiter. And the waiter was lying.

"You understand me perfectly well," Al said. "If you don't want to serve me, fine, but I'm going to sit here, nevertheless. Play your games with some tourist - not with me."

The waiter's lips pinched tight, and then he twitched a Gallic shrug. "As you say, monsieur," he growled, and stalked back into the café.

Al returned his attention to the square. He gazed up at the little statue of Liberty, covered with pigeons and the white streaks of their droppings. Evening had arrived on pastel wings, and as it came lower and darker there was a vague sense of being in a city sunken beneath the waves. Everything had a bluish tint, a sense of depth, a little melancholy. Over the rooftops and beyond, a great ivory cathedral was visible - the Sacré Coeur? It might have been an Atlantean temple. Across the square, a trio of musicians started playing Peruvian music, the soft but insistent trills of their quenas twining up from a solid foundation of guitar.

The minds around him were still busy, but the city seemed to be taking a long, deep breath. As if Paris and its inhabitants weren't quite the same thing. It seemed, too, that once he had tuned out the particular thoughts of those around him there was a sort of pattern, or series of patterns, quite beautiful in their own way.

He thought once again of the moment he had spied upon, only the day before, the manting of Brett, Julia, and the others. This was so much more vast, and so much more unconscious.

Geneva had always been there, in the background. Not something he had noticed, really, or thought of as singular. But Paris was- different from Geneva, its psychic air as distinct in flavor as its physical atmosphere.

Did cities have a sort of mental gestalt, a psionic fingerprint, as identifiable as a person, once apprehended?

It was an intriguing thought. Beautiful, even.

His coffee came, and he sipped it He ordered a sort of sandwich of thick bread and oysters. He waited, and like so many before him, tried to understand Paris.

The waiter had begun to glare at him for overstaying his welcome at the café, and it was quite dark, when he suddenly became certain that Brazg was on the move again. He let the waiter credit his account, but remained sitting for the moment

The city was alive with light now, but once again, Paris didn't meet his expectations. That was okay, he mused. He had found his fairy constellation in the subtle mind of the city, if not in its lamps.

A figure passed through the shadows on the plaza and then through a streetlight. To the eye, it might have been a man or woman, in shapeless sweater and baggy pants. The hair was short and looked black.

The mind was Brazg, though. He was certain of it.

He rose as she reached the far side of the square, where she vanished, bit by bit into the ground - first feet then knees, then shoulders, finally head.

The canal. She had gone down the steps into the canal.

He followed, trying to keep his pace casual, but feeling it quicken anyway. He did not want to lose her again.

Centuries of feet had worn a shallow trough down the steps. He almost stopped to stare at it, astonished by the signatures of age. There was nothing like this in Teeptown. Were there such places in Geneva? Not where he usually went.

As he reached the walkway, Brazg was moving out of the circle of one of the lights picketing the canal. The shadow she moved into stretched some hundred feet or so, and beyond that lights on the

ceiling of the tunnel picked up again. The ones nearest the tunnel mouth seemed to be malfunctioning.

There were only a few people out and they were walking far ahead of Brazg. He made out three small craft coasting silently down the waterway.

Now was the perfect time to apprehend her.

Or maybe he should wait and see where she was going? He might find an entire underground cell.

He slipped into the darkness, trying to decide.

A soft sound, a whisper of mind - he whirled, adrenaline stabbing through his heart. Something weighty and fast jacked up the point of his chin, and he hurled back. The stone wall caught him. As he steadied himself against it, still amazed at the weird click his teeth had made when they snapped together, he reached for the pistol in his waistband.

Ah- no. Stay very still, or I will bleed you like a pig.

It was strongly 'cast, and Al found himself looking a bit crosseyed down the narrow tube of a fléchette pistol.

Behind it, a half-shadowed face grinned at him. Though he had seen it only in photographs, he recognized it instantly by its scars, by its stone killer eyes.

Portis Nielsson.

chapter 5

"Look, Lara," Nielsson said. "Got ourselves a regular John Trakker here."

Brazg approached from the left. Even in the dim light, her face seemed haggard, with crescents under her eyes nearly as dark as her newly dyed hair.

"Why have you been following me?" she asked wearily, then frowned. "Port, he's just a boy."

"But what kind of boy?" Nielsson wondered, following the question with a quick, brutal scan.

Al met the scan and brushed it aside. Nielsson gritted his teeth and went again, using his mind like a sledgehammer. It was strong, but nothing Al couldn't handle.

When Portis stopped, his breathing had quickened noticeably. His breath stank.

"I guess that answers that question," he said, grimly. "Boy's a regular prodigy. So what are you doin' followin' my good friend, Prodigy? I don't take kindly to it."

"I- all- I want to join the underground."

"The what?"

"You know. The underground. I want to be a Blip."

"A Blip, huh? Funny thing about that word - only people I've ever heard use it were from Psi Corps."

"I was raised in the Corps," Al said, trying to hide his dismay at the blunder. "I ran away."

"Did you."

"Port, he's just a kid," Brazg repeated.

"Yeah. Ramie was just a kid, and Jio, and what did the Psi Cops do to them?"

"Can't we just- tie him up or something?"

"He's a pup, but he's got a bell of a mind. Can you be sure he didn't pick your brain? Can you be sure what he knows?"

Brazg regarded Al for a long, moment. Her eyes were unreadable. "Let's get in the boat," she said at

last.

Nielsson nodded and gestured with the weapon. A small powerboat drifted at the edge of the canal. Not seeing that he had any options, Al stepped into the rocking craft.

In a few moments, Brazg had the motor humming, and they plowed quietly down the canal, away from the tunnel, leaving a wake like ripples of black glass.

"What's your name?" Brazg asked.

"Al."

"Al, if you really want to join the underground, you'll have to let us scan you. You know that, don't you?"

Her voice took on a slightly pleading tone. "If you don't- well, Port is right, we can't really risk letting you go."

"No, we can't," Nielsson affirmed.

"I just wanted..."

"Let us scan you. Let us see what you wanted for ourselves."

The boat was leaving the end of the canal, joining some larger waterway. The Seine? The quays along it were broad, tree-lined. Farther down he could make out crowds of people. Would they hear him if he shouted? Would they pay attention? Probably Nielsson would just shoot him.

"I guess I have to, huh?" he asked

"Yeah, Al, y'do," Nielsson answered, grinning in a thoroughly humorless fashion.

"Okay, then. I'm ready." He had one very small chance. He tried not to think about what would happen if he failed. Nielsson was a killer - they both were, really, but Nielsson probably enjoyed it.

Al dropped his guards.

They both came in.

Al knew full well that if they combined their efforts, they likely more than doubled the strength of their probe. It took training, but some telepaths could weave their minds together, intensifying the results. And he might be able to use that against them.

These two would have to be compatible with him and with each other. What he had in mind he had to do against their will, and it still might be for nothing.

Oddly, he was calm. His heart was beating just like a clock, though he might be an instant away from

floating dead in the river. Part of him was distantly amazed at his composure.

As Al dropped his guard, he pulled something else up.

Help me. Help me. I fear the Corps. The Corps is chasing me. And I'm afraid of you. I have no one.

A trained P12 would see through that in a nanosecond. He was hoping it would take Brazg and Nielsson just a bit longer.

It did, and Brazg actually moved to meet him, which was good. We'll help you... she thought - And then the three of them howled like the damned, as Al fused their minds to his and screamed.

Amplified through two minds, he sent a shock wave racing into the night, carrying on its crest a single word.

HELP.

The wave rang out for a quantum's worth of time only, then their guards snapped down, severing the brief union with what felt like twin lightning bolts to his brain. He had been as open to them as they were to him.

He used the pain, rode it up to take command of his muscles, and jumped.

Arcing toward the water, he gulped a deep breath, which went somehow wrong, as if he had sucked in an icicle. They were only about thirty feet from the bank, and as he plunged into the chilling wet, he felt something burn his ear, a crescendo of rage - from Nielsson - and shocked betrayal from Brazg. And something else, something that had come out of the fusion with them.

A place.

He swam frantically, unwilling to come up because he felt Nielsson trying to find him, knew that he had the fléchette gun. Normally he could hold his breath for quite a long time, but his lungs hurt already, which didn't seem at all right. In fact, the pain was really, really bad.

He managed the quay, though, and glyphed himself rising from the water, back nearer the mouth of the canal. He didn't know if it was enough, but he couldn't wait: he heaved himself from the water.

Something whined by him, struck sparks from a wail. He bounced to his feet and ran, suddenly filled with an almost electric energy. He hadn't gotten very far when he heard the boat bump behind him, and then footsteps pounding on stone.

He sprinted down an alleyway, turned a corner, took a right, a left. Nielsson was still behind him, but Al was drawing farther away, he could feel it.

Cops and blips again, just like when he was a kid. He could do this. He could win.

He wondered where the Paris Psi Corps station was. He should know that, shouldn't he? He should have checked during the train ride. He didn't have the faintest idea where he was running, only that he

had to lose Nielsson or die.

His lungs felt full of molten tar, some of which was bubbling out of his nose, so he had to open his mouth to get enough air. But he couldn't get enough, not nearly enough...

He came hurtling down the end of the street and found himself back at the broad, tree-lined quay along the river. He almost ran headlong into a group of revelers, toasting one another with champagne. They laughed curiously at him as he staggered past, found his stride again, and dug in.

He stayed on the quay because there were a lot of people on this section, walking dogs, jogging, going from bar to bar and coffeehouse to coffeehouse. He tried to quiet his mind, draw the seared edges of his blocks back together, knowing they were leaking, knowing also that if Nielsson could get a clear shot he would take it, even with all of the witnesses. The fléchette gun was silent, and besides, Nielsson was a psychopath.

He felt as if he ran on a rapidly spinning disk now. The lights of Paris weren't points, but the tails of orbiting comets. His feet were becoming slabs of duracrete.

He no longer had any idea where Nielsson was.

He passed through a large crowd, ducked up a street into an alley, and finally, wheezing, hid in a recessed doorway.

As he collapsed against the brick wall, the dark alley strobed, and another-sunlit-scene replaced it. He was back in Teeptown, at the spot the Grins had burned into his mind. The vision shivered with unnatural color, as if the walls, trees, grass, and sky were producing light instead of reflecting it, as if their very atoms were tiny arc lamps...

The specter faded, and he was in the alley again, trying to be quiet to make a quiet place...

Quiet, quiet...

He could barely inhale now. Water was still bubbling out of his nose. He wiped at it. It was sticky.

He was never sure if it was the realization that what he was exhaling wasn't water at all, or a simple lack of oxygen that took him out. One moment he was sitting, back to the wall, trying to brace himself to face Nielsson. The next his face was pressed hard against the street. Then nothing.

A conversation woke him. Two black rats were discussing where their morsel had gone off to.

"A tasty corpse it looked, not long dead. It was here somewhere."

"Maybe not dead at all. Maybe he'll squirm a little when we start chewin' on him."

Then he really woke. His face was in a sticky puddle on the stone. The rats from his nightmare were still talking, though their conversation was a bit different

I can feel him. I think he's out of it. This way. Nielsson.

Let's just get out of here, Port. That call...

No. You felt him get it, the safe house. He knows where it is. He's here, somewhere. He won't be any trouble.

He's already been too much trouble. This is taking too long.

And he could hear their footsteps now, not through their ears, but through his own. This wasn't good. He had to get up, to run some more.

He told his muscles to do so. They told him they had the night off.

He dimmed his mind, made it seem as if it were going out, as if he were dying. He was, of course. That seemed obvious. Still, he had no intention of going peacefully.

He wondered what Cadre Prime would think of him now. Stupid or brave or just suicidal?

They came closer. He held imagoes of their minds, now. Nielsson's was simple, and if he had to draw it, it would be a knife. Brazg's was her face, simplified almost as much as a Grin's, mournful, hopeless.

Closer, closer he let them come. But once they saw him he would have to- They saw him. He used every bit of will he had left to raise his head and establish line of sight. Nielsson was a blurry shadow, but that was plenty. He hit him with everything he had, just a simple burst to the pain center. Nielsson screeched, his knees buckled, then straightened. He laughed harshly. "Still got some left, eh? This ends it. Tell the Devil I said hello."

Then a confusing thing happened. Nielsson spun on his heel and fired the fléchette away from Al.

At the same moment, the alley flickered yellow - like someone lighting a cigarette - and the walls seemed to slap together like giant stone cymbals. That was the sound he heard, anyway.

Then Nielsson's knife mind was shattered. Al saw what looked like a door crack open, and white light stabbed through, and something yanked at him - He yanked back. The door slammed, the light went out. There were some scuffling sounds. Al coughed, and something large and wet came up.

Then a hand touched him, warm, and he suddenly felt reassured.

"Ambulance. Now." A man's voice, a rich baritone, very precisely articulated. What sounded like a British accent.

"You'll be all right," the voice said, gripping Al's hand "Don't worry, son. You'll be okay."

Al opened his eyes to see sterile, white walls, comforting and familiar. At first he thought he was back in the academy, until he raised his head enough to see an unfamiliar skyline beyond the window.

"Well," a man's voice said. "I wondered if you had gone into some sort of hibernation cycle." The voice he remembered, the cultivated baritone from his fevered nightmare. He started trying to turn his head, but then the speaker walked into view.

The first thing Al noticed about him, of course, was the black uniform and brass-and-copper badge. A smile quirked seams in a dusky, broad face with a nose as large and proud as the beak on an eagle. A salt and pepper-mostly salt-mustache and goatee gave him a look that Al tentatively assigned as Shakespearean. Few Psi Cops had facial hair.

"Sir?"

"My name is Sandoval Bey, Mr. Bester. You may call me Mr. Bey."

That name rang a bell. Bey - Dr. Bey, if he remembered correctly - was a high-level instructor. Why was he in the uniform of a Psi Cop?

"What happened, sir?"

"Not a very precise question, Mr. Bester. What happened today, yesterday, a thousand years ago? Here, in Spain, on the moon?"

Al detected no actual remonstrance in his gentle, jovial tone or merry eyes.

"I mean, what happened with the Blips, sir." He paused an instant and then modified that. "Lara Brazg and Portis Nielsson. I was chasing them-"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Bester. I think I can guess what you meant from context. Lara Brazg is in custody, thanks to you, on her way, hopefully, to be reeducated. Portis Nielsson - well, I'm afraid he didn't make it."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"Are you? He did try to kill you. Put a neat hole through your left lung with that fléchette pistol of his."

"Yes, sir. But he might have been reeducated, if..."

"If what, Mr. Bester? If we had captured him alive? Yes, the odds of that would have been increased greatly if you had done the proper thing, and called Psi Corps the moment you picked up their trail."

Al winced. Then it dawned on him. "Will I get a reprimand on my record, sir?"

"That would seem to be appropriate, wouldn't it?" An ambiguous smile ghosted Bey's lips. "But no, the test of intelligence is in the evaluating of its mistakes. That test is one you must take now, but it won't be Psi Corps that judges your score - it will be the universe, and her executioner, evolution."

Al smiled weakly. "Yes, sir. Natural selection almost got me, I suppose."

"Almost, Mr. Bester. But don't forget - whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." He cocked his head thoughtfully. "Of course, in actual fact something that almost kills you can leave you crippled for life, mentally and physically, and greatly hasten your death. I find that Nietzsche engaged in a lot of wishful thinking, not a trait I associate with strength, really." Despite the grim topic, he smiled broadly.

That made Al's head swim, ever so slightly. In the that queasy at-sea state he remembered something, however. "Sir, I got something from them. They were headed for a safe house on the rue- the Rue de Pépin. 1412, Rue de Pépin."

"I see. Well, very good, Mr. Bester. That will be seen to, and your cooperation noted, I'm sure. You're a very lucky fellow."

"I'm lucky you found me. Thank you, sir, for saving my life."

"Well, that is the function of the aged, Mr. Bester. Once we can no longer contribute to the race in a direct, genetic way, we keep our eyes on the young. But you helped yourself a great deal, with that distress call of yours. If not for that, we would have certainly been too late. We were looking in a whole different quarter of the city."

"Then you already knew that Brazg and Nielsson were here?"

"What? Oh, no, Mr. Bester. We had no idea those two were in Paris. The Blip we were looking for was you. Did I happen to mention that you are under arrest?"

chapter 6

Al straightened his uniform and tried not to appear nervous. He stared at the heavy door for a moment, steadied his breathing, forced the rhythm of his heart to slow from improvised jazz to a brisk march. He pushed the door open and stepped into a room he had never yet had the misfortune to see.

Most of the classrooms and dorms were spare, white, clean, designed to keep the mind free from distraction.

This room was just as minimal - starkly so - but was weighty and dark, as if cut and burnished from a basalt cave. A single shaft of light awaited him, and beyond - raised above, behind a long bench - he could make out the five members of the review board, faces spectral in the dim, amber light of reading lamps.

"Alfred Bester, come forward."

He stepped into the light, resisting the urge to squint. Of those regarding him, he recognized only two. One was Dr. Hatathli, the principal of the Minor Academy; the other was Rebbekah Chance, the ranking Teeptown Psi Cop. Seated in the center was a third, who looked familiar, but Al couldn't quite place him.

Someone important, probably from the director's office. Maybe even one of the assistant directors.

"Mr. Bester," Dr. Hatathli began, "is accused of unregistered and unsanctioned travel. He applied for and was granted a two-day leave in the Alps. At the end of those two days, instead of returning on schedule, he purchased a one-way ticket to Paris."

Ms. Chance cleared her throat "This fact registered with our monitoring system, but as he is an exemplary cadet we gave Mr. Bester the benefit of the doubt. When - after several hours - he did not contact us, we dispatched a special detail to investigate. An officer with the Paris office went to the train terminal to meet Mr. Bester. He was found murdered a day later. We suspect he was killed by rogue telepaths or their agents."

Dr. Hatathli took all this in, glancing down occasionally at the display in front of him. Now he turned his craggy, square face toward Al. In the dim lighting, he resembled vids Al had seen of the statues on Easter Island, his eyes invisible in shadowed sockets. "Mr. Bester?"

"Yes, sir. I did apply for a two-day leave to go hiking with my old cadre. When we were coming home, at the train station, I recognized Lara Brazg."

"And why didn't you report this immediately?" Hatathli replied.

Al started to answer, but the man in the center cut him off with a raised finger.

"I have a better question. Mr. Bester, how did you so easily recognize this rogue telepath?"

Al suddenly remembered himself, long ago, when he and Cadre Prime had played that fateful game of cops and blips. The normal in a military uniform, at the statue of William Karges. Al remembered speaking to him. He remembered the flash of hatred...

This was that man. Al took a deep breath. "Sir, I hope to be a Psi Cop one day. I like to go to the West End station and look at the hunt lists."

Ms. Chance nodded. "That's confirmed by the officers there."

The normal didn't turn toward her. His voice, however, was of deep winter. "When I require information, Ms. Chance, I will ask for it."

"Yes, Director."

Al felt his face twitch and damned himself. *It's the director himself. And not the one I knew.* He remembered his conversation with Director Vacit only vaguely, but it had seemed to be some sort of warning, about things to come. *About this man?*

"Mr. Bester. Let us dispense with parceling out details. You went AWOL. You did so in the apparent company of a rogue telepath. The security officer of the train was found bound and gagged, and the Psi Cop who was to arrest you at the Lyon station murdered. You disappeared for several hours in Paris and were found, wounded, in the company of not one rogue telepath, but two. A scan while you were unconscious revealed that you knew the location of an underground safe house." He paused to glare at Al.

"Well?" the director said, after a moment

"I'm sorry, sir," Al replied. "I was not aware I had been asked to speak."

"Speak," the director said, disgustedly, waving his hands.

"Sir, if I was scanned, and the information passed to you, then you must also be aware that I never had - nor ever could have - any intention of becoming a Blip. My allegiance is first, last, always to the Corps. The Corps is mother, the Corps is father."

As he said it, he heard Chance and Hatathli murmur it along with him. He felt suddenly more confident.

"You must know, sir, that my intention was to apprehend Lara Brazg myself. I see now that it was foolish, but with all respect, sir, it was not the act of treason you seem to suggest."

"Don't tell me what I suggest, Mr. Bester."

"Yes, sir. Shall I continue, sir?"

"Please. I'm aching to hear what you have to say."

"I followed Brazg onto the train. The train cop was her accomplice. By the time I was actually on the train, I started to think I ought to get help. When I told him of her presence, he tried to hit me with a shock stick. A scan of the cop will show that."

"We cannot scan him without his permission. He will not give it."

But you can scan me anytime you like, despite the law, Al thought. And it was clear that the director had intentionally underlined that point, emphasizing that Al had only those rights the director allowed him to have.

Al decided that there was nothing to do but continue. "I never saw the officer from Paris, and I have no idea who murdered him, though it might have been Nielsson. I knew nothing about Nielsson-

"Except his name, it seems."

"Yes, sir. The same way I knew Brazg's."

He outlined the rest of his story, while the director sat in stony silence. "As I said, sir," he said, in finishing,

"if I was scanned, you will know I am speaking the truth. If the scan was incomplete, of course I volunteer to be scanned again, as deeply as necessary."

"I don't know that you are speaking the truth. I am not a telepath. I can only judge the facts at hand and testimony given."

Al felt a wave of shocked outrage emanate from the other review board members, and he suddenly understood.

The director hated telepaths. He did not trust them. And perhaps - for some unknown reason - he hated Al Bester in particular. The thought wasn't his alone, but filtered lightly through the room, and Al understood that some or all of the panel members were sending him a signal. *It's us against him. You are with us. Be careful*

A throat cleared behind him. "Director, Mr. Bester was injured trying to apprehend Nielsson and Brazg. That he was shot by Nielsson is absolutely clear. That Nielsson planned to shoot him again is absolutely clear. I fail to understand the relevance of this entire line of-" he paused and finished with faint note of sarcasm "'questioning.' "

Al didn't turn, but he knew the voice, and it felt like solid ground suddenly appearing beneath the feet of a drowning man. Sandoval Bey.

The director aimed his ice-chip eyes behind Al.

"Are you advocating for him, Dr. Bey?"

"Absolutely. He is impetuous. He is also fifteen. Neither of those qualities, last time I checked, is considered criminal. Insubordinate, yes. Punishable, yes. Criminal, no."

"Indeed? Very well, Dr. Bey. You think he should be punished, punish him. I command him to your custody, and will hold you responsible for any future transgressions on Mr. Bester's part."

"That's fine with me, Director."

"I did not ask for your approval." He turned a withering glance upon Al. "In the future, Mr. Bester, I urge you to remember your place. You are a student, not a Psi Cop. The Corps cannot abide even the appearance of disloyalty. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear, sir."

"This panel is dismissed."

In the hall, Al closed his eyes and felt his limbs tremble, ever so slightly. He wasn't sure he ought to, but he paced for a time, until Bey came through the door and nodded at him.

"Dr. Bey-

"Walk with me, Mr. Bester."

They stepped out into the morning sunlight. Bey gestured across the lawn, and they started across it

"I just wanted to thank you, sir."

Bey's head chopped in a nod. "Don't thank me yet, Mr. Bester. Despite what I told the director, your behavior was inexcusable. Your unthinking actions resulted in the death of a Psi Cop and of another telepath. I should have let him have you."

"Why didn't you, sir?"

"Because, Mr. Bester, the director is a mundane. Because he has no sense of justice. Rest assured - I do."

chapter 7

With near hatred, Al watched the children coming across the parade ground. Teacher Hua led them, but he knew that wouldn't entitle him to any mercy. No, he remembered these field trips well, back when he was in Hua's class.

If I live long enough, he wondered, will I see every situation from every perspective? I've been the child, now I'm the statue. Will I one day be the teacher?

He was irritated by the thought. But what else did he have right now, except to think and suffer humiliation?

Yes, the children had seen him, but they were still acting puzzled. It was their first trip to see the "statue of the day," then.

"That's a real man," one of the kids noted. "He isn't a statue at all." She was a freckle-powdered girl with dirty blond hair. Her name tag proclaimed her "Vicky."

"Hey, yeah," a boy agreed.

Vicky put her hands on her hips. "How come he isn't moving? How come he just stands there, like the Grabber? How come, Teacher Hua?"

"Ask him," Teacher Hua said.

Vicky looked up at Al. "Why are you just standing there, Mr. Statue?"

Al wet his lips, wishing it were time for one of his five five-minute breaks so he could get a drink of water.

"My name is Alfred Bester. I stand here because of pride. In my pride, I believed I did not need to observe the wisdom of my elders. I acted without regard for the Corps. I stand here to warn against the rule of pride. The Corps is mother, the Corps is father."

He stopped. Those were the only words he was allowed to say to anyone.

"Wow," Vicky said. "How long does he have to stand there? How long do you have to stand there, Mr. Alfred Bester?"

He wasn't allowed to answer that, but he didn't know the answer anyway. This was the beginning of his third day, and Dr. Bey had not informed him how long it would go on.

"Hey!" Vicky said. "How long do you have to stay standing like that?"

He remained impassive. He had become rather good at impassive. Vicky pouted.

"Look at him, and learn your lesson well," Teacher Hua admonished. "Now, if no one has anything else to say, come along."

They started off. Al was just allowing himself a deep breath and a bit of relief when Vicky turned back, a determined look on her face. "Why do you have to stand here like a statue?" she asked.

Damn. "My name is Alfred Bester. I stand here because of pride. In my pride, I believed I did not need to observe the wisdom of my elders. I acted without regard for the Corps. I stand here to warn against the rule of pride. The Corps is mother, the Corps is father."

The other kids had paused, and some still looked confused. But Vicky's face held sheer, malicious triumph.

"Don't you get it?" she said. "He has to answer that question."

"Why are you standing there?" asked a dark-eyed boy whose tag identified him as Tali.

Al repeated his speech. Then they all started in, asking him one after another, fast, so that he had to speed up. And they laughed at him, the little jerks, and they kept asking, and they started improvising mants around him, making fun of him.

Normally children this age had short attention spans. Not when they had a chance to be cruel, though, especially to an elder.

But if this was the worst he saw today, he would be lucky.

It was finally Teacher Hua who broke it up, though Al suspected he wasn't supposed to. As they vanished from his view, he felt the lightest touch from the old man. *Hang in there, Alfred. You may suffer from too much pride, but some of us are proud of you, too.*

It left him feeling a much taller statue.

The brief good feeling vanished at the lunch period, when academy students had their way with him. He had thought, after three days, that he had inured himself to their taunts. They always seemed to think it was funny to dress him up. Today it was a leprechaun outfit-green hat, a little Kerry vest, a pipe he had to hold clamped between his teeth. They ate in front of him, too, first passing the food beneath his nose and then 'casting the very taste of it to him as they ate. He didn't block it; he had blocked all day the first day, and paid for it all night and the next day with a seething headache.

They finished their meal, and one of them - a girl maybe sixteen years old - got up and strode toward him.

"Look what we have, my friends," she said. Her vowels had a crisp purity, an accent he couldn't

place. She was beautiful, with hair and skin nearly the same shade of cinnamon-brown, amber-tinted eyes. He had noticed her before. She stepped closer, looking up at him.

"Preach us a sermon, Mr. Cadre Prime. Tell us how great you are, how you are the heart and soul of the Corps, how everything we poor laterals do is just catch-up."

She waited a second or two. "No sermon, huh? But you look like one, a living sermon, your jaw all stuck up in the air, a regular portrait of a preacher. The Corps is mama, and you are a mama's boy, aren't you? Run back to mama, little boy, and she'll tell you how great and strong and wonderful you are, how proud she is of you - after she makes you stand out here for a few weeks." She suddenly jumped up on the podium next to him.

"My name is Alfred Bester!" she shouted. "I'm up here because I'm such a short, scrawny, tight-assed little fellow that I thought I would impress everyone by being a big, brave Psi Cop! I thought they would be so impressed, and yet look what they did to me! And so I see now that I really am a short, scrawny, tight-assed, self-important little fellow!"

Her companions hooted and cheered, and she did a little curtsy.

His body hummed like a tuning fork, he was so angry. It was a flavor of anger he had never tasted before, savage, visionary. He saw himself punching the girl in the face, again, and again, until that smug smile went away, until she admitted that she was wrong, until she understood that - he was better than her. That she should be praising him.

Another group was coming. He could already tell they were excited about what she had done, were planning their own loud speeches under his name.

Screw it. She would pay. Let them prove it.

He formed a telegraph of intense pain, addressed it to the girl's now-distant back, and prepared to send.

Don't.

His anger congealed at the touch, but did not cool.

Do. Not. It was Bey, probably behind him. Sandoval Bey. Dr. Sandoval Bey, who had scanned him, who - despite his claims - knew nothing of justice but everything about torturing Alfred Bester.

But he let the attack sigh away. He let the anger form cysts under his flesh. He could dig it out easily enough later. He would show everyone, Bey included. They would all regret treating him this way.

So he stood there, and endured.

At eight o'clock, his day as a statue was over, but his punishment was not. He returned, not to his room, but to a special detention cell, all white. He was allowed no books, no vid, nothing. He couldn't study and he couldn't entertain himself.

Not studying was bad. Exams weren't that far away, and it didn't take long to get behind. He couldn't afford failure now, not with the Major Academy within reach.

One thing he knew: normally those who were punished as statues were allowed to at least study when their day was done. This stipulation of Bey's was more than unusual. Did he want Al to fail? Probably.

For the first time, he considered the unthinkable - that he might wind up as a business telepath or in the courts. In the courts, where he would have to lick the boots of the Psi Cops who brought the criminals in...

The thought was intolerable. He got up, angry, restless, and cramped. He ran through a series of punches, kicks, blocks, and kata. He ran in place to work the knots out of his legs. He went back to punches and kicks, and suddenly found himself battering against the wall, flecking it with red from his knuckles. He backed up, breathing hard.

He threw himself on the bed and closed his eyes, trying to calm himself by listening to Geneva.

Geneva had been his project since the punishment began. Intrigued by what he had noticed in Paris, he used much of his time as a statue - and here, alone, in this room - to further study the background noise he had always taken for granted, to listen for the nuances.

It was a vague, impressionistic swirl. At times it almost seemed orderly, but the instant he thought he had a pattern, it vanished. Not unlike watching clouds, always changing, passing briefly and coincidentally through forms that seemed familiar.

The real difference was night and day, for at night most people slept, and the white noise became vivid, less connected. It was- he struggled for an analogy to explain it to himself.

With a quiet suddenness, one appeared. He saw a painting, a street scene, a woman in big skirts. His viewpoint approached the painting, zooming in, magnifying. What had been clear images lost sharpness, dissolved... then, as he got nearer and nearer, the canvas resolved once more into a multitude of tiny dots of different colors.

Yes. It's like that, he returned. *At night the picture becomes dots. Except that each dot is a picture, too...*

The image - and the mindtouch that had brought it - vanished. He knew it had been Bey, though. Another overture of kindness, another trick.

You aren't supposed to scan me. It is against the regulations and against the law.

No answer. He might as well have imagined it.

The next day, they took to putting peanut butter in his hair, to attract the pigeons. He tried to stand still with them perched all over him, shitting on him. He discovered that pigeon brains were too small and stupid to credibly frighten with Psi powers. They would flap off, but always return.

People would remember this forever. When he was a Psi Cop - if they ever let such a laughingstock become a Psi Cop - with twenty years behind him, people would still point at his back and snicker, remembering him with birds, birdshit, and peanut butter all over him. How could he ever be effective like that? Bey had ruined his future.

At eight o'clock, he didn't go to his cell. Instead he broke into a run, fell down because his legs were clumsy and stiff from standing all day, but got back up. It was just beginning to rain, a cold October drizzle dripping over the mountains that soon became a downpour. He felt as if it were becoming steam as it hit his skin, so feverish his anger seemed.

He knew where Bey's office was. He found it and pounded on the door. His fury made him a giant, but he was beginning to lose height when the door finally swung open.

Sandoval Bey looked at him mildly. "Mr. Bester, I believe you should be in your room now. The watch will be wondering where you are."

"Why are you doing this to me? Why? This is worse than anything the director would have done."

Bey's eyes crinkled, and he suddenly bellowed a laugh. "Mr. Bester," he said, "in some ways you are pitifully naive."

"Sir, how can I ever- I mean, if I don't have any respect, how can I..."

"Come in, Mr. Bester. I don't want anyone to see you standing in the hall."

Al stepped in, and Bey shut the door behind him. In an instant, everything seemed to change. He suddenly saw himself, wet, covered in birdshit, standing in the office of one of the most powerful men in Psi Corps.

"Now, Mr. Bester. You broke the trust of the Corps. You have been given a lenient punishment, considering. What is your complaint?"

"My complaint is that-that- Why does my punishment have to be so- so-"

"Public?"

Al just stood there trembling for a moment. "Sir, I thought you were my friend."

A peculiar expression passed over Bey's face then.

"Al," he said softly. "I am your friend. I'm trying to save your life."

"Sir?"

"Mr. Bester, I have done many scans of the dead and dying. I have likewise, in my time, come upon the scene of a death, many times so close on the heels of the reaper that I could still feel the trace of the dead person, their last thoughts, echoing away. When I come upon the body of someone who has slit their own wrists, swallowed handfuls of pills, hung themselves - when I come upon a suicide, Mr. Bester, do you know what thought I find most often, hanging in the air, glowing for me to see?"

"No, sir."

"This will show them. This will show them." He paused and rested his lambent gaze on Al. "Does that sound familiar, Mr. Bester? It should."

"Sir, I have never considered-"

"Suicide is a frame of mind, Mr. Bester, not an act. It is a deluded, contemptible state."

Al was beginning to feel cold. He was starting to shiver. He saw how his pursuit of Brazg and Nielsson might look like an attempt at- "Sir, I realize I made a mistake, but-"

"It isn't about one mistake, Mr. Bester. It's about your life. I've been watching you."

"Sir?"

"You are an outstanding student. Too outstanding, really. In seven out of the last ten training exercises, you exceeded safe tolerances."

"I strive for excellence, sir."

"Why?"

"Because the Corps deserves only the best."

"The Corps deserves cadets who live to pay it back for their training, who don't end up dead or as mewling idiots in a hospital ward. That is where you are headed, Mr. Bester. You have no friends. You run, you practice martial arts, you drill unsupervised in your 'spare' time. All solitary activities. And this is how you've lived, as far as I can tell, for your entire short life."

"I don't really get along with others very well, sir."

"No, you don't. That's exactly the problem. Mr. Bester, a Psi Cop has the hardest job in the world. He

has to hunt down his own people. For their own good, yes, but hunt them he must, and sometimes kill them. His own people, and they hate him for it because they do not understand. The normals who benefit from his work do not understand him either, of course - at the best they tolerate him, see him as one sort of smelly animal useful only for ridding them of even smellier ones. At worst, they fear and loathe him.

"Mr. Bester, no one is strong enough to handle that on their own, and especially not someone with the mind of a suicide. 'I'll show them!' Who will you show, Mr. Bester? The only people you have who might love you, support you through all of that, keep you sane, make you feel as if you have accomplished something - the only ones - are your brothers and sisters in the Corps. You need them, Mr. Bester, as badly as you need the ability to block a scan. How did it feel at the inquiry, when I was suddenly behind you, supporting you? When the adults on the board secretly encouraged you?"

"It felt good, sir." *But not as good as defeating the railroad cop, all by myself*, he added, in silent defiance.

"Did it strengthen your resolve, make you feel as if you could face anything?"

"I suppose, sir."

"You suppose. Sit, Mr. Bester." He motioned toward a padded leather chair. "Sit. The damp won't hurt it. You love the Corps, but that isn't enough. You must love those in the Corps, and they must love you. You must love the Blips you hunt. You must love the world you live in, Mr. Bester. You must broaden your passions. You must find art, and music, and poetry that stirs your soul as much as duty. Duty in and of itself is weaker than you think, Mr. Bester. It can betray you. It almost betrayed you in front of the review board."

He paused. "Do you understand this? Do you understand any of it?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"You have appetites, Mr. Bester. You want to show that you are the best, in the vague hope that someone will like you - or be sorry they didn't pay more attention to you earlier. It is a logic that defeats itself, that assures that the thing you want most will always elude you. Do you know what you really want, Mr. Bester?"

"I want to be a good Psi Cop."

The blow came so fast it seemed like Bey's hand merely materialized on his face. It stung, all the way to his soul.

"That's for lying," Bey snapped. His face was very dark. "You presume to know what makes a good Psi Cop? Do you? You know nothing. The Psi Cop who died because of you was a good Psi Cop. I trained him. He had friends, people that loved him. He is mourned. Will anyone mourn you, Mr. Bester?"

"I don't think so, sir," he said, face flushing hot. "I don't really..."He broke off.

"You were going to say you don't care, weren't you? But that isn't true, is it?"

"Sir, don't-" His throat was constricting. The last few days suddenly seemed piled upon him like so many rocks, but above those a whole mountain was crumbling.

"How was the trip with Cadre Prime, Al?"

"I thought- they only took me with them because-" What was happening to him?

"Because I told them to, as a matter of fact. But you hoped, didn't you? Hoped that you would belong?"

"I've never belonged, sir. I've only ever belonged to the Corps. I don't understand why you're so mad at me. I don't understand why the director said those things, called me a traitor, because I love the Corps. I don't understand ANY OF IT!" He was shouting now, and hot, salty tears etched streams down his face. It seemed as if the bones in his chest were melting and squirting up through his eyes.

Bey stared at him for a moment, then sighed. He laid a hand on Al's shoulder and squeezed.

Al didn't want to. It felt stupid and stiff and weak, but that simple Human gesture burst the dams behind his eyes, and though he still did not understand why, he wept uncontrollably, gritting his teeth. He couldn't remember another person touching him with kindness, with care, in so very, very long. It hurt terribly. He couldn't trust it, didn't Bey see that? It was stupid to trust, stupider to need. Bey was just another kind of Grin, subtler. His face was his mask.

But his tears didn't know that, and he wept for what seemed a long time. The older man made no move, just kept his hand on his shoulder, neither drawing him nearer nor pushing him away.

"Don't worry," Bey told him. "Don't worry. It will be all right. Now go back to your room. I'll make it seem as if I sent for you, to reprimand you. Go."

Once back in his room, Al no longer knew what he felt. He felt as if a gulf had been torn through him, and it was filling with waters he did not recognize in the slightest.

He lay on his back and tried to contemplate Geneva again.

And a touch came, feather-light. He knew that one of the walls must have a disguised window. Before that had made him feel like a fish in a tank, but now it was suddenly, oddly comforting.

You were wondering about perspective the other day, the voice said.

Dr. Bey?

Yes.

Sir, what-

When the children came by, you were wondering if you would one day see the same situation from all perspectives.

Yes, sir.

Was there some point to that speculation?

Yes, sir.

What was it?

I'm not sure, sir. I'm still thinking about it. Actually, he wasn't. The thought had come and gone. Bey probably knew that, and he was suddenly sorry he had lied.

Good. There is something I want you to see.

Suddenly, a section of wall came to life. It flickered in stark shades of grey and black, sputtering white sparks streaking like comets. Then images appeared, as colorless as the beginning pyrotechnics. A half-destroyed building-ancient Japanese, maybe, and some men, talking. A title came up, in English and in Japanese.

RASHOMON

Blinking wearily, Al sat on his narrow bunk and began to watch.

He thought about the film all the next day. The premise was actually quite simple: a rape and a murder, seen from four points of view - a bandit, a woman, her husband, a woodcutter. They all agreed on a few facts - but in the end, the stories were all very different, each altered to put the teller in the best light. As it turned out, even the murder victim - the husband - wasn't a reliable witness when his spirit was called up from the dead.

Only the woodcutter - who seemed to be merely an observer - had anything approaching an objective view.

And yet the film cast doubt on even his version of the story, leaving Al with the frustrated revelation

that he could never know for certain the truth of what had happened.

If a telepath had been there, to scan everyone, would it have helped? Maybe not, because the characters seemed to have convinced themselves that things really happened the way they said they did. It would make it very difficult, at best, to investigate the matter. And the telepath would be like the woodcutter, a seemingly objective observer who really wasn't. Couldn't be.

Obviously, at some level of reality, there was only one set of events that really happened.

But no observer could be objective.

He certainly couldn't be, standing, looking foolish, humiliated, and angry. He could see the story only from his own point of view, the point of view of the victim.

In Rashomon, it was arguably the victim's story that in the end proved most doubtful.

And so, since he had nothing better to do, and since he was tired of looking through the eyes of a victim, he tried to imagine himself from the point of view of his tormentors. In a general sense, that was easy. He found he could understand the children - after all, he had once stood in their place - and he found, quite surprisingly, that this dissolved much of his anger toward them.

The older students were different. He had never been in their place. When he was older, he had simply ignored the "statues" on the parade ground. He hadn't been interested in them. It was thus harder for him to imagine what an academy student, who should have better things to do, would gain from the experience of taunting a helpless fellow.

Of course, he didn't have to imagine, entirely. He gleaned clues from their surface thoughts, from the surface thoughts of their friends. Little Rashomon images to sift through, to piece together into biographies.

It was hard at first, because he fought understanding them - he would have rather despised them - but once he learned a certain simple truth, he quickly got into the spirit of it.

Fatima Cristoban, for instance, the woman who had taunted him so cruelly two days ago, was a later, hadn't come into her psi until she was thirteen. Raised as a normal, she missed the mundane world, was uncomfortable in the academy, and had a deep dislike for anyone who grew up in a cadre, especially Cadre Prime.

One day Brett and the others passed in the distance and waved at him. Fatima was there - putting lipstick on him, actually - and she noticed them. The thin compression of her lips was perfectly consistent with the sudden spike of anger in her surface thoughts.

No, it wasn't just him Fatima hated.

Jeffer Powylles. He wished he had the guts to do what Al had done. On another level, he knew he would never have the guts, and if he couldn't, then nobody should exist who did.

Jiri Belden. He liked helpless things. It made him feel less helpless.

The simple truth was that the joke was on them. Each thing they did, each insult, was simply another clue for Al to puzzle at, another instrument he could use to dissect them.

Nothing could be very threatening, once dissected. They became his victims; not he, theirs. He had the power of knowing them, and that was a terrific power, indeed.

At night, Bey's lessons continued. They weren't like any lessons he had ever experienced before. Bey would present him with a vid, or a short story, or a poem, or a painting. The significance of the selection often escaped Al for a day or more. But in the end, each piece was like a distorted mirror, reflecting some thought of his own, a thought carried to conclusions he himself would have never reached, and sometimes could not agree with. He argued with Joyce, Nietzsche, Heinlein, Voltaire, Card, Blake. Bey had a particular fondness for great thinkers from the past. He argued with Bey, too.

It was a peculiar kind of learning. It filled him with a strange excitement. He began to see ways he could use it, too. It started to make some of the things he had already learned make a certain sort of sense.

On the tenth day of his punishment, he saw a girl approaching him, her dark, bobbed hair bouncing with her ambitious stride. She looked to be about his own age. She was pretty, but not entirely conventionally so - her mouth was wide, her eyes black in the bright sun. He began composing her biography, and then understood that she wasn't really approaching him at all, but merely walking in his direction.

That was actually too bad. He had looked forward to picking her apart. Maybe- he tightened his control, touching on her surface thoughts, not a real scan. She seemed deep in thought, and probably wouldn't notice a very slight- She stopped, rather abruptly, and her gaze darted to his. Blocks shut out everything. She cocked her head thoughtfully.

Well, he had her attention, anyway. He felt an embarrassed flush color his face and wished he could control his body as well as he could his mind. She came toward him, sauntering almost.

She was planning something now, or wanted him to think she was. She was slim, her arms long and coppery. Her gaze stayed fastened on his. He thought briefly of a cobra, swaying toward its prey. Her lips were slightly quirked. He tried to put himself in her place, to see the scene as she saw it, but came up blank.

She stepped up on the podium with him, cocking her head this way and that as he noticed they were the same height. He could smell her now, a scent with some flower in it.

She kissed him on the lips. Twice. The second time she took his lower lip between hers and stretched it, so that the contact lingered sensuously. His knees actually buckled. Her eyes flashed dangerously, and then she abruptly laughed. She walked away, still laughing. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to turn his head and follow her.

Biography? His mind was blank. About this girl, he didn't know one damn thing, except- she was fire inside, combustion thinly disguised by skin.

He would like to know a lot more.

But she didn't show up the next day, or indeed for the next four. But Bey did, on the fourteenth day. He came across the green, smiled conspiratorially, and said, "Your time is up, Mr. Bester. You may rejoin the animate."

"Thank you, sir." He paused awkwardly. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for everything."

"You are quite welcome, Mr. Bester. Good day." He placed his hands behind his back and started away.

"Sir?" Al said again.

"Yes, Mr. Bester?"

"I was wondering- could we- ah- talk sometime? Face-to-face?"

"Of course, Mr. Bester. Why don't we meet in my office, tomorrow, about 0600?"

"Thank you, sir."

"Go on, Mr. Bester. You have a lot of catching up to do. Fourteen days will set you back considerably, and exams are only a month away."

"I'll manage, sir."

"I'm sure you will. I'll see you tomorrow."

chapter 8

Al looked forward to his meetings with Sandoval Bey. He never knew what the older man was going to say, but it was almost always something interesting, offering a perspective he hadn't considered. Bey's thoughts had mass, inertia - they were bodies in motion. Sometimes they entered Al's brain like bullet trains, sometimes like stealthy thieves, but they always seemed to find a place.

He liked Bey's office, with its odor of coffee and cigar smoke, shelves packed with books, some with crumbling spines, some so new he could still smell the ink. He liked the Gauguin print with its wide-eyed beasts and cavernous jungle. He liked the faint baroque interplay of Bach or Telemann that underscored most of their conversations, or the occasional, surprising days when instead it was Wagner or - on one startling occasion - the wild discords of Stravinsky.

"This one started a riot when it was first played in Paris, you know," Bey had murmured that day. He had been a little strange, subdued - and yet somehow more taut - than usual. Al later discovered that Bey had been forced to kill a Blip that morning.

He was curious about Bey - he wanted to know everything about him, but he took things as they were revealed, relishing the small details and broad strokes as he built his portrait of the man.

He didn't look at Bey's public record, or even search for articles about him in publications. Most of Al's life was spent in a whistling gale, frantically struggling to win this contest or pass that test, but his time with Bey was the eye of the storm, a place for long, deep breaths. He didn't want to spoil that by making Bey into another project.

What he did know was that Sandoval Bey was an important man. He knew that because his office was in the administrative building, because even high officers deferred to him, because he had challenged the director and still had his job. He had once been an executive officer in MetaPol - maybe the chief - but had retired from the position after only two years, to become station chief of Geneva. He was an instructor at the Major Academy, teaching advanced criminology.

As station chief, he still wore the MetaPol uniform sometimes - internally for certain purposes, but also when a member of the Corps went Blip. That was why he had been called in on Al's case. Usually he just directed operations, and it was rare for him to actually take to the field. Al felt most fortunate that he had benefited from one such unusual event.

Bey's father was Turkish, from the hill country, a poor boy who rose to political prominence. His mother had been the British ambassador to Turkey, and they had lived there until he was six, when his father was murdered by a political dissident. Thereafter, Bey had been raised in London, and had spent long summers with a grandfather who lived near Madrid. He had joined Psi Corps as a teen -

Al really wasn't sure exactly when or under what circumstances. He was a widower, and it was a subject he studiously avoided.

Today the music was Wagner, the overture to Tristan und Isolde. Brave brass sang out over the storm growl of low strings as Al approached the door. He rapped the heavy wood, wondering what they would discuss.

He had just read Hobbes' Leviathan and wanted to talk about it, but Bey would most likely surprise him again.

He did.

"Good morning, Mr. Bester. What does the rest of your day look like?"

"I..." He had a test to study for, an important one, but Bey was dressed in black Psi Cop garb, smiling enigmatically. "I've an open flight plan, sir."

"Good, good. How would you like to accompany me on a hunt? See how it ought to be done?"

"I would like that very much, Dr. Bey."

"I thought you might."

"Are we leaving now?"

"As soon as we prepare." He handed Al a photograph. "This is the runaway."

Al took the picture, then gave a vague start. It was Fatima Cristoban.

"You know her?"

"Sort of. She used to come by and bother me when I was the statue of the day. Put lipstick on me, and such."

"But you aren't friends."

"No."

Bey nodded. "Good. I'll leave you to prepare."

Al looked up, a bit startled. "Sir? How do I do that? We haven't been taught that."

"Yes you have. I taught you, in fact. You may use my office. I'll be outside when you're done."

Al watched him go, a bit perplexed, then looked back down at fawn-colored Fatima Cristoban. He remembered her self-satisfied sneer, and the deep uncertainty it hid.

Why? he silently asked the portrait. *Why would you betray the Corps? They offered you everything.*

But he knew part of the answer. After all, he had assembled a biography of her, in his mind. He tried to recall her telepathic signature, impose it upon the photo. He tried to imagine her speaking the anger and fear she felt, her insecurities about the Corps.

Was this what Bey meant by preparing? To try to remember Cristoban's "scent," the better to track her?

Somehow, he thought Bey wanted something more of him than that. He concentrated more deeply on the photo, willing himself to understand Fatima Cristoban, to be able to anticipate her movements. The hunter becoming the prey.

After a few moments, he closed his eyes in frustration, aware that Bey was outside, aware that he still had not done whatever it was the older man imagined he should have learned by now. Cristoban remained a photograph.

You have to love those you hunt, Bey had once said. And that recalled something else, something from long ago. When he had played cops and blips with Brett and the rest. When Brett had insisted a Blip could only act in certain ways because they were stupid or evil...

But that wasn't the case. To kids, Blips had no motive: the point of view was always that of the cop, even when you played the Blip. You never really stepped into the Blip's shoes. That was why, that day, he had chosen to pretend he was really a Psi Cop being chased, rather than accept the role of a rogue.

Think of Rashomon.

As insane as it seemed, Fatima wanted to escape the Corps.

To understand any of it, he had to look not at her eyes, but through them.

He turned slowly in Bey's office, and his gaze came to rest on something he had always considered odd - a small mirror in a frame of plain, polished wood. Bey kept a neat appearance - his mustache, in particular, was always elegant and trimmed. But he had never seen the station chief preening in front of that mirror, or even glancing in it. In fact, he couldn't imagine Bey doing so. Bey was not, Al was sure, a vain man.

But there was the mirror, out of place in the cluttered, scholarly office, hung almost like an icon. He felt a flutter of excitement

Know your enemy. Love your enemy. Be your enemy.

He held up the photo so he could see it and his own reflection in the glass. He remembered Fatima again, but this time placed those memories and perceptions into his own reflection. Long ago, he had projected himself onto Brett, to fool the others. Now he projected Fatima Cristoban onto himself. Concentrating. The room beyond the focus of his gaze began to blur. For a long moment he felt as if he were pushing against some flexible but impenetrable membrane, a tension on some surface of the universe he had never imagined existed before - and then, subtly, he seemed to slip through.

The image in the glass was no longer his own. It was Fatima Cristoban's.

The Corps is not my mother or my father, she said, defiantly. I have a mother and father. I won't go see them, because that's the first place they will look for me. I'm choking here, I'm hemmed in. I want a bigger sky. I want things to be as they were before I got my psi. They will be.

He blinked his eyes, slowly, resting them for a few heartbeats in the dark before returning them to use. He was looking at himself again. But inside, in his head, he felt a sort of compass now, a lode-stone swinging always north.

And north was Fatima Cristoban.

Taking a deep breath, he left Bey's office and found him outside of the building, smoking a long cigar.

"I'm ready," he said.

Bey studied him through oily curls of smoke.

"So you are," he said, approvingly.

Al watched the Earth below with fascination. He had never flown before. The helicopter made almost no sound, and it seemed as if they were gliding along, fifty meters or so above the trees. Like flying in a dream.

"We have her as far as Amsterdam," Bey explained. "She used a forged ident - not a bad job, but not so good that we didn't catch it, after a few hours."

"I don't think-" Al broke off, not wanting to speak out of turn.

"Mr. Bester?"

"I don't think she could have forged an identcard."

"On what do you base that, Mr. Bester?"

"I could be wrong. That just wasn't my impression of her."

Bey stroked his goatee. "I tend to agree with you. You think she had an underground railroad connection?"

Al shrugged. "Sir, I don't know that much about the underground."

"Well, we'll be met by other cops and some bloodhounds in Amsterdam, in case things get hairy. My guess is they won't - the resistance is weak these days, and laying low. I think she got the ident from a forger in Geneva and is hoping to find the underground railroad in Amsterdam. It's a city with that sort of reputation."

Al nodded. They were over countryside now, and it occurred to Al that it was probably some of the same territory he had covered by train not long ago. Then it had seemed somehow overwhelming; now he saw it as a hawk might, a big place full of small things at his mercy.

It was a feeling he liked a great deal.

"Mr. Bester, I want to be clear about your position here. You are a student, and an observer. This sort of thing is not usual - I usually select advanced students from my class to accompany me, if anyone."

"I'm honored, sir, but may I ask- why me?"

"Think of it as a reward. You've pleased me, these past few months. I think you've come a long way. The Corps needs Psi Cops who know what they are doing, not-" He broke off and twiddled with his mustache, frowning, before continuing. "Anyway. I had to pull considerable strings for this. No one thought it was very wise, not after your last little excursion. There are some who will be watching this whole enterprise very closely. I want them to know you are now the levelheaded lad I say you are. Do you think we can convince them of that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I chose this hunt because I don't think there will be much danger, but that is never a given, so pay attention to me. If I say go, you go. If I say sit, you sit."

"Understood, sir."

"I also thought you might like to see Amsterdam. You enjoyed Paris, didn't you?"

"Well, sir, I was shot and nearly killed, so I'm not sure 'enjoyed' would be the best word-"

"Hah. I scanned you. You were fascinated by Paris, and well you should have been. You will be fascinated by Amsterdam, too. With any luck, we can make time for a brief tour. Educational, of course."

"She was here," Bey said, surveying the dingy little room. "Not long ago."

Al felt it, too, the vague imprint of Cristoban's psyche. It didn't belong here, in this narrow space, on that wretched tiny bed. It belonged out somewhere, with a wide sky. He thought back to her file, which he had reviewed on the helicopter ride. She was from Argentina. Was it a spacious place?

He shook the feeling off. Ever since he had "prepared" himself with the photograph, it was as if a ghost hung near his shoulders, entering his eyes now and then and rendering them alien. Was it possible that he was actually in touch with the Blip somehow? Sharing her actual thoughts? He asked Bey.

Bey was still walking slowly around the room, as if surveying each molecule in it. He didn't look at Al.

"I don't know," he replied simply. "Telepathy and distance are very strange things. Once, in the Belt, a construction worker went missing. We didn't find him for hours, and when we did it was first with radar and then with a telescope. He was in an EVA suit, twenty miles away, drifting. No response from his comlink, nothing. All of the shuttles were out, but we knew we could rig up a sled in pretty short order - if it was worth it. They asked me if I could tell whether he was alive or dead. He was a little dot in the sky, but once I established line of sight, I had him. I scanned him, and he was alive, though unconscious. Turns out it was attempted murder, but that's a longer story. Twenty miles and clear as a bell. I even got who the would-be killer was from him, then and there. We had him detained before the sled even rescued the castaway.

"On the other hand, I've been unable to pull surface thoughts from someone hiding in a closet ten feet away." He paused. "I know they teach line of sight, but I could tell you some stories-" He looked at Al, finally. "It comes down to this: We still don't know exactly how telepathy works. I sometimes wonder if its limitations aren't more psychosomatic or perceptual than anything else. Why else should I be able to scan someone twenty miles away, simply because I can see a tiny silver dot?"

"So it's possible I might have established some link with her?"

"I wouldn't count on it. It's more likely closure - your mind putting things together from a number of facts and sensations. Your memory of her signature, the traces of her left in this room, the details you know about her - the Human mind is a strange machine, even without telepathy. The main thing, Mr. Bester, is that it works. 'Why' is usually a fine question to ask, but in this case-" He stopped, smiling. "Have you ever seen the animated vids?"

"Yes. I used to like Roadrunner."

"Hmm- the roadrunner was the Blip, right? And the coyote, the PsiCop?"

"Yes, sir. The roadrunner was clever, but he always got caught in the end."

"Did he ever run off of a cliff, and not know it? Just hang there in the air until he realized that he wasn't standing on anything?"

"Yes, sir. That's when he would fall."

"Sometimes our abilities are like that. Convince yourself that something shouldn't work, and sometimes it doesn't"

"In that case, sir, I'd like to tell you something I really shouldn't know."

"What's that, Mr. Bester?"

"She's out in a park, somewhere, or a field. Someplace open."

Bey nodded thoughtfully. "Well. An intuition. And you may be right - that may be where she wants to be.

That's very different from knowing where she is."

"Yes, sir."

"Let us suppose she is trying to reach such a place. I assure you, it is not in Amsterdam. What will she need to get there?"

"Credits. Her own chit is no good now, and she must know that."

"Exactly. Let's interview the manager."

Cloe Lyster was a stringy woman in her late forties, with hair like a white tumbleweed. Her beaklike mouth clacked out brief, acerbic answers to their questions. No, of course she didn't know where the girl was. She had checked in the day before, gone out, and hadn't returned. Yes, of course she'd run an ident check, but there were problems with the system just now. No, she hadn't required a retina scan - she didn't even have the equipment. Young? Yes, but a million young people came through Amsterdam on holiday. Why should that be suspicious?

"If she was on holiday, why did she ask you about jobs?" Bey asked, not looking up from his notebook.

"Lots of kids get part-time-" She froze, realizing that this was the first mention of jobs thus far. Bey looked at her, a bit archly.

"I know the law," she said, sullenly. "You aren't allowed to do that."

"Do what? Ask you a question? Madame, of course I am."

"You aren't allowed to read my mind."

"I didn't," he said mildly. "I guessed, and you obliged by being stupid. That's at least twice you've been stupid with us, Madame. Once when you lied to us, again when you let me trick you. Please, do not be stupid again. I now have probable cause to do a scan, if I wish. I can have the authority in less than an hour. Have you ever been scanned, Ms. Lyster? I assure you, you won't like it. Personally, I'd prefer not to do one - I don't imagine I would like the inside of your mind." He leaned on the antique,

polished wood of the counter. "Why not just tell me what I want to know? I will find out, one way or the other."

Lyster's eyes seemed to dull, and she reached for a slip of paper and a pen. She wrote down a name and an address.

"It's nothing to do with me," she said, softly. "I warn them."

Bey looked at the scrap for an instant, then back at Lyster. "Nothing to do with you?" he said, softly. He pulled out his tel-phone and flipped it open.

"This is Bey," he said. "I need an elite squad to meet me at the following address," he said, then read the street and building number from the manager's note. "At least ten bloodhounds. Keep it quiet, but come armed for bear." He paused. "Send an ambulance to 21 Lagendijk Street, too. A Ms. Lyster has had some sort of attack."

He closed the phone. Lyster was backing away, blinking rapidly.

She turned and tried to run.

"Sir?" Al asked, as their car sped through the city. "Why did you-"

"You'll see why I did it soon enough," Bey said, grimly. "Don't worry about her. She'll wake up with a headache and have bad dreams for the next six months. Better than she deserves."

"She works with the underground?"

Bey shook his head. "Most runaways like Ms. Cristoban don't find the underground. They find people like Saskia Grijs."

"Grijs?"

"Yes. That's who our sweet little old landlady referred Ms. Cristoban to."

Bey parked on the street, near an ancient-looking three-story building. Lights were flashing in the upper story, and a crowd was gathered on the street, staring upward.

"No!" Bey shouted. "I told them to wait!" He bolted from the car and sped toward the house, PPG in hand, black coat flapping behind him.

Al sat stunned for a moment, staring up at the flashing lights, before noticing two men in MetaPol

uniforms lying facedown in the street

Bey hadn't told him to stay in the car. Hadn't told him anything.

In a few heartbeats he was with one of the downed men. He knew in an instant the fellow was dead. It wasn't the gallon or so of blood pooled beneath him, or even the film forming on his wide eyes - it was the nothing that was in his mind.

The other man was dead, too. For a moment Al felt disoriented, as if the whole world had come apart at the atomic level, and then come back together slightly different.

Dead. This was real. They had been people, and now they weren't.

Above, he could hear weapons conversing. That's where Bey had gone. Bey, who could be dead, too.

The dead man was still clutching a PPG. Gingerly, Al took it from his still-warm fingers and slowly, quite slowly, followed Bey up the stairs.

He continued to pass bodies. One on the stairs, one on the first landing. Outside, sirens were approaching - regular police, he imagined. He thumbed the PPG on, found that it was already charged. The man outside must have died shooting, at least.

The corpse trail led to an open door. Al noticed that the gunfire seemed to have stopped.

He glanced through, and found himself face-to-face with the muzzle of a PPG.

"Don't!" Bey said, from somewhere. "He's with me!"

Al's heart was well toward the front of his mouth. The face staring into his was intense, almost mad-looking but beneath it was the familiar Psi Corps badge.

You should be more careful, kid.

Al nodded vigorously, still not capable of saying anything.

Bey was across the room. Five other cops had taken up positions. Bodies littered the floor, perhaps fifteen, and only one wore a badge.

"Search the whole thing," Bey snapped. "Rip up what you have to. Where is the girl?"

As his eyes adjusted to the darkened room, Al realized that Bey was speaking to a woman, thirtyish. Her platinum hair shone against her dark brown business suit

"I want my lawyer," she said.

Bey's expression didn't change, but hers did. Her eyes rolled back in her head and her back arched, hands spasming. She made a sort of clucking sound and fell wetly to the hardwood floor.

He nodded. "Three of you come with me. Al, I thought I told you-" He paused for an instant. "No, I guess I didn't, did I? My mistake. Come along then." He broke into a trot They wound up another tight corridor, old wood. Oddly enough, the air had a strange, antiseptic smell.

Bey approached a door and motioned. Two of the hounds kicked it in.

"Hey!" The man inside was large, broad-shouldered, with aquiline features. He was just putting on a white shirt. The rest of his clothes lay in a heap on the floor. "Listen, I paid good-" then he saw who they were.

PPGs whined.

"No," Bey commanded. "I want this one to go to trial. Take photographs."

One of the hounds walked over to the man and kicked him in the crotch. When he doubled, he slammed the butt of his PPG into the base of his skull. The fellow went down, groaning.

Bey ignored all of that and went to the bed. That was where Cristoban was. Al followed, almost unaware that he was doing so. There was blood everywhere. He noted, dully, that it had beaded on the sheets rather than soaking in, as if the sheets had been made with this in mind.

She was still alive, tied spread-eagle. Naked. One eye was swollen shut, and her face was battered beyond recognition.

Help me...

Bey cut the bonds with a small knife.

"The ambulance just arrived, sir," one of the bloodhounds said.

"Tell them to hurry."

Am I- I'm in trouble.

"Don't worry about it," Bey said, softly. "Don't worry about anything. Just hang on, okay?"

I just didn't want- I wanted it to be like it was...

"It will be. Just like it was. We've called your parents. They're coming to get you."

Really?

"Really."

And then she wasn't there anymore.

Bey bowed his head, then straightened and stood. He looked terrible, like an angry god, a single tear

trickling down one cheek.

God damn them. Damn them to hell, Al suddenly caught, from Bey. It had a strange subtext, almost as if he weren't talking about the criminals who had raped and murdered Cristoban at all, as if he meant- But that was impossible.

"Come on, Mr. Bester," he said, softly. "It's time we left, you and I."

Bey swirled his coffee and gazed out at the creamy morning light on the canal. A paddleboat with a young couple in bright yellow shirts disturbed a family of ducks. A third-story window opened, and a beautiful girl with long, white hair leaned out to enjoy the hint of breeze.

"I'm sorry, sir," Al said, sipping his own coffee.

"What are you sorry about, Mr. Bester?"

"I know it upsets you when someone gets killed." Bey seemed to consider that for a long while, as Amsterdam quickened, and the streets began filling with men and women in business suits, the fronts of restaurants and shops rolling up. The older man's eyes took all of that in, and his face was placid, but Al was certain that if he dared to scan him, he would hear Stravinsky playing.

"A fellow goes out to the country one day," Bey began, "and he stops in at this farm. He's talking to the farmer, when he notices this pig with three peg legs. Three wooden legs and one real one. He asks the farmer about it

" 'Let me tell you about this pig,' the farmer says. 'This is some pig. This pig saved my life once. The house was on fire, and this pig charged right in, dragged the wife and me out.' "

" 'That's pretty amazing,' the fellow said.

" 'That's not all. This pig can do calculus and all kinds of mathematical whatnot. Why, some say he's even solved Fermat's last theorem.'

" 'Seems I read that in the papers a few years ago,' the city fellow said.

" 'Yep. Reporters came out for that one. Also, this pig can play the piano - he prefers Chopin. He really is some pig.'

" 'Well, I have to agree,' the city fellow replied, 'but what happened to his legs?'

" 'Well,' says the farmer, 'when you've got a pig this special, you don't want to eat him all at once.' "

Al blinked, felt his lips lift up involuntarily.

"Yes, it was a joke, Mr. Bester," Bey replied. "You are permitted to laugh."

"Yes, sir. It was an awful joke, if I may say so, sir."

"Mr. Bester, somehow I don't think of you as a connoisseur of humor, so I will take that as a compliment. Cultivate a sense of humor, Mr. Bester. You will need it to survive. And if you use it correctly, you might even be able to convince mundanes that you are almost Human." He finished off his coffee.

"What do we do now, sir?"

"I'll have to go to the arraignment this afternoon. I was thinking of sending you back to Geneva."

"If I'm in the way, I understand."

"On the other hand, I have most of the day free, so instead I considered we might take in a few museums - there is a very nice modern art museum here, you know. We can eat some frites and mayonnaise, wander along the waterfront, check out what was the red-light district, before the neo-Lutheran purge last century. Beautiful buildings that have seen centuries of the best and worst that Humans can do. We can remind ourselves that we are still alive, and that that is a fine thing indeed. What do you say, Mr. Bester?"

Al thought about all the studying he had backed up because of this trip.

"That sounds fine to me, sir."

chapter 9

The blade flicked out in what seemed to be a straight lunge, but Al knew it was a feint-disengage. He went for the parry anyway, but instead of staying put or advancing to riposte as his opponent expected, he took a brisk retreat, caught the elusive steel with a second parry in prime, slid neatly inside the enemy point, and riposted at last - a difficult move, but it looked very elegant if you could pull it off.

He pulled it off. Green light, his point.

The score was fourteen-fourteen. Al returned to the en garde line and pulled off his mask. He saluted his opponent, a long-jawed, big-boned fellow named Emory. Al flashed Emory a smile. "One more. Loser buys lunch."

Emory nodded a little nervously.

Perfectly relaxed, Al flexed his legs and dropped his foil to the side. They began to dance.

Emory was a bit predictable. He beat, advanced quickly in a low line, lunged, disengaged. He 'cast his next move - or what he wanted Al to think was his next move, a retreat-crossback-flèche - and instead did a lunge-and-duck, hoping Al would be suckered into running onto his blade.

Al went for it. Give the guy a break - he hadn't won a match all day, and this was, after, all, only practice. If they ever faced each other in an official bout, Emory would learn, to his dismay, that Al had been fencing about five notches below his best.

"Well done," Al said, taking off his mask and saluting. He strode forward enthusiastically to shake Emory's hand.

"It was a good bout," Emory said. "I'm surprised I beat you."

"Don't sell yourself short. You've got some good attacks. You sure suckered me with that last one. I guess I'm buying lunch."

Emory grinned. "I guess so. I- ah- I promised some friends I would meet them in the sandwich shop on the square. Would you mind being in company?"

"Not at all," Al replied. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine."

"... and the farmer says, 'Well, when you have a pig this special, you don't want to eat him all at once,'"
" Al finished.

All five made faces. Emory aside, Al hadn't met any of them before - they were all sophomores, and he was a senior.

"Thanks a lot, Al," one of the girls - Alemba - said. "Makes my ham sandwich all the tastier."

"I strive to give pleasure," Al replied. They were all still chuckling, Alemba included.

"So tell us, Al," Emory said, after the moment had passed, "what was it like, tracking down Brazg and Nielsson?"

Al put on a sober face. "You heard about that?"

"Everyone heard about that. A lot of us were rooting for you, when you had to be the statue of the week, but we were afraid to say so. The older kids-"

"I appreciate that, but it's just as well you kept quiet. The Corps doesn't punish without good reason. Going after those two was the dumbest thing I ever did in my life. I genuinely appreciated my punishment."

"Still, some people went too far. Fatima-"

"I felt sorry for her," Al said. "I still do. I wish I had understood at the time how disturbed she was. Maybe I could have done something." He was surprised to realize that he really meant this. "What she did to me was a symptom of her own problems. It didn't really have much to do with me."

"That's right, you were there, weren't you- when she, you know..."

Al nodded. "That hunt was part of my punishment, my lesson. The Corps really wanted me to understand the evil that's out there, the kinds of things that can happen to telepaths in the mundane world. Believe me, when I saw what that sick pervert did to her-" He broke off, strategically.

"It must have been awful," Dierdra said, her violet eyes round.

"Let's talk about more pleasant things," Al suggested.

"Yeah," Emory replied. "Like our trip on the lake next weekend- Al, would you be interested?"

"That sounds nice," Al said. "Can I let you know in the next day or so?"

"Sure."

Later, when he and Emory were alone, the taller boy looked a little sidewise at him. "Did you let me have that last point, in the gym today?"

Al chuckled. "I never let anyone 'have' anything. Haven't you heard that about me?"

"The older kids talk like that about you," Emory said, cautiously. "I have to say, you aren't what I expected."

Al chose his words carefully. "It's not their fault. I used to be a little too competitive. I've- learned a few life lessons."

"Well," Emory said, a little awkwardly, "you're okay by me."

"Thank you, Emory. That means a lot to me. See you in fencing tomorrow?"

"Count on it."

"You won't fool me with that duck again."

"We'll see!"

Al watched him go, surprised at the warmth in his chest.

He was still at the top of his class. He still tested highest in psi-tests. And he had- friends? Almost friends, anyway. People who liked having him around.

"Good morning, Al." Bey shuffled some papers from his desk. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if I could take a rain check on the Geru exhibition this weekend."

Bey nodded. He seemed a little stiff. "I was going to talk to you about that. It was a little problematic anyway. Some things have come up. You have some other engagement?"

"Some of the sophomores asked me if I'd like to go out on the lake with them."

"Go, go by all means. This is what I've encouraged in you, eh? You should be out with the other

students - for your own sake, and because it makes a good impression." He glanced at his watch. "If you have time for a walk, though..."

"Right now, sir?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"No, sir." But Bey never went out this time of day.

"Forgive me that little subterfuge, Mr. Bester," Bey said, as they strolled along the parklike north quad. "I wanted to mention something to you, and I wanted to do it where no one was likely to overhear."

"No problem, sir."

"Matters have come to my attention that will impinge on our talks."

A little hollow seemed to appear in Al's throat. "Oh. Anything important, sir?"

"Yes, but I can't talk about it. And that's not what I..."

Bey paused for a second, uncertainly, and for no reason he could name - Bey's thoughts were, as always, carefully guarded - Al felt a slight dread. "Mr. Bester, did you ever meet with Director Vacit?"

"Why-yes. Yes, sir. When I was six years old. He called me to his office after that incident with the Grins I told you about"

"Hmm."

"Why do you ask?"

"Mr. Bester, I worked closely with Director Vacit in his last years here. He took few into his confidence, but he confided in me now and then. Those of us who knew him well were aware that - he took a certain interest in you, Mr. Bester. Over all of the other students. None of us ever knew why, not even Natasha, who was closest to him."

"I... we, sir?"

"Yes. It was one reason I was keeping my eye on you, out of respect for him, though as I think you know, I've found reasons of my own to be concerned for you."

"Thank you," Al said, almost at a loss for words. "I- I know you've saved my life, in more than one-"

"No, let me finish. I don't want to get sidetracked. The present director - Johnston, the one you met at your hearing - has done everything he can to remove the influence of Vacit. All of Vacit's former aides are elsewhere, retired, or- well, Director Johnston has certain ambitions. And a certain vision

for the Corps, which is - which some feel is untraditional."

This uncertain speech was not like Bey at all. "But you're still here," Al noticed.

"Indeed." Bey plucked at his beard. "He knows, Mr. Bester - Johnston knows that Director Vacit took an interest in you. Like me, he doesn't know why. That bothers him a lot. And so he keeps a close eye on you, Mr. Bester. And those you associate with. You have a bright future ahead of you, Mr. Bester, but you have an enemy. He will be the more your enemy if you and I continue our association, especially now."

"Now, sir?"

"I really can't speak of it."

"But, sir- Dr. Bey, I don't care about that."

"Yes, you do. You will. And you don't have all of the facts before you, from which to predict consequences. Mr. Bester-" his voice softened "-Al. I don't want to hear from you. Don't come by to see me. Don't message me. Respect my wishes in this." He turned, put a hand on his shoulder. "But know that I am proud of you."

You've learned a lot-

"I've learned everything important from you, sir."

"You were an apt pupil. I will consider you a perfect one if you obey me now."

"I-" His chest was tight. "I will, if you tell me to, sir."

"Good. Perfect." He reached into his pocket.

"I want you to have this." He withdrew something, something that fit into his palm. Al held out his hand stupidly and felt something cool pressed there.

"This was my first. It always brought me luck. Hang on to it. On the day you have earned the right to wear it - and that day will come, Al, I do not doubt it in the least - I would be proud to see it on your uniform."

He paused, as if to say something else, shook his head, and suddenly turned and walked away. "A bientôt, Mr. Bester."

Only when he was gone did Al open his fingers to stare at what he already knew was there - the brass and copper of a MetaPol badge.

Two steps to your right, Al, Emory 'cast. He glyphed, too. Al saw himself approaching a shallow pit. It was perhaps a yard across. He paused for an instant, trying to will himself the ability to see through the blindfold, but of course that was impossible. He could only see through the eyes of his teammates. That was the point of the contest, really. One reason he had avoided such team events in the past - it meant trusting one's teammates completely.

Trust. It came hard.

He flexed his knees and leapt. The floor found his feet a little sooner than he expected, and he almost stumbled. Emory must not have noticed that, the extra height beyond the trench. Sloppy, but he probably hadn't imagined Al would jump, thinking he would edge around instead.

Shooter, Al, two o'clock! That was Indira, and Indira was always precise. He dropped and rolled sideways, came up with his own simulator held level. Indira, on one side of the course, and Abraham, on the other, glyphed simultaneously. The two images were confusing, but necessary. With them he was able to triangulate where his opponent - also blindfolded, also coached by his team - stood. Al squeezed the contact, and was rewarded with a small ringing sound.

A cheer went up from his side.

You did it, Al! Emory 'cast.

No, Al replied. *We did it together.*

There was a celebration, of course. The victory had advanced them to the semifinals, and they all thought their chances looked good. For Al, it was a sort of revelation, this shared victory. It was mixed - when he failed he let everyone down, and when he succeeded he had to share the glory. But being part of a team had its rewards, as well. For the first time, he felt he was at the center of something, rather than clinging to a rapidly rotating edge.

Something was still missing, though, and that something was Sandoval Bey. Al had struggled to understand the feeling of loss that had only seemed to mount as the months marched by. Three months, and not a word from the station chief.

Part of him felt ashamed for missing Bey, because he was bright enough to understand the implications of what he felt

Most of his new companions were laterals - most had been raised for years by biological parents. They were all loyal to the Corps, all thought of the Corps as mother and father - but as surrogate mother and

father, as replacements for their birth parents.

For Al, the Corps had been his first mother, first father, yet despite that, his feelings toward Bey were - if he was honest with himself - filial. The primitive instincts that even the best telepaths inherited from their mundane ancestors still lived in him, urged him to focus on human individuals as parents.

The faces he had once seen in his dreams were gone, left behind with childhood and the Grins - but Bey's face had taken their place.

It was wrong. We are all mothers and fathers to one another.

That had been the lesson imported by the Grins. That was the lesson of the Corps.

It didn't comfort him much. He missed Bey.

He shook his head. The excited conversation around him had shifted, and he tried to focus, to catch up. He didn't want them to think he wasn't paying attention to them, that he didn't value them. It was one of Bey's lessons - if you show someone they have value to you, it automatically makes you valuable to them.

So he joined in the conversation, pushing Sandoval Bey to the back of his mind.

Half an hour later, a Psi Cop walked into the bar. He glanced around, and when his gaze met Al's, recognition kindled. He came over.

"Alfred Bester?"

"Sir? Yes, sir, that's me, sir."

"Would you come with me?"

"Of course." He turned to the others. "See you guys for practice in the morning?"

"Sure thing, Al. You were great today."

"You guys, too. See you."

The Psi Cop set a brisk pace. "Sir? May I ask where we're headed?"

"The director's office," the cop told him. "Director Johnston wants to see you."

"Mr. Bester."

Al had never heard his own name sound so threatening. The director maintained his familiar, thin smile as he appeared to review something on the desktop display.

"Sir."

"I've heard good things about you, of late. You may know that many of your teachers had concerns about you. I did myself, after that little incident in Paris. I'm very pleased to say, no one has had the slightest complaint about you since that time."

"Thank you, sir. I believe I learned a valuable lesson."

The director nodded. "You will graduate the Minor Academy this year?"

"Yes, sir, if I meet the requirements set by the Corps."

"Oh, I'm sure you will have no problems there, Mr. Bester. All of your instructors seem quite certain of you."

"That's gratifying to hear, sir, but of course I take nothing for granted."

"No, I'm sure you don't." He paused, took a small tumbler half full of what appeared to be water, and relaxed back into the arms of his padded chair. "Have you seen Dr. Sandoval Bey, recently?"

Al felt it then, a faint touch, a prickling of the skin. Someone, somewhere, was scanning him, a very light scan, like a business teep.

"No, sir. Not in months."

"You two spent quite some time together. You even went on a raid with him, I seem to remember. No, no- don't fear to admit it, he cleared it through this office."

"So he told me at the time," Al replied.

"Do you know why he took such an interest in you? He advocated for you at the hearing, took you under his wing. You two met regularly for months."

"I can't say, sir. He saved my life in Paris, I suppose that had something to do with it. He thought my education was incomplete."

"Really? He said that? In what way does he feel the Corps is not doing its job as educator?"

Al felt, suddenly, as if he had walked into a trap. "That's not what I meant, sir. It wasn't the Corps that failed, but myself. The lessons Dr. Bey thought I should learn were there for me all along-I just didn't learn them."

"And what lessons might those be?"

"I-" Al realized that it was hard to articulate what Bey had given him. "He taught me to appreciate other people. To work with them, to try to understand their point of view."

"I see. And this Blip you chased together, this Fatima Cristoban - did he teach you to understand her point of view? Did he teach you compassion for rogue telepaths?"

Al's mouth suddenly felt very dry. There was something - some subtext to this conversation - that was leaking from the director. He tried desperately to shut it out "I- she was confused, sir. Very confused. I suppose I did feel sorry for her."

"Tell me, Mr. Bester," the director said, very softly. "If you had to choose between a rogue telepath and a *mundane* who was loyal to EarthGov and to the principles of the Corps, which would you choose?"

"I am loyal to the Corps, sir. A rogue is a rogue."

"I see. A commendable attitude. Do you think Dr. Sandoval Bey shares that attitude?"

"Of course, sir." But he felt a flicker of doubt at that. Bey might - just might - under the right circumstances - put the telepath first

And he knew, with sinking heart, that his doubt had been heard and noted by someone he could not see.

"Very well. That will be all, Mr. Bester."

And as he left, he felt the same flash of hatred he had felt all those years ago, when he had first seen this ice-eyed man. And there was something else - a danger, a threat. Not to himself, but to Bey. And it was mixed with a feeling of terrible triumph.

He fought to control his breathing all the way back to the dorms. Bey was in danger- grave danger, of that he was sure. He should warn him, go to his office- No, that was crazy; send him an anonymous message.

But what if Bey really had betrayed the Corps? Wouldn't warning him be an act of treason, too?

Yet it was plainly impossible. Bey was the Corps, represented everything good about it. Even if he had sympathy for some rogues, that didn't mean- The director was a mundane, a jealous, power-mad mundane, who-

He crushed those thoughts, but they kept coming back. Bey was in danger. How could he do nothing?

Then he turned a certain corner and for just an instant didn't understand where he was, how his feet had led him there, why the world had suddenly become so vivid. Why he was six years old again and all life since a dream.

It was the place. The place that the Grins had branded into his mind. It all came back - the fear, the shame - mostly the shame. He felt a sob jerk in his chest, but he grabbed it with his heart, kept it there, tight and cold and awful. Grinding his teeth, eyelids twitching, he closed his hand in a fist, hurried on, until the feeling faded, became a memory again.

They were trying to trick him. That's what they were trying to do. The director had intentionally made him think Bey was in danger, to test his loyalty, his commitment to the Corps. If he went to Bey now, it was all over, everything. No Major Academy, no future with MetaPol, nothing.

Bey was fine. Maybe- he shied away from the thought, but couldn't entirely dismiss it -maybe Bey was even in on it. Since his foolhardy pursuit of Brazg and Nielsson, everything had been leading to this - a test to make sure Alfred Bester really was Psi Cop material.

Now his breath smoothed out, and his heart found a reasonable pace. He went back to his dorm, he took out his books, and he studied.

Three days later he stood on closely trimmed grass, his legs like wood.

It should be raining, he thought. The sky should be black

It wasn't. The sun dazzled, a jewel on a vast pillow of blue velvet and white lace. The leaves of the trees glistened with dew. Birds were singing, though the music - the music in his head - nearly drowned their song.

He was the only one there, at the grave. No one else had come. They said he was lucky to even be buried here, considering.

"They say-" He couldn't speak, he found - not with his throat. *They say you were helping the rogues, that you sympathized with them. They issued a warrant for your arrest, and when they came, they found you...*

He couldn't picture it, Bey standing on a chair, a rope around his neck, calmly kicking the chair from beneath him. It didn't fit. Bey hated suicides.

I've heard- whispers -that they killed you. That they gave you a choice, and rather than disgrace the Corps you - you did it while they watched. Like a samurai. Is it true, Dr. Bey? I trusted you.

(Anger, sudden, somehow like hiccups.) The director was right, or half right, wasn't he? You may never have helped the rogues, but you did sympathize with them. If you were given the same choice they gave me - good mundane or bad telepath - you would always choose the telepath, wouldn't you? What have your philosophies gotten you? Your jokes? How could you betray me by dying?

The grave did not answer, of course. Al stood there, staring at the fresh earth - smelling it, like the flower beds after the ground crews broke them for planting - and he wondered if he would live. He wondered if a Human heart could just tear itself in half, if his life could simply vomit out of him, as anything he ate did, each time he pictured Bey hanging there, face purple, his beard still neatly trimmed.

I could have warned you. I didn't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, even if you really were a traitor.

It should be raining. The sky should be black. He closed his hand on the badge in his pocket, and it felt like a smooth piece of bone, long dead. His head was full of music, discordant, mocking.

Stravinsky.

chapter 10

Al admired Freja Magnussundottir's face. It was like carved ivory, fixed, expressionless. She seemed to speak and blink without using muscles; despite her advanced years, the only wrinkles were precise, incised lines that never bunched and neither lengthened nor shortened.

"The field test," she was saying, "will not comprise any fraction of your grade - it will comprise all of it. Those of you who do not have a B average or above will not be allowed to participate. As of now, you have effectively failed the course."

"But that's- we weren't told that at the beginning of the class. It wasn't in the syllabus!" The protester was Roger Fieldstone, a burly, weak-chinned senior.

"Mr. Fieldstone, sit down. I did not give you permission to speak."

"I'm sorry, Instructor, but this is simply not fair. If we were required to maintain a B average, we should have been told so."

"Mr. Fieldstone, you feel you could have done better if you had known it was required of you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I see." She nodded thoughtfully. "Then the Corps has no use for you. Excellence should not be conditional, it should not arise from necessity - but from desire. You have admitted that you took my class less than seriously, Mr. Fieldstone. If we were to give you a badge and a PPG and make you a Psi Cop, why should we expect any more of you? I'm recommending you be dropped from the program entirely."

"But I'm a senior," Fieldstone said, his voice panicky. "I can't- you can't-" He stood there, mouth open, and then collapsed back into his seat, burying his face in his hands.

Serves you right, Fieldstone, Al thought, but did not 'cast

"Now. As I was saying before Mr. Fieldstone's unfortunate interruption-" On the very word, the door suddenly creaked open. Magnussundottir chopped off in midsentence and turned her uninflected face to see who it was. "Ah. Ms. Montoya. How nice of you to join us."

"Sorry, ma'am, I was arrested."

"Arrested."

"Yes. By the sight of the interns jogging by. The men wear these tight little-"

"Sit down, Ms. Montoya."

Montoya smiled, shrugged, and did so. On the way she caught Al staring at her and arched her eyebrows. He looked quickly away.

He remembered Elizabeth Montoya, had recognized her the first day of class. She was the dark beauty who had kissed him four years ago, when he had been the statue of the day. He had considered reminding her of the incident, but didn't really see the point. Montoya was a capricious creature, always flirting, usually outrageous, rarely more than a single word away from being thrown out of class - and yet somehow, she never quite seemed to say that word. It irritated him that she got away with such behavior. Her attitude was not, in his opinion, fitting for a Psi Corps cadet.

"If I am finally free of interruption," the instructor began again, "I will finish what I was saying. For those of you to whom the field test is still a concern - you will be assigned to four-person teams. You should be ready to go at 0500 tomorrow. The location, duration, and nature of your exam will not be disclosed. You will be provided with no tools, equipment, or clothing. You are free to confer among yourselves between now and then. Group assignments will be posted after class. Now, if you will all refer to diagram one of your text, we can begin a discussion of today's assignment."

"Well, Alfie, looks like we're on the same team," Montoya chirped, peering over his shoulder at the posted list.

"I prefer Alfred," he said.

"I prefer Alfie. Alfred sounds like a butler. Anyway, where do we meet to go over strategy? Uh-oh-we've got Vetsch and Nhan on our team. Couple of lowlifes."

"Hey!" Thuy Nhan said, behind them.

"No offense."

"So, where are we meeting, Captain Alfie?"

"Hiking boots," Al said.

"Right. Best to be overprepared in the footwear department. Unless they dump us in the middle of a black-tie formal."

"I hadn't thought of that," Vetsch said, resting his rounded chin on folded arms.

"No," Al said. "It can't be anything that specific. If it is, there will be opportunities for us to acquire the right clothing. We should start with survival gear."

"Swiss army knives," Nhan offered. "Water."

"It won't be a simple survival test," Montoya said, doodling on her list "We'll have to track, I'm sure of it."

"Or avoid being tracked," Al replied.

"How so? It's a class on detection techniques."

"Right. Nothing teaches you to hunt like being prey."

"Ah! Words of wisdom from the master."

"Look," Al said, starting to feel really irritated, "I take this seriously. I want to be a Psi Cop."

"Hey, we all do," Montoya gave back, "but can't you have a little fun with it? Relax! We're the best of that class."

"I know we are," Al said. Actually, he didn't agree. Nhan was smart, but she had no stamina. Vetsch tended toward the bottom end of P12 - he ought to have been rated a high-end P11. And Montoya-Montoya had no discipline.

Still, if they thought he thought he was better than they, they wouldn't follow him. "We are the best, but that just leads to over-confidence. Now, I say lightweight parkas - we can always dump them if they put us on the equator or in the Sahara."

"Wear pretty underwear, in case we have to strip all the way down," Montoya added. "I have a nice set with Narn-head mottle."

Inwardly, Al sighed. It would be a long afternoon.

They were in a jet for a while, or perhaps a jet simulator. They might have been on a train, and they were certainly in a helicopter toward the end. A lot of time passed, though thanks to the blackout conditions they traveled under, it was uncertain exactly how much time - their watches had been taken from them before the trip began.

When they finally stood again on the ground, still blindfolded, Al took a deep, slow breath. The air was brittle with cold, and he was glad he had insisted on the jackets. Rich scents of earth, hay, the

memory of smoke surrounded them, and he felt tall grass brushing his pants. It was resoundingly silent - no traffic noises, no distant voices. The same was true of the psychic wind. They were somewhere far away, remote.

Someone removed his blindfold - a tough-looking woman with close-cropped hair. Everything remained dark, but it was a darkness with stars, and a moon.

Once they and their packs were out of the chopper, it left again on nearly silent rotors. Al sleepily blinked the nightscape in a series of still lifes with eyes gritty from fatigue.

"Well, here we are," Montoya observed. "Wherever 'here' is."

"Now what?" That from Nhan, who was hugging herself against the cold.

No one move. There might be clues as to what we're supposed to do almost at our feet. And don't speak aloud unless you have to. He glanced slowly around them. He could make out a horizon, some clumps that might be trees, houses, buildings. A few lights, very distant. *First we listen to see if anyone is out there.* He already had, but now they had line of sight.

Right, Captain Alfie.

They all concentrated, scanning their limited view.

After five minutes, Anything?

The answer was a uniform no. Following that, two of them kept watch, while the other two looked more carefully, switching on the two sets of infrared goggles they had between them. Like meerkats, Montoya said, one of many annoying references Al didn't get.

When infrared showed them nothing, they switched to flashlights.

"This is getting us nowhere," Montoya hissed, after a quarter of an hour. "We need to really look around. We don't know that we have time for this kind of lollygagging."

Al didn't want to agree with her, but he had to. He was impatient.

Fine. Let's do a clockwise sweep, about ten feet apart, with flashlights.

"Wait!" Montoya said. "Look there!"

Maybe half a mile away, maybe much farther, a string of light raced through the darkness. At times it resolved into circles or arcs. A groundcar, or something similar.

"You think that's it?"

Al stared at the car, keeping line of sight, reaching out, trying to find- There. He had it. Someone in the car and they were thinking-

Catch me if you can!

Al opened his mouth to repeat it, aloud, but Montoya was already gone, loping off into the near darkness with amazing speed. Vetsch and Nhan looked to him.

Damn it.

"You two follow. Walk thirty feet apart and try to keep us in sight. 'Cast if you notice anything. Watch our backs." Then he ran after Montoya.

It took a minute of hard running to catch her, and she was barely slowing down. He could've passed her, but didn't

What the hell are you doing? he 'cast. *We have to work together on this.*

C'mon, Alfie. You aren't the cautious type. You're overthinking this whole thing. It's a game of tag. We're it. If we sit on our hands, we'll get nowhere.

We can't catch it!

We sure as hell can't if we don't try.

He had no argument for that. Besides, he liked running. The grass hissed against their thighs, and he was just getting the wonderful burn in his belly. In the moonlight Montoya looked fierce and free. She might have been a lioness.

So for the moment, he surrendered to the joy of motion, the gratifying feel of his muscles, the night air. Even when the light vanished over the horizon, they didn't slacken.

A dawn sky like diluted milk revealed a flat plain that met all four corners of the world. Light transformed the landscape in unexpected ways, awakening a severe, bruised beauty.

The psionic landscape had altered, too-subtly-throughout the night. It had seemed at first totally silent, but that was because Al had been immersed in the background growl of Geneva for all of his life. Here, in the quiet hours of morning, faint impressions began emerging - heartbeats a hundred times faster than human, sharp hungers unburdened by denial or need for justification, occasional, almost vivid, flashes of color and structure.

The steppes, too, had a mind. At first he enjoyed it but after a time it became a little distracting - too strange to completely dismiss but of no use in accomplishing his task.

It was Montoya who found two lines of bruised grass that must be the tire tracks. They followed them for hours, alternating between fast walking and trotting, as the sky rapidly filled with light. *Call a halt, Captain Alfie.* He looked up to see Montoya, winking at him.

Tired?

No, but Nhan is. She's just too proud to say so. If we keep going at this pace, she won't be any use to us when we get wherever the hell we're going.

He looked at Nhan, and realized that Montoya was right

"Let's take a rest," he said.

"Fine with me. I'm bushed," Montoya replied, aloud.

They dropped their packs. Al walked up toward the next rise. The plain wasn't as flat as it seemed; it had a gentle roll that hid subtle valleys. They had seen a few structures-houses, factories maybe-but as the tracks didn't go near them, they hadn't approached them either.

He felt Montoya come up behind him.

"North Dakota? Mongolia? Where do you think we are?" she asked.

Looking at the huge sky, Al remembered Cristoban, and Argentina. And Bey.

"Right now it doesn't matter much," he said. "Right now, our job is very simple - we follow these tracks.

We're on the hunt."

"Uh-huh. Hey, Alfie-Alfred. Aren't you even going to ask me?"

"Ask you what?"

"Why I kissed you that day."

He considered that for a moment. "No."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't matter. Whatever the reason was, it had to do with a moment a long time ago. It's got nothing to do with now."

"You're a hard case, you know that? They say you had about a year when you unplugged your ass. You even went to semifinals in a team competition, then dumped your friends like a load of smelly shit."

"They weren't my friends. They just wanted to win the games."

"They thought you were their friend. Emory in particular was pretty torn up about it. He said it was like you had just cut them out of your head. He understood you were upset about Dr. Bey, and no one expected you to finish the games. They did sort of imagine you would talk to them again, though."

A sudden suspicion came over Al. "Who put you up to this?"

"What? Put me up to what?"

"This. Trying to talk to me."

She stared at him for maybe ten seconds, and then burst out laughing. Still laughing, she walked back to join the others.

Two hours later the tire tracks vanished into a river, one of the oldest tricks in the book. They split into teams, two up, two down, examining both banks. Al took Nhan with him.

They met again four hours later. The news wasn't good - in each direction the river was bounded by bluffs too steep for even the most rugged groundcar, and to the south the channel got too deep to drive in, anyway.

Where they stood was essentially the only place their quarry could have forded the river. And night was opaquing the pearly sky.

What wood they found was too damp to start a fire with, so they ended up huddled in sleeping skins, jackets on. Al turned the problem over and over in his mind, but got nowhere.

He awoke to a sharp jab in the ribs, and looked up wearily to see a smiling Montoya.

"Found the car," she said. She was dripping wet.

"In the river, sunken," Al guessed.

"Yep. Half mile downstream. Found some footprints in the mud, too."

He shucked himself out of the sleeping skin. "I'm impressed."

"Are you? I didn't think anything could impress you."

"I'm impressed by a lot of things. The mathematical precision of Bach. The prose of Joyce-

She squatted next to him. "Are you? Or do you just say things like that?"

That hit him oddly. He remembered - in sudden vivid clarity - the feel of her lips, a moment of impossible intimacy in the midst of humiliation, and for a nanosecond it seemed he knew Montoya, had always known her. And she knew him, saw straight through to the middle of him. For that flicker of time, it seemed a pretense to act like they were strangers.

"Let's go," he mumbled.

Montoya led them to the car, and, taking turns diving in the uncomfortably cold water, they did a hurried search of it. Again, Al felt the faint fingerprint of the same person who had challenged them two nights before. That made it easier to follow the footprints, which were almost imperceptible in the grass. After a time, however, it seemed pretty clear where the trail was leading; in the vast distance they could make out a small town, roads converging from several directions, including from slightly south of their own path. Soon they were walking on blacktop, and the sign of their prey was gone entirely.

"This is very bad," Al confided to Montoya, as they approached the town. "Two, maybe three thousand people in that town. How do we find him?"

"Or her. You've got me. But we'll think of something."

"Confident, aren't you?"

"No more so than you."

She shrugged, but he could tell the comment pleased her.

"You were raised in the Corps, weren't you."

"Yes. My biological parents were Corps, but they died when I was very young."

"You sure about that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. Have you ever seen any evidence that they really existed?"

"Are you questioning the Corps?"

"No. Yes. We should question everything, shouldn't we? Even if only for form's sake? How can we be good detectives if we make a habit of accepting assumptions blindly?"

"Why should the Corps lie to me about my parents? There's nothing even faintly logical about that." The very thought was sickening. Montoya just didn't know - couldn't know. She was a later who had been raised as a normal. Normals lived in a world of suspicion and violence, and it tainted them.

"Look," he said mildly, "my parents don't matter. They wouldn't if they were alive, except that the Corps would have two more valuable members."

"I'm sorry I brought it up." She touched his shoulder with her gloved hand.

A galvanic shock ran through him, as if he were a discharged battery suddenly exposed to current again.

Again he remembered her approaching him, noticing him on the parade ground.

"Why, then?" he asked, trying to keep his voice flat, nonchalant. Trying not to inflect it with surrender.

"Why what?"

"Why did you kiss me?"

A smile pulled at her lips, but somehow it wasn't a capricious one. There was something honest about it, something personal.

"To thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"It's hard to explain. I- I had just come into the Corps. You have to understand, it's different that way. Harder. It's very different from the outside world, and everyone is already broken out into cliques. I was- well, I was having my doubts. Frankly, I was considering running away."

"That would have been foolish. Another girl-"

"Fatima. Yes, I heard about her. But by that time I was okay, because I saw you."

"I don't understand."

"I had seen you there for days. When I walked past, you were dressed like-like Santa Claus with lipstick.

And there was shaving cream all over you. You looked ridiculous- I couldn't have stood there, like that. I couldn't have borne it. And the way everyone talked about you -what you were going through was worse than anything that I could imagine.

"And yet when you reached to touch my mind, and I felt you- you weren't angry, or ashamed. You were curious. You were just standing there, taking it all, and you were okay. That's when I knew I would be okay, too." Now her grin became mischievous. "And you were kind of cute. And I could tell that you thought I was beautiful."

"I didn't-"

"You still do. I see you looking at me. Why haven't you done anything about it?"

"Because-" *Because what's the point? What will it get me? Another chance to be hurt, another chance to be distracted. Excellence I can have, because it depends only on me. Happiness is an illusion, and for me not even that.* He didn't say it, didn't 'cast it. It was the first time he had even thought it. Montoya's presence brought back that year of joy and sorrow, and it felt like remembering madness. He had seemed so full of- something -back then. Something hot and alive, like- well, like Montoya herself. Her mind was like a furnace.

And she was threatening to bring it all back, the madness, the weakness, the pain.

He noticed that they had entered the town. "We had better get to work," he said.

chapter 11

"This is hopeless," Nhan said.

"Nothing is hopeless," Al replied, though he could not for a moment imagine in which direction hope might lie. They knew, at least, where they were - Tuulu, a small town in the Altai Federation.

"We aren't going to find him just walking up and down the street," Vetsch said.

"No. I thought I might catch a scent of his signature, but-" He furrowed his brow. "This is like a game of cops and blips, right?"

"A game of what?" Montoya asked.

Al blinked. "You never played Psi Cops and blips when you were little?"

But all three were looking at him in puzzlement. Later, every one. They had no idea what he was talking about.

He remembered the Grins, each heavy word they had impressed upon him.

The others were pretending you two were rogues. You were not. You imagined yourself a Psi Cop, chased by rogues. But it is deeper than that, Mr. Bester. Whatever any of you were pretending, you are all members of the Corps.

Could it be that simple?

"In cops and blips there are multiple goals, usually arbitrary. In this case, though, the goal should have to make some sort of sense."

"We've already checked the train station, the bus station, the car sales and rental lots-"

"Right. So maybe the goal is arbitrary, after all."

"I don't get it"

"Remember, this is a test, not a real hunt, or even a contest. Maybe- maybe it isn't about catching the Blip, but about doing everything right"

"But a Psi Cop's job is to catch rogues."

"Sure. But sometimes you fail. Then what? Then you put out the word, report what you know, and trust the rest of the Corps to help you out. Where is the one place we haven't gone since we've been here?"

They looked at him blankly, and despite himself, he felt a smile crawl sluggishly across his face. "The local Corps station."

"Holy Moses," Montoya said. "Why didn't we think of that earlier?"

"Because we were thinking of this as a contest. We thought we were competing with the Corps. Real Psi Cops don't compete with the Corps- not even in training."

Montoya's eyes were wide. "I wouldn't have thought of that."

No, he thought to himself. None of the rest of you could. Only me, only someone who grew up in a cadre.

And I should have thought of it much, much earlier.

A huge grin spread across the Psi Cop's already broad face. "Well," he said, in precise Anglic. "Are you here to give up?"

"No, sir," Al said. "We are here to notify the local station chief that a Blip recently passed through here."

"Catch me if you can," the cop said. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir."

"Holy smokes, you were right!" Montoya let out a war whoop and started dancing with Vetsch and Nhan. Al just stood there, feeling proud and stiff - and somehow, despite it all, a little left out.

"Unfortunately," the cop said, "for logistical reasons, it'll be morning before we can get you a connection back to Geneva. I've got rooms for you about three blocks from here."

"What's the drinking age in this 'grad?"

"Drinking age?" The cop pretended blank-faced incomprehension, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Heh!" Montoya replied.

"To Alfie," Montoya said, raising her shot glass high.

Al looked dubiously at the amber fluid in his own glass. But the toast was for him...

He sputtered on it, nearly blew it back up through his nose, and they laughed at him, but it was good-natured laughter, and Montoya was pressing a crescent of lime into his fingers.

"Suck on this," she said.

He did, and that made things better.

"Whew!" he managed. He stared at their grinning faces. Sure it was illusion, sure it was temporary, but...

He poured them all shots. "To all of us," he toasted. This time it wasn't nearly so hard to drink it down.

Later, they lurched back to their rooms, singing. He would never remember exactly what. The air had become a honeyed syrup - it almost seemed he should be swimming through it-and he was acutely aware of Montoya clinging to his arm. Aware of her fire, of it eating up his own limbs, perhaps attracted there by the heat of the tequila in his belly.

At the rooms, there was a round of good nights, of jokes - all hazy - and then suddenly he was alone with Montoya, very near her opalescent eyes. She wore the same mischievous smile he had first seen on her.

"Right," she said softly. "And why haven't you asked me to kiss you again?"

"I- because I-" He furrowed his brow. "I don't understand the question."

"You're a smart fellow, Alfred Bester, but in some ways you're as dumb as a stick."

"Look, this isn't smart," he tried to say, though it came out as "shmarr."

" 'cause we're drunk, an'-" He stared at her suddenly. "We are drunk, aren't we?"

"Never been drunk before, hey?"

"Well- no. The Corps doesn't-"

"Hush." And then she kissed him. It wasn't like the first time; it was an explosion. It was as if all of the universal constants had just changed by a factor of two. From his classes in astrophysics, he knew what that meant: all the stars flying apart as fusion became impossible, whole galaxies disintegrating. Of course, he didn't care. He felt her lips, the taste of tequila and salt, and he felt her feeling his lips. He brought his hand up to press the cool satin of her hair and kissed back. He was, perhaps, over-eager, and neither were in good control of their bodies. They overbalanced and thudded into the door, slid in a heap to the sidewalk. Montoya laughed and kissed him some more. There was nothing even

remotely playful about it anymore. He saw her, saw himself through her, and in that instant he wanted to really know her, everything about her, to make the illusion of the day before into a prophecy. He wanted to learn the shape of her toes. The names of her childhood pets. Her hopes and dreams.

How to unfasten her bra-

She laughed as she unlocked the door, but she didn't fool him. She was as nervous as he was - it was only that she was braver, brave and fierce and lovely in a way he could never be. But he wanted it, to hold it, to plunge into her heat.

"Vetsch- Nhan-"

"In the other room, Alfie," she whispered. "In the other room." Then she brushed the warm petals of her lips along his neck, and he stopped worrying about it. About anything.

chapter 12

"Hey, champ!" Elizabeth Montoya said, looking up from her books just as he came through the trees. She bounced up and into his arms, but when she darted her face forward to kiss him, her hair came between them. She laughed and pushed it out of the way, and her face materialized, right there. He seized the initiative and kissed her.

A year. A year and she hadn't realized her mistake, let him find someone nicer, taller, better for her.

He had expected it. From the first moment they came together in the motel in Tuulu, he had expected her to evaporate like every other happy thing in his life. He had stared at the beauty of her face in the dawn, and had mourned the passage of time and the pain it would bring him when she finally awoke. Instead, when her eyes had opened, she had grimaced at her hangover, but kissed him anyway. They ate breakfast together, and she used the pronoun "we" a lot. Any questions had somehow been asked and answered in the night.

A year of furtive meetings, of time stolen. Each and every time he saw her, he feared it would be the last.

But now...

"So what's this big news?" she asked, leaning back so their bellies pressed together, but he could see her whole face, undistorted.

He cleared his throat, suddenly feeling shy.

"We're a match," he said.

"I'm a match. You're dry wood. Ya wanna get together?"

"No, I'm serious. I mean we're a- ah- we're a genetic match."

"Al, you're shaking."

"Ah- yes, I guess I am."

Her eyebrows steepled. "Are you saying you had our genetic profiles run? To see whether we can have Corps-certified babies?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Um. Can I ask why?"

"Well, because- well, I thought -look, I'm not trying to rush you, Liz. I know things might change, I know you might not want me by the time we finish our training. We'll both be interning soon enough. But I love you, Elizabeth Montoya, and now we know-"

"What's all this got to do with genetics? Alfred Bester, I love you, too. And you damn well know I'm going to be with you when we finish our training. But I'll be damned if I need the Corps' permission to make babies with you, if that's what I want."

"I- Liz, I understand your feeling about it, but we have to be realistic, right? And anyway, this is perfect! There's no way they can object now."

She looked as if she was going to argue more with him, but then her face cleared, she shrugged, and she kissed him again. She drew back, comets dancing in her eyes. "You do love me, don't you? You wouldn't have checked if you didn't. I'm sorry, Al. I feel so close to you, sometimes I forget that we grew up in such different worlds. This means a lot to you."

He nodded solemnly. She mussed his hair and then kissed him once more, a slow, languorous kiss that spoke more than words.

The virtue of a kiss, he had learned, was just that. In and of itself, it was no large thing; flesh pressing together, a somehow always-unanticipated tickle. But when he and Liz kissed, it was expression, an attempt to communicate the incommunicable. To show - with the care one took, with this or that slight inflection in the grammar of lip, cheek, tongue, chin - what lay in their hearts. For the first time he pitied - truly, deeply pitied - mundanes, who could never possibly know how powerful and deep a kiss could be, much less lovemaking.

No wonder they were mean. They were like he had been, without Liz. Unfinished, half-made things, angry because they understood they were missing something important, that other people had it - but never, never able to know it themselves.

"Let's go somewhere," she said, when they left. "Let's celebrate." But he felt it, in the kiss. He could no longer pretend that it was his imagination. Finally, something had gone wrong.

A year ago, that would have been enough for him. He would have cut his losses, as he had the loss of Cadre Prime, of Bey, of Emory and the rest. But he could no longer imagine life without Liz Montoya. He couldn't see his future without her eyes, her smile, her soul near his.

She was covering it for his sake, but the genetic matching bothered her, and it bothered other things in her he had been trying to ignore. Still, this time, he couldn't give up. He had to know what was coming between them. Because he had no doubt that she loved him. He could feel her affections like a fixed star. Couldn't he? Or had he become that big a fool?

"A celebration it is," he said softly.

He took her hand across the table and studied her candlelit face. "I thought the news would make you happy."

She smiled, but it seemed a little forced. There was a rhythm to their communication - at certain times, they would settle for words; at others, they would share all of themselves. The last was so powerful it couldn't be borne continuously. The cycle was necessary, but sometimes it was frustrating not to know exactly what she was thinking.

Yet he would never violate their trust; he would wait for the invitation. It was like lovemaking - it had to happen by mutual consent and in mutual delight, or not at all.

"I was happy, Alfie. I am. It's just that - it bothers me that we had to check at all. That you felt we had to. This is us we're talking about. It's our lives. Why should anyone else even have a say?"

"It's the way it is," he said. "And, our feelings aside, it's the way it ought to be. I love you, Liz, and you are the most important person in the world to me. But the world is bigger than we are, and there are things more important than the two of us. I know it in my heart, and you do, too."

"I know you believe that, Alfie. I can feel it. And I respect it because I love you. But there are some things I just can't accept. This is one of them. I'm happy we can get married when we want to- and someday I do want to marry you, Alfred Bester, I do. You know I do. It just upsets me that it isn't our choice."

"It is now. So why are you still upset about it?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'm not. Maybe I can't believe that we were so lucky. Maybe, deep down, I was so worried I still don't believe it"

"I know that feeling," Al said. "I have it every time you look at me. Every time I touch your hand."

"Careful, Alfie. You have to stay the sensible one, remember? You are my axis. Without you, I think I would fly off into space."

"And without you, I would be a cold, dead planet. No life, no heat..."

"Let's get out of here. I want to go for a walk."

They paid their bill and left the restaurant. They had passes for the whole night - hard to get - and they tripped up and down the streets and lanes of Geneva. They decided to go on an impromptu tour of churches and bars - one church, one bar, one church, two bars. Al was careful; he had learned that drunkenness was not for him, even with Liz. Alcohol took his control. He felt out of control enough when he was with Liz, but in a giddy, wonderful way. Add too much strong drink, and it was like he was flying off into space. Liz was right - one of them had to keep one foot on the ground, and it was natural for it to be him.

But it was hard, so hard with her. He wanted to lose himself in her, enter the bright blaze that lived in her breast, even if it should consume them both.

They found themselves in a park, on a hill overlooking the lights of the city. Teeptown wasn't even visible, though the topaz immensity of EarthDome was. They sat on the hill and watched starships land at Port Thiessen. They talked about the universe.

"Mars, that's where I'd like to go," Liz said. "And after that, Kalevala. They say the wind there smells like a thunderstorm all the time, that there is always lightning in the upper atmosphere, like burning spiderwebs. I want to see it all. Narn. Centauri Prime."

"We will. Once we're Psi Cops we can put in for transfers. If we're married, they might even assign us together. Even if they don't, we'll be able to take our vacations together, with the jump-gate time we earn. We can go anywhere. Anywhere, as long as we're together."

She wrapped her arms tighter about him, and their languid comfort suddenly grew more electric. She began kissing him, insistent.

"Not here," he managed. "This is a park-"

"We don't have enough time as it is. Neither of us has any leave for three more months."

"I can sneak in to your dorm, when your roommate is out-"

"I hate doing it there, in Teeptown. People can hear-"

"They wouldn't if you weren't so loud-"

You like me loud.

Ha. It hurts my ears and what- what are you-

She was on top of him, her long, pleated skirt settled around them like a collapsed parachute. She was working at his pants.

Better cover your ears, she told him.

They stayed there until dawn, and he watched her sleep again, loving each angle of her face with his gaze, tracing her jawline with his finger. *I love you,* he 'cast, and in her sleep she smiled.

A week later, they found time again. His roommate had leave, and they lay together twisted in his sheets. He knew how she felt, but he liked having her in his room. When they were away, in Geneva or farther afield, it was like a strange dream. Here, she seemed part of his life. It was comfortable, real. It helped him imagine their future together and make that real, too.

Tonight she was restless, more restless than she had been a week before. Her unease felt like a rotten spot in his own chest.

"Alfie - have you ever considered - have you ever considered not joining the Corps?"

"Not joining? I'm already in the Corps."

"Only until you finish the academy. Then you can choose."

"Choose what? The sleepers?"

"I know. It's just that- you can't see it, Alfie. You remember that movie you showed me? Rashomon?"

"Sure."

"You grew up in the Corps. I know you love it. But- you know, you must know -that they only showed you one side of the story, don't you? You know that there's a whole world out there that has nothing to do with the Corps."

"What happened, Liz? Did one of the instructors-"

"Nothing in particular happened, Alfie. It's just that I don't like being controlled, and the Corps is all about control. It's about-"

"It's about being telepaths," Al said. "Liz, that's what we are. There isn't any place out there for us. Nothing. The Corps is all there is, and I know there are some things about it you don't like, but-"

"How do you know that there's nothing else? How would you know? All of your life you've been taught one thing - that the Corps is the only way. Don't you see how that serves them?"

"What 'them'? There is no them. The Corps is us, Liz-"

"Oh yeah?" She sat up in bed. "When did 'we' ever get a vote about the breeding regulations? When did 'we' get any say whatsoever? When did we get to decide that we can never be lawyers, or stockbrokers, or politicians-"

"That's EA law, Liz."

"It's all the same, Alfie. It's all control, and we just do what they say."

"Are you saying that I don't have the brains to know I'm being controlled?" Al asked, suddenly feeling a little angry. "That I believe the Corps is best only because I've been told it is? Liz, I've been out there. I've seen what happens to our kind without the Corps. I saw--"

"You still saw only what they wanted you to see."

"No. I went after Brazg and Nielsson on my own. Nielsson was sick. He would have killed me. The whole underground is like that."

"So much from a single example! You were trying to take his freedom. Of course he--"

"Nielsson was a criminal. What freedom do you think a criminal should have?"

She looked down at him, her eyes ablaze, and he was suddenly, terribly frightened. Not of her, but for her.

But then she bent and kissed his forehead. "I'm sorry, Alfie. I upset you, and I didn't mean to do that. It's just that sometimes I want you to see more than you do, just for a moment."

"And I want you to understand," Al said. "I know it's hard. They always told us in Cadre Prime that it was our job to make laters understand--"

"Is that all you're doing with me?" she said, flaring again. "Making me understand? Doing your duty to integrate laters into good Corps members?"

"You know better than that, Elizabeth Montoya. You know how I feel about you."

Her face had hardened, but now it relaxed again. "I do know." She sighed. "Sometimes I wish I didn't. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, though. I love you." And she came back to him, and they spooned together perfectly. Soon she was asleep. It took Al longer. He felt a sort of breathlessness he never had before, a little like he had been punched in the solar plexus. Light-headed. And he didn't know what it meant.

Weeks passed, and Liz seemed to calm down. The final examinations were approaching, which meant that they saw less of each other, but when they did sneak an hour or most of a night, it was good. She still seemed a bit distracted, but then, so was he. In less than a month, the long ordeal of the academy would be over, and they would finally be Psi Cops-interns, anyway.

A week before finals, he met with her for lunch, and she asked him to meet her in her room that night.

He went, a little after nine. Liaisons like this were ambiguous territory - essentially everyone knew that students went to each other's rooms, and ostensibly it was forbidden. As long as you were careful, as long as appearances were maintained, no one really cared. Like a good parent, the Corps

knew that sometimes it was best to be a little blind in one eye.

So sneaking in was just a ritual, though there were penalties for being caught. He might be forbidden to associate with Liz for a time; leave, always difficult to get, might be entirely restricted.

Al liked the window. It was traditional, and gave him a chance to hone his climbing skills.

He rapped on the pane. After an instant the curtain drew back, and there was Liz. She flashed him a halfhearted smile and let him in.

He saw immediately that something odd was going on. Clothes were folded neatly on the bed, and her backpack was out and already half full.

"What's up? Did you get leave?"

She paused and bit her lip, and he suddenly knew what she was going to tell him. That she had met someone else. That they were taking leave together.

No, she 'cast. I don't have leave.

Why are you packing?

I don't have leave. I am leaving.

That's not a good idea. I went AWOL once, remember-

She rushed suddenly into his arms, wrapped him up so tight it actually restricted his breathing. *Not AWOL, Al. I'm leaving. Leaving the Corps.* She pushed back a bit, so he could see her eyes, see that she was serious.

No you aren't. You're just upset about something. You aren't thinking straight. You're afraid of the exams-

Yes. I'm afraid I'll pass them. I checked, Al. No one who passed the exams ever left the Corps.

Of course not. Why would they?

Some tried. They were sent to the rehab centers. I'm going now, before someone picks up on how I feel, before they send me there.

He could feel her heart ticking against him. He couldn't feel his own at all. It was very strange.

Liz, I love you.

And I love you, Al. That's why I'm asking you- I'm begging you -come with me. We can be together. Not when we get leave, but all the time. We can do everything we said we were going to do, and more. We can be free.

We would be criminals, Liz. The same criminals we've been trained to hunt.

Right. We know all of the tricks. They'd never catch us. And we could go to the outer worlds, where they don't care, where the Corps doesn't reach.

"My God," he whispered. He couldn't stand. He sat on the bed next to her.

"I'm doing it, Al. I have to, and I want you to understand. I want you with me. But if I stay here I'll wither. I'll suffocate. You are the only reason I have to stay, and if I do it, I'll end up hating you. I don't want to hate you."

He put his head in his hands. He couldn't think.

"Just- wait a few more days. Give me time to think."

"No. Al, if I give you time to think, you'll never go. Right now, deep down, you know this is right. I can feel it. You know this is the best thing for us. For you. What has the Corps ever given you but pain? You think you belong, but when have you ever belonged?"

"Only to you," he murmured. "Only you and Bey ever made me feel that way."

"You see? For once in your life, Al, act from your heart. From the passion I know you have in you."

"You can't ask this of me. It's too much."

"I know. But I have to. If I didn't love you so much, I would have just gone. But I do, so I had to see you."

She took his chin in her fingers. "I want you to go, now. I want you to meet me where we made love, in the park, at midnight. If you don't, I'll never see you again. It's the way it has to be."

He wandered, trying to think. Past the statue of William Karges, into the cadre quad, where he hadn't been in years. Without ever consciously deciding to, he found himself at the base of the oak, the one he had spent so much time trying to climb.

He could reach the lowest branch now. He didn't have to jump for it. He leaned against the bark, feeling its familiar roughness, like an old friend.

In a way, when he had lived here, the tree had been his only friend. The kids and the cadre had never been, and the adults he had imagined as caring for him had been the same Grins who punished him so terribly.

Only the tree had been the same, day in and day out, always challenging him to climb higher, never changing the rules. Like the Corps itself.

He swung himself up onto the branch and began to climb.

The rules had changed. He was bigger. The stretches and gaps in the branches that had once been such a problem weren't impediments at all anymore. He kept going, effortlessly, past the high-water mark of his youth. Up and up, to where he had never been, to where the branches were narrow, to where he could feel the tree actually swaying with his weight, and the limbs themselves trembled with the effort of supporting him.

And he could see the stars above, those same stars in which he had seen the faces of his parents, the stars he and Liz had dreamed of seeing much closer, together.

Yes, the rules had changed, hadn't they? Bey, and now Liz. And he had changed.

He sat in those new and dangerous branches for a long while, thinking, playing futures in his mind, like vids.

Dangerous, uncertain futures. Futures with rules yet to be defined.

She rushed into his arms with a gasp, crushed his lips with her own, and they swayed together on the hilltop like saplings twining together for strength.

"I knew you would come," she said, breathlessly. Her face was shining, the fire in her burning brighter than he had ever seen it. In that instant, he loved her more than he ever had, more than he even knew he could.

And in that instant, too, she knew. He felt her body stiffen, and now he had to grip her harder, because if she ran it would only be worse. He expected her to fight. He wanted her to.

But she didn't. She just went dead in his arms. Her mind went away from him, shuttered behind bars and doors he hadn't felt since they had been together.

When the cops came out of the trees and took her away, she never even looked at him. She just stared at the ground.

He stayed where he was, rooted by the ghost of their last embrace, savoring it

"Are you okay?" He looked up to see one of the cops. It was Van Ark, the old fellow from the West End precinct. His dark face was gathered with concern. "You did the right thing, Mr. Bester. I know it

must have been hard for you."

Al nodded wordlessly.

"Give you a lift back to the dorms?"

"Sure."

"Don't worry about her. She'll be okay. They do a good job at the reeducation camps. Some day she'll even thank you."

"I know."

"You did the right thing."

"I know. 'The Corps is mother, the Corps is father.' " Al looked into the Psi Cop's eyes. "It's the only thing we really have, isn't it? The only permanent thing. The only thing that won't die or abandon us." He didn't know why he should explain this to Van Ark. Because the other would understand, he supposed.

Van Ark nodded and patted him on the shoulder. "Let's go home," he said.

Al nodded. He did have exams to study for.

chapter 1

Thoughts slipped about him like eels through dark waters, mostly tail and fin, but here and there the occasional glimmer of an eye, the flash of moray teeth. He wasn't among friends, which meant he was surely in the right place, after all.

That was good, because coming here had been a big risk, and justifying it to the travel authority had been no easy matter, especially to follow a trail that had reached an official dead end three months ago.

Blips had gotten good at making the sorts of journeys most peoples had abandoned in their respective stone ages. Horseback. Raft. In this case, a Polynesian double canoe. A reproduction, incorporating almost no metal. A satellite would have actually had to look for it in order to find it.

Three months ago, no one had thought to do that, himself included. Jonathan Stone, rogue telepath, had gone once again on the hunt lists with the designation "whereabouts unknown." Most had more or less forgotten about him.

Alfred Bester had not. Alfred Bester hated to look foolish. Most of all, he hated to lose. It chilled him to think how close he had come, this time. Another day, and it would have been too late.

It might still be, he reminded himself.

He smiled pleasantly at the dark faces, often tattooed, watching him stroll up the beach. They did not smile back, made no attempt to hide their objection to his presence. Most had probably figured out why he was here. Some would act. Even now, someone was probably realizing that his tel-phone wasn't working, that the local system had been shut down. At the same time, they were also noticing that he was a lone Psi Cop, without backup.

Yes, he was the gardener, turning over the rock, and soon enough things would start to squirm out.

Soon enough they did, and in doing so did him a favor. All of their scuttling about, just beyond his sight, actually directed him to the right building. He knew for certain that it was the right place when six large men planted themselves on the porch, between him and the door.

"Hello," he said, pleasantly. "How are you gentlemen today?"

They were all dark, dressed in sarongs or shorts. All but two had facial tattoos.

"Pretty well," one of them answered, his New Zealander lilt melodic despite the subtle hint of danger built into it "And you?"

"I'm just great. Salt air, a beautiful beach-

"Private property," one of the men noted.

"Government business," Al returned, pleasantly. "I'm looking for a fellow named Jonathan Stone."

"I had a cousin named Jonathan Stone," one of the men volunteered. "He went down at sea, some time ago. Kind of a crazy fellow, him."

"He's in there, isn't he?"

"Nah. Or he's everywhere, I guess, depending on your religion."

"My religion says he's alive, right in there," Al maintained, nodding his chin up behind them.

"What's your religion say about an afterlife?" another of the men growled.

"Tell him to come out," Al said. "Tell him to come out, and I won't have to call in the choppers."

"You don't want to do that. All kinds of political trouble there."

"Yes, I know. In fact, I think if choppers come in, at least one faction here will open fire. That means the EA troops will move in - something they've been looking for an excuse to do for a long time. That's why I walked in here alone - I want to spare everyone that. Now, somebody here might take it into their head to do me harm. I can stop a few of you, maybe most of you, but in the end you'll probably get me. I understand that. I'm here because I'm betting you have more sense than to do it, and because I think your cousin Jonathan has enough regard for his family and his people not to put them through it. He made a brave run. He almost beat me. But I'm the best there is, and I won. It's time for him to acknowledge that."

"What's your name, Mr. Best-That-There-Is?"

"Alfred Bester."

"Bester-That-There-Is," the speaker said. "Okay. I'll go with you."

"Mr. Stone?"

"Yep."

"Don't do it, Johnny," another argued.

"Nah, he's right. If they'd never caught on, that would've been one thing. But he got me fair and square." He stood up.

"Do you have anything you'd like to bring?"

"Nope. Don't insult my intelligence, okay? I know I'm going to a reeducation center. I've seen them. So let's not pretend you're taking me off to summer camp."

Al shrugged. "Very well."

They started back up the shore, walking up the long spit of land. Stone kept stopping to gaze out at the sea.

"Do you mind?" he said. "I didn't give you a hard time. Do you mind if I look, for a moment? Might be a while before I see the ocean again."

"Go ahead."

Stone set his eyes on the distant horizon. "My ancestors - some of 'em, anyway - sailed thousands of miles out there, without compasses, without astrolabes or computers or satellites - well, except the moon, of course. Just guts and the stars and dead reckoning."

"You did it, too," Al said.

"Oh yeah, knowing it could be done. That's not the same as sailing out into an unknown ocean, not knowing if anything at all is there, with only so much in the way of supplies..." He smiled faintly. "I always wanted to do that, out where that kind of thing is still done, in the stars. But they wouldn't let me, you know, when they found out what I was. They wouldn't let me be."

"That's life," Al told him. "We can't have everything we want. I'd like to be taller. I'm not."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, you could've joined the Corps. That can take you out there, to the stars."

"Oh, yeah. As a cop, or a hunter, or the pet magician of some general. That's not what I wanted." He looked at Al. "Why do you do it, Bester-That-There-Is? What did the underground ever do to you?"

"Killed my parents. Ruined everyone I ever loved. Not a lot, I guess, but I can be as petty as the next man about having my life ruined. The underground is a lie, and a destructive lie. The Corps is the truth. It may not be perfect, but it is the truth."

Stone shrugged. "Guess I'll see how truthful it is in the camps. Are you gonna check on me a year from now and see if I'm still alive? See if they beat me to death or drove me crazy with punishment scans? Or are you just going to turn me in and forget I ever existed?"

"I'm just doing my job."

Stone laughed. "Yeah. Okay, I'm ready to go."

Al caught something then, a bitter sardonic humor. He looked sharply at Stone. Stone saw that he knew and smiled.

"Got you, Mr. Bester-That-There-Is. You stopped to catch a minnow and the whale got away. Too late now."

Al blinked at him, then hit him with a scan. He should have done it to start with, even though it was illegal.

Sure, they could never use it in court, but-

Stone fought him, tooth and nail. He was strong, maybe a P10. They stood on that headland by the sea, a storm whipping up. The sea and sky bled together, the earth thinned to nothing. Shark-headed beasts and bird-headed men stormed his defenses.

Shaman battles, Al remembered.

It lasted a long time. Stone was clever and determined, but in the end Al was stronger and more skilled. The big man slumped to the earth, unconscious, and Al had three things from him that were important. A name, a signature, a destination.

He turned and ran back up the beach as fast as he could, PPG drawn.

"Get the hell out of my way!" he snarled, as he came back up to the house. They didn't try to stop him; they stepped aside and let him go in.

He didn't find much - a blanket, the faint residue of a telepathic signature, the same one Stone had been carrying in his mind.

He should have known Stone had given up too easily, that he was sacrificing himself for someone else. He should have known there was someone else in that damned canoe.

The biggest fish of all. The leader of the underground since 2190, for more than thirty years. Stephen Walters.

Al had missed him. But he had his signature, and he knew where he was going.

This hunt was just beginning.

chapter 2

"Tell me why I should give you this assignment, Mr. Bester," station chief Niles Ramanashah said mildly.

Bester lifted his chin a tad. "Sir. Because I'm the one who found the lead, sir."

"We are all one in the Corps, Mr. Bester. Didn't you know that? If it's a matter of pride - if you just want to prove you can catch this guy, that's not reason enough."

"No, sir, that's not it. I'm the one who found the lead, so I'm the one who has his scent. This isn't just any Blip - this is Stephen Walters, and I think we'll need every edge we can get. If you check my records-

"Oh, I've checked your records, Mr. Bester, no need to worry on that account. And of course your reputation precedes you. You've made quite the name for yourself for such a young man. You're-what? Thirty?"

"Thirty-three, sir."

Ramanashah glanced at the display on his desk. "Interned with Olivia Vong, where you showed outstanding courage under fire. First assigned to the Saint Petersburg office - you made lieutenant in just under four years. I won't even bother to read your list of arrests." He paused. "There are some notes. A number of civilian-related incidents."

"Only two official complaints, sir, and in both cases the individuals were eventually convicted of aiding and abetting, so of course they kicked and screamed."

"I can see that, Mr. Bester. Most of the worrisome comments are from your superiors, in particular Geoffrey de Vries, who had you transferred from his command. You seem to have made him nervous."

"Commander de Vries is a good man, sir."

"Indeed. But perhaps a little timid?"

"I can't speak to that."

"Huh. Mr. Bester, if I send you to Mars, it will be me who takes the heat for any incidents there. I am not timid, and to be perfectly candid, I have little sympathy for mundanes who get in the way of a Psi Corps investigation. On the other hand, the Corps itself has taken some political heat in the last few

years, so for the good of us all, there is some need for a certain- decorum. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir. Does that mean-"

I have another piece of information, Mr. Bester, one not written in your record. Director Johnston - he doesn't like you. Do you know why?

Not exactly, sir. Something about his predecessor taking an interest in me.

Well, you are something of a loose cannon, Mr. Bester, but I haven't seen a more gifted young officer in a long time. And, as you say, you are the logical man for the job. I'm having you transferred to my station immediately. The director won't like it, but then that isn't your concern. I'll detach you to Mars as soon as that's done. Pack warm, Mr. Bester. I hear Mars can get a bit chilly.

"Holy mother of God," Erik Andersen choked out, closing his eyes. The hull of the lander had begun to hum in a tone that couldn't possibly be good, and the distant rusty curve of the planet was flattening with uncomfortable speed. "Doesn't this bother you at all. Al?"

"It's not the fall that worries me," Al replied. "It's that quick stop at the bottom."

But Al had to admit he wasn't exactly thrilled. He had never been afraid of flying, but then he had never dropped like a stone for hundreds of miles. Over the last few days he had watched Mars go from marble to baseball to basketball, but it had always been out.

Now it was down, with a vengeance. He remembered Teacher Roberts' long-ago lesson about the primate origins of human sensibilities. He could appreciate that ancient tree-dweller in him right now - it was bad, bad, bad to be up this high without a single branch to hold on to.

Nope, this wasn't flying, it was falling.

It got worse, of course, as they hit the unpredictable lower atmosphere, which was thickened, wetted, and- it seemed -angered by terraforming. Just as you were telling yourself that you were safe in the belly of superior technology - that such landings were routine - your gut would drop, inertia would yank you in some unnatural direction, and it would seem thoroughly implausible that survival was even remotely possible.

He kept his breathing steady and let Erik do the moaning for both of them. Being frightened sometimes had utility, sometimes not. He was in someone else's hands and would either survive or not. Nothing his backbrain screamed at him would change that.

Still, when the ship was finally motionless, his body felt like a wet towel, snapped too many times by some kid in a locker room. He deboarded on wobbling legs and queued up for the security check.

There was a woman in line in front of him with a little boy in tow. The boy, fidgety - and seemingly unperturbed by the landing - looked around restlessly before noticing Al and Erik behind him. When he did, he started tugging on the woman's sleeve. "Mommy," he said, "there's one a them mindfrickers behind us."

The woman turned, her face darkening from copper to dark brown. "Jeremy!" she snapped. "I never want to hear you use that kind of language again." She looked apologetically at Al. "I don't know where kids hear these things, I honestly don't. I'm very sorry."

She was lying, and Al knew it. He smiled. "Well, you can only control what they get at home," he replied.

"I try to teach him the right things," she said, her voice a bit defensive. She knelt down. "Look, Jeremy, I want you to apologize to the nice man. He's Psi Cop - one of the good kind of telepaths. He helps protect us from the bad ones."

The boy peeked around her leg.

"Hello, Jeremy," Al said. "My name is Mr. Bester. As your mother said, I'm the good kind of telepath."

"Oh." The boy reached uncertainly for his hand. "How come you wear gloves?"

"Because if I didn't, I might accidentally burn your brain all up," Al said, still smiling. "We wouldn't want that to happen to such a nice little boy." He looked back at the mother, whose face had done an odd about-face and was now rather pale. "I believe," he said, pointing beyond her, "that the customs man is waving you over." He cast a knowing look at her bag. "May I help you with your luggage?"

He hadn't scanned her, so her bright flicker of panic was all the more amusing. Everyone had something to hide, some dirty little exception they imagined themselves entitled to.

"No, thank you," she said quickly.

Al shrugged. But as she left, he whispered a subtle, subliminal suggestion to the customs agent that he search her bags with more than usual thoroughness.

"You ever get used to that crap?" Erik asked.

"What crap?"

"The bigotry. The hatred."

Al shrugged. "The dinosaurs had their moment, too," he observed.

"Meaning?"

"Nothing, Erik, nothing. Look, now it's our turn."

A man and woman in MetaPol uniforms greeted them as they left the terminal. One- a tall blond with a prematurely receded hairline -stepped up. "Welcome to Mars. I'm Faren McCleod, and this is my associate Roxanna Durst." He indicated a thick-boned young woman with handsome cheekbones and green eyes.

"Pleased to meet you both. I'm Alfred Bester, and this is Erik Andersen."

Polite bows went around.

"Well, once we get your luggage, we can move on to the briefing, if the both of you are up to it."

"Absolutely," Al said "I'm eager to get started."

Judit Uhl settled into her chair with a look of contemptuous amusement playing across her somewhat catlike face. "So you know that the Stephen Walters is on Mars, eh, Mr. Bester? On Mars. On the planet somewhere. And that is the extent of your knowledge?"

"Almost. I will recognize my quarry, of course, by his signature. But I've studied Walters. If he's here, he's not alone. In fact, it's a good bet that there is a large, highly organized resistance cell on the planet somewhere. That should be hard to hide, now that we know it's here. Am I wrong?"

Uhl smiled with an obviously false sincerity. "Yes, Mr. Bester, you are. And Geneva was aware of that when they sent you."

"I'm sure they weren't, or they wouldn't have sent me."

"Let me explain something to you, Mr. Bester," Uhl said, motioning toward the window. She came out of her seat as if propelled by springs and clattered to the view with staccato grace. Al rose and joined her in regarding the landscape.

What looked like crushed brick spread to a horizon of low mountains. They were looking east, and a

small, sickly looking sun was just starting to crawl through a long Martian day. The sky was a dark salmon - not that different from the land - bordered on the northern horizon by dirty red and black lenses that Al assumed were clouds.

"Looks forbidding, doesn't it? It is, but people are not easily forbidden, Mr. Bester. What we have here is a planet with more land area than Earth. To keep watch on that, we have forty trained Psi Cops. Forty."

"So few?" Al said. "Still, no matter how much land area there is here, the situation can hardly be the same as on Earth. After all, even the air isn't free here. Your population is more constrained, by necessity. The places they can arrive and leave from are few in number- the spaceports, the city air locks-"

She interrupted him with a small laugh. "Ah. Mr. Bester, it must be wonderful to live in such a dreamworld. Ships land on Mars every day, all over the place, unmonitored and uncontrolled. We have three large cities, two hundred and thirty experiment and mining stations - most privately owned - and about three thousand registered hinterland colonists. Add to that at least as many unregistered squatters - religious extremists, utopianists, criminals, rugged individualists, cowboy-and-Indian wannabes. Oh, EarthForce stops transports and mining vehicles which try to slip things on and off planet without paying taxes and tariffs - but don't imagine we have the same kind of satellite net that Earth does, or the same number of ships. Maybe a tenth of such illegal activity is discovered.

"In other words, Mr. Bester, planetary security stinks, and no one really gives a damn. Marsies certainly don't. Marsies like freedom. They like the sodbusters, even the squatters. People leave the cities and join them all the time, some with permits, some without. The fact is, settlement permits are so cheap, the government mostly looks the other way if you don't have one. Mars is trying to attract settlers, not scare them off.

"So your rogues could be anywhere out there. Anywhere. Unless you have some idea where you want to start looking, you've wasted your time and the Corps' money." She waved dismissively at the landscape and returned to her chair.

"Well. I presume that you have at least a list I can start with, and transportation."

She nodded, smirking, and pushed a stylus tablet across the desk toward him.

Erik's eyes widened as he stared at the list.

"There's a hundred and fifty sites listed here. Scattered all over Mars. This will take forever."

"Yes," Al said, scrolling through another database.

"I guess we can narrow it down, some. I mean, the Blips are probably disguised as the last group we would imagine, right? Like maybe the Adamists, or some other 'Human purist' organization."

"Maybe. But there are still too many of them, and the local office won't give us more than two or three men at a time. Suppose we do stumble on them, what then? We vanish into the Martian desert, you and I. And when we start searching, word will get out, so they'll be ready. No, we have to pick the right spot the first time out, or get there darn quickly."

"And how do we do that?"

Al leaned back on his chair, looking around their cramped quarters. "Uhl talks as if there are hundreds of thousands of independent settlements out there. But there can't be."

"What do you mean? Here they are." He waved the tablet

"They aren't independent. They can't produce everything they need, and they certainly can't produce everything that they want. Have you ever studied central place theory?"

"Not that I know of."

"Human beings don't settle randomly. Central place theory is one way of modeling where people live. Here, let me show you something." He cleared the desktop and then took up a stylus. Erik leaned over to watch as Al drew a large dot and filled it in. "This is a city - let's call it Metro." He labeled it. "Cities produce finished products. Computers. Phones. Stylish clothing. Art objects. Processed food. Entertainment. Anything you need or desire, you can probably find in the city."

"Okay. But all of the raw materials for that stuff have to come from somewhere else, right?"

"Yes, but leave that aside for a moment. Just think like a consumer. In the universe of things you might want or need, the city is the center."

"Okay."

"Now." He drew four smaller dots in a circle around Metro, and labeled them clockwise - 1, 2, 3, 4. All were two inches from Metro, and about two inches from each other. "These we'll call towns. Each is about the same size. Let's pretend each produces something different - this one iron ore, this one corn, this one cotton textiles. You live in town 1, which grows wheat. So if you want bread, you just stay home. What if you want the iron tools produced in town 2 or the textiles produced in town 4?"

Erik studied the diagram. "Metro," he said.

"Why?"

"Towns 2 and 4 are no farther than Metro, but they are in opposite directions. The other towns are even farther. I can make one trip to the big city and get everything, plus catch a show and eat a fancy meal."

"Right. Now, in reality, you can still get lots of goods and services in your hometown - it's small, but it still has grocery stores, shopping centers, and so forth. Now let's add even smaller places." He quickly drew a series of even smaller dots around the town markers, four around each. "Those are villages. They have fewer goods and services than the towns because they are smaller."

"I get it. I go to town now and then for things I can't get in my own village, and I go to Metro for the things I can't get in town."

"Yes. And if we add even smaller dots - call them hamlets - and smaller ones - homesteads - You get the picture. If you live in a hamlet you go to the village a lot, to the town less often, to Metro, which is farthest away, only when it's really necessary." He tapped the tablet. "These are all hamlets and homesteads. But each one is connected through a hierarchy of larger and larger places to Metro - or MarsDome 1. And MarsDome 1, in turn, is connected to an even more cosmopolitan place, Earth. "In fact, on Mars, this model works even better.

"Consider the things each of these hamlets absolutely must have: the equipment to produce and maintain a breathable atmosphere and drinking water, and the parts and tools to maintain the equipment, for starters. Eventually, all of that must come from MarsDome 1 or Earth. Heavy metals aren't readily available here. Food is hard to produce in quantity. Maybe some of that comes directly from Earth in smuggler's ships, but the cost would be enormous, made even worse by its illegality. No, there must be a tight network of trade, and it all leads back here, to the Metro, the central place."

"I get it. The trail to wherever the underground is hiding-

"-Starts right here. We don't start with that list of settlements. We start in Syria Planum and work our way out."

"Hold it. What about Olympus Mons and Solis Planum? Couldn't one of those be 'Metro'?"

"Sure. Three central places on Mars, which still makes things pretty simple. I guess we could throw in Xanthe Terra, too, though it's too small and young to really compete with the big three. But we start here, because this is where we are."

"So how do we find the outward trail?"

"Think of this. These people in the hinterlands - what do they trade for machined parts, for food, for new molecular filters, for power cells? There isn't that much out there, is there? I've checked into it; most do some sort of mining or local processing-iron, aluminum, various rare earths. Others produce curiosities - the Mennonites make polished hematite bowls that are sold back on Earth to the very rich, for instance. But it's hard going, very hard. Any valuable commodity you possessed would have to be used, simply to survive. Now, think. What commodity would the underground have to trade that would set them apart from everyone else?"

Erik got it His eyes shone with understanding and admiration. "Illegal scans."

"Of course. So we don't need a list of these hamlets at all. What we need is a list of persons in Syria

Planum who need Psi services that Corps members are forbidden to provide." He grinned evilly. "Which, I might add, I've nearly finished."

"I am in awe, Mr. Bester."

"I appreciate the compliment, but it's only common sense. And Erik?"

"Yes?"

"We won't mention this to the local office right away?"

"Surely you don't think-"

"I'd rather leave nothing to chance," Al said, dryly. "Anyone who actually lives on Mars should know what we just discussed without even having to think it through. Uhl didn't even bother to point it out to me. For whatever reason, she wants us to fail - or at the very least have a difficult time."

"Okay. Where do we start?"

"Shadiest element first. There's a certain man who seems to win an awful lot at poker."

"Look at that." Erik grunted, pointing across the crowded casino. "It's McCleod and Durst."

"Yes," Al agreed, spotting the two local Psi Cops. "And that's our man Cheo they're questioning. Very interesting. They're one step ahead of us."

"But they aren't sharing. Want me to eavesdrop?"

"I'll do it You keep us quiet."

"Gotcha."

Al focused his vision on Cheo, an overweight fellow with rather nondescript features and hair coiffed in intricately bound braids. He was sitting at a card table that everyone else seemed to have deserted - there were three other hands, in any event, all lying discarded. The hundred or so minds in the casino created a palpable murk, but as Al narrowed his attention, he began feeling the cadence of the man's speech. When normals spoke aloud, their surface thoughts - that is, what they were saying - were strong enough to detect within line of sight without scanning.

... *know nothin'*, he was saying. With a stubborn expression, he then listened to the reply. It seemed to be Durst doing the talking; he could make out her fiercely determined features. Al couldn't listen in

on her, though. She would almost certainly notice if he did. And at this distance, without a direct scan, he couldn't get the "reflection" of her words off of Cheo's mind, only a sort of an impression. It was like hearing only half of a phone conversation.

I'm just a lucky son of a bitch, la, Cheo said. I don't need a 'sicky to win, so I don't keep one around. Besides, what's it to you guys? You never cared about the 'sickies before...

Al suddenly felt as if nails had been driven into his head, many of them. He gasped and clutched at his temples, closing his eyes.

That shouldn't have helped, but it did. Immediately the pain dimmed, which, after an instant, he realized meant that the brutal scan hadn't been aimed at him, but at Cheo, and that Cheo's pain had just run up his connection. He resolutely forced his eyes open, renewing the contact. Cheo was jerking in his chair as if being electrocuted, and the patrons of the casino, already keeping a respectful distance, quickly drew even farther away.

Al got it when they got it. A name, an address, the sketchy glyph of an appearance.

"Erik. Let's go. Now!"

"You okay?"

"Yes. Come on, before they notice us."

"So this is one of the 'towns' we're going to?"

Al grimaced, hand on his forehead. He felt as if he had a monstrous hangover. The train gave little sense of motion other than acceleration, but when he opened his eyes it was to a chalky red landscape hurtling by with nauseating speed. "Yes. A second-tier settlement. The next step on the trail."

"What if Durst and McCleod beat us?"

Al shrugged. "I'm not sure what would get them there faster than a train. A hoverjet, maybe, but there aren't many of those. Helicopters don't work here, obviously. An ATV would be far too slow. My guess is that they're on this train or will be on the next."

"This is crazy, working against other cops."

"I agree. But we don't know what's going on. They did an illegal scan - a hard, deep, obvious one - on Cheo in full public view. If you did something like that on Earth - anywhere - you'd be up on charges, at the very least. It seems that the Psi Corps enjoys a somewhat different status here. Cheo also

implied that the cops don't normally care about Blips."

"You think they're in with them? That the cops here are traitors, helping the underground?"

Al held up his hands in a shrug. "Something's going on. They might just want us out of the loop so they can grab credit for the bust themselves."

"Durst and McCleod, you mean."

"Or the local office. If they get credit for a successful hunt without the aid of hotshot outsiders, they might be able to resist future investigators being sent here."

"But even that implies they have something to hide."

"You catch on quick, Mr. Andersen."

They got off the tube car in New Harappa, a settlement of about six hundred people. A billion or so years ago, when Mars was young and wet, rushing water had carved a canyon almost a quarter of a mile deep. When the water flew off into space as ions, or locked itself beneath the planet's skin, the fossil of that flood remained. Its narrow, almost sheer walls served as a reminder of how active the planet once was, and how silent and still it had been ever since.

Until now, of course. Today the polar ice caps were being melted, and carefully engineered microorganisms bred and metabolized in soils that made Antarctic permafrost seem hospitable.

The canyon had been roofed over with the same macromolecular glass that the domes were made of. Its soil had been chewed by machines, cut with organic compounds, seeded with bacteria, planted in peanuts, potatoes, and vetch. Wells had been drilled to find where the last of the once plentiful water rested in crystalline form. The settlement would then quicken it to liquid and vapor and component gases.

The town perched above them, vertical, dug into the red cliffs, built on ledges. Exotic and striking, it seemed Middle Eastern, somehow, or like the ancient pueblos of North America that Al had only seen in photographs.

He didn't have time to gawk, however. "We want to go there," he said, pointing to a spot halfway up the right side. "There should be an elevator down this walkway."

At first glance, New Harappa seemed to be laid out like a termite mound, a chaos of tunnels, but in reality it wasn't that hard to navigate. Elevators and steep-angled stairs had street names - sidewalks running along the cliff face were avenues. All were glassed in - Marsies had a well-earned historical mistrust of canyon roofs and domes.

Al and Erik rode an elevator up Easy Street to Lowell Avenue and went quickly from there toward number 12, the address Durst and McCleod had torn from Cheo's mind.

Al led the way, with Erik a few paces behind. He slowed when he identified number 11 and was just

turning to give Erik final instructions when a bolt of superheated helium scorched past his ear.

chapter 3

Al's reflexes took him down in a shoulder roll. His PPG was already out, and he brought it whining to life, its muzzle scenting wildly for a target as he spun on his stomach to face the direction of the attack. A second shot tortured another protest from the air, and then a third. Al felt a mind wishing to kill him, pointed at it, fired the PPG.

Erik was on his belly, shooting. Al's brain was meanwhile assembling the whole picture from fast-motion glimpses. Erik had fired first, over Al's shoulder, at a man stepping into the avenue from a recessed foyer.

Probably Erik had actually felt him - the Swede was good at that, scenting impending mayhem. It was Erik's shot that had galvanized Al into his evasive maneuver, and it was a good thing - because there really were people behind them.

Al and Erik were caught in a cross fire, two behind them, two in front still on their feet, and one down from Erik's first strike.

Al's first shot hit the shoulder of one of those coming up behind them. The fellow staggered into the transparent avenue wall, and Al fired again. The burst of plasma hit the glass two feet in front of the man.

Like the fluid it was, the PPG shot deformed a bit and slid on into him. Rapidly cooling, the helium was still hotter than the boiling point of lead, and the unfortunate fellow got it full in the face.

The other two were taking careful aim at Al.

I'm not here. He hit them with the glyph of the empty avenue, hard, and hoped they weren't teeps.

They weren't. They looked uniformly astonished, whipping their heads about.

Mundanes! Al shot one in the heart and the gun hand off of the other. He spun, came up in a crouch - and found himself confronting Erik's PPG.

Each took a step to the left, sweeping the corridor. All three on Erik's side were down.

"Keep me covered," Al said. The man whose hand he had shot off was climbing to his feet, breath coming in hiccups. Al shot him in the back of the knee, then in the other. The bursts of plasma seared through tissue and tendon, scorching the bones beneath.

"You could have cuffed him," Erik noted.

"This is quicker. There may be more."

The first shooter had stepped from the foyer of apartment 12. Covered by Erik, PPG held in both hands, Al kicked the slightly open door with the side of his foot.

McCleod sat against the wall, one side of his uniform drenched in blood. He tried to raise one arm weakly - the one still clenching his side arm.

"Keep it down," Al growled.

"No, you put yours down."

It was Durst, to his left. He hadn't noticed her.

Al kept the weapon aimed. "Kill me, and my friend kills you. Probably I'll kill McCleod, if he isn't already dead. Why don't we just calm down and talk this over?"

"Because I don't trust you," Durst explained, tightly.

"You don't trust me! That's very funny, Ms. Durst. I'm just doing my job. I can't imagine what you're doing. Withholding information-"

"Not very well, it seems."

"Attempting to murder Mr. Andersen and myself."

"I've done no such thing."

"Please. Your men, then."

"You idiot. They aren't my men. Who do you think shot McCleod?"

"Not me, that's all I can be certain of," Al replied. "Drop your gun."

"No. I-"

Al hit her with a mindflash. She was almost ready for it and almost strong enough to resist. She even managed to finger the PPG contact, but too sluggishly to hit Al as he dropped straight to the floor. Erik was a whirlwind spinning past him. By the time Al got up, the younger cop had disarmed the stunned Durst.

"Now," Al said, smoothing out his uniform. "Where is Chandler?"

"There," Durst managed, pointing. Al followed her direction and saw a light-haired man sprawled on a couch.

"Dead?"

"No. Shocked out. Will you let me help McCleod?"

"Mr. Andersen, will you see to Mr. McCleod?"

"On it."

"So these men attacked you, then us, you say?"

"It would seem."

"Do you think we're safe for the moment? Don't block."

She didn't. "I think so." He didn't think she was good enough to fool him. She was telling the truth.

"Okay. I'm putting this up." He slid the PPG into its holster. "You're going to tell me what's going on, now - right?"

Durst nodded. "Right." She sat down heavily, rubbed her eyes with one hand, then rested her forehead on her fists and her elbows on her knees. She spoke to the floor.

"Things are different on Mars," she said. "It's a frontier. Things get rough. A lot of bad people end up here. Someone has to keep order."

"And that someone is you. That's fine. I have no objection to that."

"We're more respected here than on Earth. Marsies don't care much if we get a little rough, a little heavy-handed - as long as in the end we protect them from the bad guys."

"I'm with you so far. Sounds like a nice place, one I might come to like. So why are people shooting at me?"

He plucked his shirt. "See? Same uniform."

"Because for Marsies, a lot of the bad guys are back on Earth. Earth sent you."

"Psi Corps sent me," Al corrected. "I'm sure you know the difference."

"Barsoom Autonomous doesn't, however."

"The terrorist organization?"

"Some are terrorists - most are businessmen, scientists, average citizens. Whatever you may have heard on Earth, most Marsies are in favor of independence. Most don't advocate violence, but you know how that goes."

"Those dead men outside weren't firing rhetoric at us."

"Or us," Durst snapped. "Because we were trying to find your rogue telepaths."

"Uh-huh. Tell me about that."

"There are Blips on Mars. Mostly we look the other way because they help the cause. They-"

"Wait. You just made a logical leap that I find hard to follow. Last I heard, Psi Corps had no position on Mars independence."

Durst nodded. "That is correct"

"But the local office does? Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying we're only effective here because people see we aren't harming that cause. Mr. Bester, there are only forty of us-"

"This song I've heard sung before. Is Uhl with Barsoom Autonomous?"

"Not officially."

"Which means 'yes.' Who else?"

"Most of her officers."

"But not you?"

"Sir, the Corps is mother and the Corps is father. McCleod and I were protecting the Corps."

"You wanted to find the underground before we did, because you knew if we waded through to them we would find all of this out."

"Yes, sir. And disgrace the Corps."

"Wrong. Uhl and anyone else who ignores a Blip for reasons of local politics has forgotten what their job is. The Corps would take pleasure in dealing with them, and setting an example. They deserve what they get."

"Sir, I think you might be surprised. My orders were explicit - locate the underground before you did and ah, pacify it."

"But your orders were from Uhl."

"No, sir. Uhl probably tipped BA to ambush us here. We tried to hide our activities, but apparently we failed."

"You're talking nonsense. Geneva sent me, so your orders didn't come from there. If they didn't come from Geneva, and they didn't come from Uhl, who does that leave?"

"It leaves Department Sigma."

For a moment Al was stunned into silence. "Department Sigma?"

"Yes. McCleod and I were both placed here by the department."

"Can you verify that?"

"I think you know what a stupid question that is, Mr. Bester - if you'll pardon my saying so."

"What were you supposed to do when you found the underground cell?"

"Contact the department. They were going to send reinforcements."

"All the way from Earth?"

She averted her eyes and said nothing.

Oh, he thought So the rumors must be true. Of a secret base on Mars, one which few even in the high command knew of. Even across interplanetary space, the director maintained a tight grip.

He nodded thoughtfully. "Mr. Andersen, how is Mr. McCleod?"

"He'll live, I think."

Al looked back at Durst. "Did you get anything out of him?" He motioned toward the unconscious telepath.

"Yes. He lives out here, but he goes into the city twice a week to get supplies for the underground and arrange contacts. He makes his money helping out gamblers, certain businessmen, and politicians. They rotate them in and out of here - it's his turn right now, but in another week he was going to switch with someone else."

"Does he know where the main base is?"

"Yes. But I can't get it out of him."

Bester quirked a sharkish grin. "Let me see what I can do," he whispered.

There was not, unfortunately, much left of Chandler when Al got through. Reeducation would be able to do something with him - possibly even return him to full sentience, make him a working human

being. But however that turned out, he would never again be Thurston Chandler.

It upset Al more than he thought it would. Yes, the underground was misguided, and criminally so. Directly or indirectly they had cost him the only two people he had ever loved, and for that they would pay until they didn't exist anymore.

But still, they were his own kind. Still, they were telepaths. They should all be on the same side - the mundanes were the real enemy.

He brushed the unwelcome remorse off, treating it as a distraction.

"Here's the deal," he told Durst. "I know where the rogues are. You know how to contact the reinforcements we may need. I suggest we work together."

"And McCleod?"

"We put him in an infirmary. He can't travel."

She nodded reluctantly.

"Can we obtain an ATV, without the order going straight to Uhl?"

"I think so," Durst replied.

"Good. Because I'm ready to get this over with."

Night on Mars. A few high, thin ribbons of cloud frosted some of the stars, but most were almost as clear and sharp as the constellations seen from the vacuum. Phobos was the ghostly skull of a moon, dim, irregular. The smaller Deimos had sped around the horizon some hours earlier.

Durst was asleep, and Al confirmed it with a brief touch. REM sleep had a signature all its own, almost impossible to fake. Dreams drifted from her like vapor, but he ignored them.

"Why are you so hot for this one, Al? I mean, you have a reputation for busting rogues, but what you did to Chandler - you really want these guys, don't you?"

Al nodded. "When I was a kid - when I was just in the Minor Academy - I used to hang out around the West End precinct, check the hunt and capture lists. Underground leaders come and go, but there are a few - ever heard of Stephen Walters?"

"The Black Fox. The traitor Psi Cop."

"He was never actually a cop - he was in covert ops. Not even a P12. But of all the underground leaders, he's the only one who's survived from before the purge of '89. It's all about him, Erik. If it weren't for Stephen Walters, the resistance would have died with Fiona and Matthew Dexter. It would have all been over thirty-three years ago. Just think what we could do if we weren't burdened with having to hunt our own kind - if we weren't divided. We were so close."

And Bey would still be alive, he added silently, because there would have been no underground for him to sympathize with. And Liz would still be mine because she wouldn't have tried to go Blip, not without the underground out there, urging her, promising her something impossible...

"So, yes," he went on, in a low voice, "I'm hot for this one. Walters has set the cause of the telepaths back a century. It's time for the legend of the Black Fox to end."

At Martian dawn, they came to the location Chandler had relinquished. A thin rim of rose appeared along the too-near horizon. They woke Durst, and the three of them bundled into surface suits and breathers, then broke the seal on the ATV. For the first time, Al stepped onto the true, unadorned surface of the red planet. It was cold. The chill seeped through the body-hugging pressure skin, through the parka, and Al tightened the hood around his face. His thermometer read -50 Fahrenheit. His skin prickled. Here, in the lowlands, terraforming had already produced an atmosphere dense enough to make a full pressure suit unnecessary, and they had lowered the cabin pressure of the ATV slowly over the night to prevent the bends. Still, the air somehow felt thinner when one was actually in it

It was, of course, poison - mostly carbon dioxide, so they still relied on the oxygen in the tanks on their backs, tanks that quickly became heavy even in the low Martian gravity.

But they didn't have far to go. Though it was dark, the landscape Al had ripped from Chandler's mind fit well against what he now saw. The entrance to the buried complex should be simple to find - and he had found the passwords, the keys to the front door, in a hiding place in a chair cushion.

Durst had placed her call, and even as their feet set down on what looked and felt through his booted feet like compact, wet beach sand, Al noticed fliers, coming from the sunrise. Four of them, black-hulled, unmarked, their bizarrely large airfoils making them resemble dragonflies.

Al checked his PPG as the vehicles settled, and heavily armed figures began pouring out.

A trio of them made their way toward Al. Close up, they all looked pretty much the same, faces almost totally obscured by breathers, physiques encrusted in heavy parkas.

Mr. Bester, I take it?

Yes, sir.

My name is Natasha Alexander. Department Sigma is my command.

An honor to meet you. He remembered the name - Bey had mentioned her. One of Vacit's old aides.

We'll see about that. In any event, you've had your part in this. We'll take it from here.

Not to argue with you, ma'am, but that's not what my orders say. I am to find and apprehend the members of the underground on Mars. My authorization comes from EarthGov, and says nothing about twiddling my thumbs during the raid.

The faceless figure seemed to contemplate him, and he felt fear stalking him as he was reminded of a Grin.

The moment passed.

Very well, Mr. Bester. Indeed, it might be better this way. While this needs to be done, I have no desire to officially involve Department Sigma. The raid is officially yours.

Beneath his own mask he allowed himself a small, triumphant smile.

There was no need for stealth. The fliers took back to the air for surveillance purposes; they deep-radarred the installation, dropped men at anything their tactical schematics suggested might be an exit, and started blowing things up. In the thin air, the first string of charges sounded like firecrackers, and the smoke blew out in a long exhalation as the first corridor, apparently slightly above outside pressure, surrendered a few millibars.

Al was one of the first inside, just behind four bloodhounds who were worked into a near frenzy, blasting everything that moved. The walls and floor were slick with sudden layers of frost, and clouds of still-condensing moisture and smoke from explosives fluoresced like nebula in the PPG bursts.

In this surreal atmosphere, Al had the detached impression of invading an anthill, and the insectlike masks of the defenders heightened that impression. He had his weapon set on low - after all, these were telepaths, and he didn't want to kill them. The mule-kick and surface burns of the first setting were sufficient to stop most people.

The installation defenders didn't pay him the same courtesy. A bloodhound next to him went down with a fist-sized hole bored in his neck.

They fought their way through corridors booby-trapped with explosives; two of the bloodhounds went down in an ambush from ceiling vents, but the rest worked their way in, for what seemed like hours.

The rogues made a last stand in some sort of control room, full of computers and uplink equipment.

Barricades had been thrown against the doors. The Department Sigma people were terribly thorough; they radared, set off charges, and then fired through the breaches. Several fell there, and Al was virtually swept into the room by those rushing from behind.

He fell into a crouch behind a console as plasma and old-fashioned lead slugs hissed and hammered around him.

And that's when he caught it, the signature. Suddenly he had the overwhelming sensation of familiarity, of warmth. A weird memory of being held, and certain smells- He stuck his arm around the corner, fired. Somewhere near, God slammed the palm of one hand into the world and flipped off the light switch with the other.

He came to moments later, in the dark, struggling for breath. The explosion had broken the seal on his mask, and though his lungs gulped, the air they sucked wasn't nourishing them. He pressed the seal back into place.

His ears rang as if the tympana had been replaced with brass gongs, but that didn't stop the groans of the dead and dying from reaching his brain.

He pushed himself up, roughly. Something was wrong with one of his legs, but he couldn't tell what. It hurt, that much was certain, and it didn't work well. His nose was bleeding, too, the blood beginning to pool in his breather. The cavern was lit by a few dim emergency lights and a few console indicators that miraculously still worked.

He could still feel the signature nearby, attached to a great deal of anguish. He stumbled toward it.

He found Stephen Walters crushed against a bulkhead, one leg bent under him in a very strange way, one arm missing at the elbow. He still had his mask on, but Al had the distinct impression the eyes behind it were open.

I know you.

The hairs on the back of Al's neck stood up. *I was on New Zealand*, Al replied. *I tracked you here.*

No. Before that. I know you. Oh, God in heaven. It's my fault. Fiona, Matthew, forgive- It paralyzed Al. The sense of familiarity was like a drug. It wasn't pleasant, it was horrible, but he needed it

somehow. Somehow- somehow it was a piece of him that was missing.

What are you talking about?

I know the feel of you. I saw you born - after all I had done, after all the blood on my hands, but they let me watch you come into the world, and you were so beautiful I cried. You were our hope, our dream-

My name is Alfred Bester.

We called you Stee, so you wouldn't be confused with me. They gave you my name, made me your godfather. Your mother, Fiona, how I loved her. Matthew, I loved him, too, but God- A terrible spasm of pain stopped him and almost stopped his heart. Al felt it tremble. It was me that lost you. I thought I could save them, but they knew they wouldn't make it. All they asked was for me to get you out, keep you free, and I failed them. Failed-

Matthew and Fiona Dexter were terrorists. They died when the bomb they were planting in a housing compound went off early. The bomb they set off killed my parents.

Lies. His voice was getting weak. They fed you lies. You are Stephen Kevin Dexter.

No.

Walters cocked his head wearily, and then he reached up to his face. With a trembling hand he pulled his breather up and off. In the gloom, his eyes were colorless, but Al knew they were blue. Bright blue, like the sky. A woman with dark red hair and changeable eyes, a black-tressed man, both all smiles. He knew them.

Had always known them, but he hadn't seen their faces since the Grins had banished them. They were looking down at a baby in a crib, talking baby talk. And he could feel a love so strong- was it love? He had never felt anything just like it, because there was no hint of physical desire, no desperate need, just deep, abiding affection, and hope...

He was seeing through Walters' eyes, through the filter of Walters' heart. But then, horribly, another image superimposed itself. The same two people, but looking down at him, and he was the baby in the crib, and behind Mother and Father stood another man, a man with bright blue eyes, as bright as the sun...

They loved you. I loved you. I love you still. Psi Corps killed them and they took you away. I tried to find you...

Al wasn't aware of finding the PPG. Suddenly it was there, in his left hand and in front of him. His hand clenched on it, and Walters' face turned bright green, uncomprehending.

Shut up.

His hand clenched again, another viridian flare.

Shut up.

The mind images were dropping away, but not fast enough. He tried to shoot again, but the charge was gone.

He tried and tried, squeezing the contact, throttling the lying glyphs in his brain.

Fiona... Matthew ... Walters was still there, pulling the images about him in a blazing cloak. His eyes were still there, too, resigned, full of gentle reprimand. He stood near a gate, the doors of which were just beginning to crack open. *You can't destroy the truth.*

And he was gone, and finally the images shredded, a thousand visions of his parents, dancing, fighting, embracing, holding him...

No! He took it all in his fist and he squeezed until it went away.

The next thing he knew, Erik was kneeling by him.

"Al? Al? C'mon, let go, he's dead." Erik was trying to pry the PPG from his hand. He didn't seem to understand that Al couldn't let go. He couldn't.

chapter 4

Natasha Alexander was both older and more striking than Al had imagined. Her hair - the sort of grey that suggested it had once been red or blond - was clipped to just below her ears, framing a powerful, handsome face. Her black uniform - unmarked save for the usual Psi Corps badge - sheathed a lean, trim body.

"Mr. Bester. You are feeling well, I hope."

"I won't lie, Ms. Alexander- I've certainly felt better."

"If it's any consolation, I'm sure a day will come when you'll feel worse," she said wryly.

"I'm afraid I don't find that reassuring," he admitted. He tried to sit up, failed, and settled for raising the back of the bed a few inches. "What's even less reassuring is that they won't tell me when I will get out of here. I don't suppose they told you anything?"

"Only that your physical injuries will take a few weeks to heal. But they're likely to keep you longer than that, I think."

"I don't understand."

"You were in a bad state when we found you. Fugueing, as a matter of fact."

"So I'm told."

"And I gather you've been unwilling to tell the doctors exactly what occurred during your encounter with Walters."

"Ms. Alexander, that's because I don't remember," he lied.

She nodded, slightly. "How's the hand?"

He held up the knotted fingers. "It doesn't hurt, but I can't-" He stared at the useless digits, then shrugged.

That he was crippled was self-evident.

"Did you know," Alexander asked conversationally, "that they can't find a physical reason for your disability?"

"That's not all that unusual, is it?" Al asked. "Nerve damage can be subtle, they tell me. Undetectable, even."

Alexander sighed. "Mr. Bester, you are, without doubt, one of the finest young officers in the Corps. Your record documents it, and I've seen you in action. Your performance was exemplary, and I'm putting you in for a commendation. But Walters did something to you, and you won't tell us what. That's... not good for you."

"Ma'am, I told you-"

"Yes, Mr. Bester, I know what you told the doctors, and I know what you told me. That's unfortunate.

"Imagine our position - a highly trained, upper-end P12 suffers some sort of mind attack by one of the most notorious rogues of all time, is left with certain debilitating injuries, and can't remember anything at all about it. Mr. Bester, we want to help you, but you have to help us."

"You think I'm lying?"

"Not necessarily. Partial amnesia is common after a severe mind-blast. What I would like is for you to allow some diagnostic scanning. We might be able to reconstruct what really happened."

Al tried to keep his face expressionless. "Is that an order?"

She gazed at him for a moment, then sighed. *No. It should be. But the old director took a great interest in you and I ... honor him.* Her eyes shifted away, then back. *I know you've suffered from being his favorite - you might as well benefit this once. Even though I'm not certain this is a benefit - I think you should have the scans. But it's your decision. I'm probably the only person who will give you such consideration.*

Ma'am - can you tell me why Director Vacit was interested in me?

He never told me. I never knew.

"No, I'm not ordering it," she said aloud. "But you should consider it."

"I will."

She nodded briskly and started to go. Then she turned back, regarding him oddly for a moment.

"Ma'am?"

"It's nothing. You just remind me of someone."

"Perhaps you knew my parents."

That drew a peculiar reaction from her, a sort of mental hiccup that she quickly covered up. "You are certain," she asked very softly, "that you don't remember anything Walters said or did?"

"Nothing."

'That's probably for the best. Good day, Mr. Bester. And good luck to you.'

He watched her go. The fact was, he knew exactly what Walters had done. The sick old man had reached down into Al's deepest memories - to the parents he barely remembered - and he had twisted them. Expertly, cruelly, precisely. He had probably even known them, before he had turned traitor to the Corps.

In a desperate effort to save his own life, Walters had tainted those memories of Matthew and Fiona Dexter with his own, trying to confuse him.

It had worked. Now Al doubted his own mind. It made him sick.

If letting them scan him would help matters... but no. Walters had been skillful. Anyone examining him might actually think it was the truth - that he really was the son of the Dexters. If anyone in the Corps suspected that, for even a second, his career would be over.

Of course, they should be able to check, right? There must be genetic records in the data files that would prove conclusively that he was unrelated to the Dexters.

But if he checked himself, it might be noticed, and as Alexander had pointed out, there were people who did not care for him. And what if Walters - or someone else, someone on the inside - had tampered with the records? He couldn't rule out the possibility.

This whole thing felt like a time bomb, waiting to blow up in his face. He had to be careful not to trip it himself, not until he had the resources to defuse it.

After about a week they let him get out of bed but continued to stall as to when he could leave the hospital.

Alexander had been right - they wanted to keep him under observation. They ran him through a battery of mental and psionic tests and exercises and seemed satisfied with the results. There were a lot of tests on his hand and arm, too, but nothing conclusive ever seemed to come of them.

Before long he was going stir crazy. He had never spent more than a week in his life doing absolutely nothing, and he didn't like it. What's more, the constant implicit questioning of his abilities made him nervous - they would never find anything, of course, but the longer he stayed in the hospital, the more suspicious it was going to look on his record.

There had to be something he could do, something that would convince them he was not only well but

capable.

His third day up and around, he discovered that three of the rogues were in the hospital, too, in high-security wards. To occupy himself, he visited them, called up their files, learned what he could.

He discovered that two of them were nobodies, but the third was Anthony Selto, one of Walter's lieutenants.

Selto wasn't in a good way; he had been in cardiac arrest twice. They hadn't questioned him yet because he wasn't strong enough. Probably he never would be.

Al immediately put in his formal request to do the deathbed scan. They came to get him the next day.

"I don't like this," Dr. Mandle told him, "but we don't have a choice. There isn't another P12 who can get here fast enough, and you did volunteer. I hope you know what you're in for."

"Tell me what to do." Al remembered the brief taste of death with Walters, the door opening and slamming.

It had made him wonder, *Did the universe remember people? Was there anything on the other side?*

Probably not, but it was worth exploring.

"Just make contact with him. Talk to him. A violent scan will push him over the edge and you may get nothing. Be his friend, play along with whatever illusion his mind has constructed to help him die. At some point you will see a liminality - it may appear as a door or the mouth of a cavern. You'll know it when you see it. That's when you break off. Don't follow him beyond the liminality."

"Why?"

"Because we might lose you, too. It's happened before."

"Oh."

Al removed his gloves and reached out to touch Selto's face.

Then he was on a plain made of black clouds, beneath a sky teeming with ravens. The sun hung eclipsed in the sky. He sat on a black horse; Selto was beside him on another. Selto was a short, fierce-looking fellow dressed like a Napoleonic hussar.

"Well," the fellow said, leaning on the pommel of his saddle. "Are you death?"

"No," Al replied cautiously. He was inside of Selto's dying dream, and Selto didn't know him. Perhaps he could play off his confusion. "No," he said, "I'm Stephen Dexter." The lie clung, weird and bitter in his throat, and he was sorry he had said it. Saying it made it feel real.

It had the desired effect, however.

"Holy smokes! Walters found you! He's been looking for you for years. At times he thought you were dead."

He cocked his head. "You look like your mother - the pictures anyway."

Al ignored the chill that sent up his spine. "He sent me to talk to you. He escaped, but he was mindblasted. He's forgotten a lot about the locations and ID codes of some of the cells. He's hoping you'll remember."

Selto shrugged. "I only know the one, the Baltimore cell through the Retrograde Hotel, room 661. Does that help?"

"Yes. Thank you."

They were approaching the gate, a sort of trilithon made of gigantic stone slabs. The horses kept the same pace but somehow seemed to approach the gate with exponentially greater speed Selto drew a saber. "This is it," he said. "Into the valley of death rode the six hundred, and all of that. Are you going with me?"

"No, I have to go back and talk to Walters."

'Tell him I went down swinging, will you?"

There was no time to answer. He was rushing at the portal at breakneck speed. Selto was actually charging through, saber held high, the wind from his ride sucking Al along like a leaf behind a tornado. He fought to disengage, but a blinding light suddenly burst forth from the liminality. Selto stretched toward it, his saber becoming a line infinitely long, a shadow falling in the wrong direction... and he was gone.

Al had caught a glimpse of something beyond - there was something there - and then the portal had slammed shut. The world dissolved, and he was back in the hospital, his trembling fingers still on the dead man's face.

chapter 5

He awoke screaming, as he often did. The phantasms of night came with him to the waking world, and for long moments he remained surrounded by them, frantically trying to understand where he was, to banish the faces he had never known, the memories that weren't his.

In time, he succeeded, as well as he could. He rose, went to the sink, filled a glass with water and drank it. He stretched his arms, legs, and back until blood warmed his sleep-stiffened muscles and was silently thankful that he now rated quarters of his own. That no one but he himself was witness to these shameful awakenings. He closed his eyes, trying to feel the motions of the city outside, but behind his lids the nightmare still lurked, so at last he bundled into a coat and went outside to watch the sun kiss the snow-cloaked Alps awake.

The doctor - a long-faced man with a mustache that might have been penciled in by a mischievous child - looked him over with clinical suspicion. "Have you slept, Mr. Bester?"

"Some, I've had a little trouble with sleep, lately."

"Do you want me to prescribe something?"

"No, thank you. I prefer to make do without drugs. I'm sure in time my body will sort things out. I'm probably still readjusting to the day length on Earth."

"Unlikely. How's the hand?"

Al held up the useless club his left hand had become. The knuckles were white. "No change. Nerves don't heal, I guess."

"The nerves are not damaged, Mr. Bester, so far as I can tell. We've been through this before."

"Maybe you should go through it with my hand, then," Al replied, lightly.

"There are a few more tests we can do," the doctor said. "But as it stands, you seem to be in perfect health."

Your leg has healed up nicely, and the minor burn on your arm shows no sign of having caused your paralysis." He consulted his chart. "I see you've been doing deathbed scans."

"Yes. I started them on Mars, when I was confined to the hospital. It seemed a useful thing to do."

"Yes, but you're still doing them."

"I am. Someone has to."

The doctor set the chart down on the examination table. "Deathbed scans- are something we don't understand very well, Mr. Bester. The one thing we do understand, from experience and observation, is that it isn't healthy to do very many. You've done four already, which is three more than most will do willingly and as many as most can stand without suffering permanent disability. I suggest it's time for you to retire from this particular activity."

"Is that an order?"

"No, Mr. Bester, it is a heartfelt suggestion. You don't show the usual signs of stress associated with multiple scans, unless - tell me - is your insomnia due to nightmares?"

"No," Al lied.

"Hmm. Well, until you show clear signs of debility, I can't write you off, because willing scanners are hard to come by. But they can't make you do them."

"No one is trying to. I just feel it's my duty to the Corps."

"There are safer ways to suck up to command, Mr. Bester."

"I resent that implication," Al replied tersely. "Is my examination over? May I go?"

The doctor rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mr. Bester. But I'm making a note of my objections."

"What is it, Al?"

"I'm just tired. I did another deathbed scan this morning. Poor girl - but I got a clear image of her killer. I hope they catch the bastard."

"That's number five, isn't it?" Erik picked at his food and kept his eyes down, but Al felt the concern behind his words - and maybe something else.

"You aren't going to start, too?"

"Al, nobody does five necroscans."

Al shrugged and poked his fork into his pierogi.

"What are they like? The scans?"

"It's always a little different," he replied. "There's always a threshold of some sort - a door, the edge of a cliff - a sort of event horizon. The dying person hangs there for a time, and then - they go. They recede infinitely."

"Recede infinitely?"

"An illusion, I guess, since it only takes a short time. But that's the only way I can describe it."

"But it's like they pass through a doorway."

"Something like that."

"Can you- can you ever see what's beyond? Where they go?"

"No. Some fear it, some welcome it, but they don't know either, because they're still on this side when I'm with them. When they leave the liminality, I lose them."

"Don't you wonder what's there? I mean, if there is a door, it implies something on the other side."

"I wonder, I suppose. But as to the symbolism of the doorway, it doesn't necessarily mean anything. It's a mental construction, a way of conceiving of what's happening. It could well be wishful thinking - none of us can conceive of just ending, of not being anymore. What's more natural for a dying person than to pretend they're going somewhere else, even if they don't know what they will find there?"

"Or maybe they are- going somewhere else."

"Sure. Maybe."

"I know you, Al. You're looking for something, beyond that doorway. You think something's there, or you wouldn't keep doing it. What are you looking for?"

Al uttered a harsh chuckle. "I'm not looking for anything. What's got you so interested in this? Why all the questions?"

They've been asking about you. The evaluators.

Asking what?

Leading questions. They're worried about you.

Al swirled a chunk of the potato and cheese dumpling in sour cream and brought it to his mouth. He remembered his first taste of pierogi, his delight at its simplicity, its unexpected mixture of textures and taste. This one didn't seem to taste like anything at all.

"You get the impression people fear I'm unstable?"

"Yes. And that's not good, Al. I'm telling you this as a friend."

"A friend who perhaps hasn't been promoted as much as he would like?" Al asked, mildly. "Who thinks maybe I've been promoted too often? What did you tell them about my stability, Erik?"

Erik could turn an amazing shade of red at times. This was one of those times. "Look here, Al, I'm trying to save your career, not ruin it. You know the Corps won't risk an unstable cop. Why do you think all of your assignments since Mars have been domestic? Why do you think they've been keeping you away from the underground, or any shooting assignment?"

"And lest you forget, it was me who covered your ass in the IA investigation of that mess on Mars. If it had been anyone else who'd found you, raving, shooting a drained PPG over and over at an unarmed dead man- hell, a one-armed, unarmed dead man- you'd be in area 5 even as we speak. So don't you dare-" He broke off. Al had never seen him so furious. "Screw you, Al, I don't need this." He pushed his chair back violently and stalked off.

Al frowned and, after a bit of consideration, took another bite of his pierogi. It tasted no better than the last.

Al wasn't particularly surprised when Assistant Director Babineau called him into his office a few weeks later. If he had been both observant and honest with himself, he would never have doubted Erik's word. But over the years, Al had gained the knack of ignoring - no, not ignoring, but disregarding - the opinions of those around him when they concerned him. When he worried about what people thought of him, it invariably led to grief. He sought excellence, and that rubbed people the wrong way - people didn't want you to be excellent, they wanted you to be mediocre, to keep expectations low, and make life easier for them.

This time, though, he should have been paying attention. The Corps could tolerate a lot in an officer if he was efficient - but it could not tolerate instability.

He half expected that Babineau was going to announce a hearing to determine his fitness to serve. In his mind, he was already preparing his defense.

But for today, at least, it was just Babineau, his diminutive form doll-like behind an overlarge desk.

"Ah. Mr. Bester. If you would?" He gestured to a chair, which Al stiffly accommodated to.

"Mr. Bester, I am a plainspoken man, and a busy one, so I'll come to the point, if you don't mind. Do you know Alisha Ross?"

"Sir? Yes, sir, we've met."

"What do you think of her?"

"Think of her, sir?"

"Did you find her attractive? Ugly? Interesting? Boring? Flaky?"

"She is not unattractive, sir. I can't say whether I find her interesting or not - we've never really spoken, and I know very little about her."

"Well, I'll tell you a bit. She's a P12, like yourself. Doesn't have the temperament for fieldwork, so she mostly does forensics, building psychological profiles, that sort of thing. She's a decent soccer player, twenty-four years old, single. Do I have to draw you a picture, Mr. Bester?"

"I see," Al said, feeling more than a little disoriented. "She and I- we have a good genetic match?"

"Very good. Mr. Bester, we've already spoken to Ms. Ross. She's agreed, in principle, to consider a match."

"And you want me to..."

"First you should meet, I should think. Talk about it. But quite honestly, Mr. Bester, there are many who think marriage would be good for you at this time. If it isn't hate at first sight, the Corps is much in favor of a union between you and Ms. Ross. Such thorough genetic compatibility is actually quite rare."

"Yes, sir. I would be happy to meet Ms. Ross."

"You're a credit to the Corps, Mr. Bester. I expected nothing less from you."

They met in a restaurant in the city, having been assured that the bill was on the Corps.

It was a somewhat awkward moment, the first in a series.

Alisha was quiet. She had a conventionally pretty face, with hair not assertive enough to be called either chestnut or auburn, and eyes that could be called nothing but brown.

"I heard you were on Mars," she attempted.

"Yes."

"How did you find it?"

"Well, once we were near enough, it was pretty easy," Al replied. "We just fell onto it." She smiled

at the joke and took a rather large sip of her rosé. "And you?" he continued. "Have you been off planet?"

"Twice to the Moon," she answered. "No farther than that, I'm afraid. I really don't do well with zero gravity."

"Oh. That's too bad." He sat there trying to think of something else to say, wishing the food would hurry up. "I- ahm- you're from the United States- from Seattle?"

She nodded. "Yes. I don't remember much about it, though. I was brought into the Corps when I was eight. Have you been there? Seattle?"

"Oh. No. Almost, once- Portland. It rained a lot."

"That's what I remember."

The appetizers chose that moment to arrive, for which Al was grateful. He picked at his mussels, trying to make them last and keep his mouth too busy to talk at the same time. With someone you knew, that wouldn't stop conversation, of course - you could psi with a full mouth-but by mutual consent, neither of them initiated mind-to-mind communication. It seemed too intimate.

Al noticed as Alisha finished her wine and poured her some more.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"So- are you horrified?" she asked.

"Horrified of what?"

"Of marrying me."

A mussel went down the wrong way, somehow ended up halfway into his nose. He took some wine to try to clear up the problem and nearly choked a second time. In the end it was quite a mess, and Alisha was laughing - a soft, appealing, genuine laugh.

"Sorry," he said, when he could speak. "I suppose I thought we would avoid that subject for a while longer."

"I did, too. I guess the wine went to my head faster than I thought."

"The wine went in my head," Al said, and smiled again. It felt real on his face, an unfamiliar sensation. He looked curiously into her eyes. "I'm not horrified, I find. I always knew that the Corps would eventually suggest marriage, I just suppose I never thought it would be so soon."

"Well, you are over thirty."

"You've seen my file."

"I'm in forensics, remember? I can tell you what your cholesterol level is, if you want."

"Hmm. Well, at least you go in with eyes wide open."

"Are you in love with anyone else?" she asked.

"No. If I were, it wouldn't make any difference, not with a match approved by the Corps." He thought of Elizabeth, remembered her objections to all of that, despite their compatibility.

"What?" Alisha asked, reading something from his face or surface thoughts. "I don't mean to pry-"

"An old girlfriend," he said. "Very old. To be honest, it's been a long time since I thought about anything but my career."

"The two of you weren't compatible."

"Yes and no. Genetically we were, and I thought we were in other ways." He smiled, and this time it felt normal - that is to say, false. "We were very young."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out for you, especially since you were genetically matched. I think that's really the most important thing, don't you?"

He remembered Montoya, the flame in her that had nearly consumed him. There had been ecstasy, yes, and excitement, and love. It had made him stupid, nearly ruined him. "Yes," he said softly. "Yes I do."

She smiled back, and Al realized that he liked Alisha Ross, that he might manage to like her very much. But he would never love her.

That was fine. That was more than fine. He didn't want to be in love again.

They were married in April. Alisha's parents came, but they seemed lost among her Corps friends. Erik agreed to stand for Al, but it was clearly out of duty - whatever friendship might have been developing between them was gone.

They went on their honeymoon to Bali. They climbed mountains and sunned on beaches. For Al, it was mostly a boring business, vacationing, but at times he genuinely enjoyed himself. Alisha wasn't bad company, even if she wasn't exciting company. Their lovemaking was pleasant and companionable, if not inventive. He grew to like the idea of a wife more and more - the comfort of having someone to go home to.

And his nightmares retreated, though they didn't go away. Alisha didn't ask about them, though he was sure she knew.

They changed, his nightmares, even as they lessened in intensity. For some time he had been haunted by fragments of the lives of those he scanned. Now he dreamed that he himself stood on the liminality, alone. In this case the threshold was the pinnacle of a mountaintop, terribly high, and low mountains receding to every horizon, fading with distance but never actually ending. It was almost pleasant.

He would stand there, feeling that all of the answers were somehow out there. He would hear familiar voices, just below the level of intelligibility.

A woman's voice, low and soothing. A man's voice.

The voice of the rogue on Mars. Of Bey. In the drifting clouds, from the corner of his eye, he would catch hints of the faces, but when he focused on them they dissolved, even as he felt his left arm stiffen, his fingers fusing together into a single mass.

He would wake, not screaming, but indescribably sad. And then he would find Alisha's warm body next to his, a living thing among his dreams of the dead. A warmth. And he would fold against her in the night. And he was grateful- to her, to the Corps. To the Corps, which had seen what he needed and had given it to him.

chapter 6

"Here's to Mr. Bester, who took us to the lair, who smoked out the quarry, who made us well and truly hunters!" Gavriil Kichgelkhut's face split in a wide grin as he raised his glass.

Al acknowledged the toast with a modest bow of his head. Gavriil was a romantic who imagined himself in the days of his Koryak ancestors, but he was a good hunter for all of that. Al would teach him to be a great one.

Al raised his own glass. "To the Corps, our mother and our father!" he said, and they all drank again. Al, of course, drank very little.

After that they rehashed the hunt, the long chase through the elaborate and crumbling subways of Brasilia, the moment when they had almost lost the quarry, the final firefight. Gavriil sang a Koryak hunting song, and they got even louder as the patrons of the Common Flamingo gradually drifted out of the place. Al watched them go with quiet pride. Early on, a few of the bar patrons had looked as if they might become belligerent toward the telepaths in their midst. Al had fixed that with a dark stare and a thought. Even with their crippled senses, mundanes knew he was a cobra while they were mice.

The last of them was leaving as his tel-phone vibrated for his attention. He pulled it out and thumbed the contact. "Bester here."

"Mr. Bester? This is Dr. Juan Koabawa. The Blip is dying."

"I see."

"We've been cleared for a deathbed scan. I understand you have some experience with them."

"Indeed I do."

"Your record shows that you've already done six, so I'll understand if you don't want to do another. But the brain damage is extensive, and she's going fast. Ms. Calderon was unable to make good contact-"

"Say no more, Doctor. I'll be there in five minutes."

He closed the phone, stood, and took a bow. "Duty calls, gentlemen. Enjoy yourselves, but I want to see you all clearheaded by ten-hundred. Is that clear?"

He left, buoyed by their earnest cheers. Ten-hundred gave them three hours of sleep more than they had any right to expect. He knew his men - they would drink, but they would not get drunk. To do so

would be to put themselves at the mercy of normals, and he had taught them better than that.

He felt good. It was good to be back in the hunt.

Another scan, though - since his marriage to Alisha, his desire to do them had waned. Erik had been right - he had been looking for something that lay beyond the liminality, though he wasn't sure what it was. Something missing, a lost piece of himself.

Yet every time he stood with the dying at that doorway, he saw less and less. He came back feeling not more whole, but diminished, as if part of him had gone with the dead.

Each time the liminality manifested differently, depending, apparently, on the person who was dying and the person who was scanning. The truth of the threshold was probably beyond human understanding, but it was that old primate brain again, operating by analogy, trying to make sense out of the inconceivable.

He would not have gone out of his way to volunteer for another, but when the Corps called, he answered.

Especially as he was coming up for promotion, soon, to senior detective. Seven deathbed scans would make him a legend, after a fashion.

Her mind was shredded by approaching death. She had not allowed them to take her gently. Al had hated to use such force against another telepath, but she had been very strong, and in the end - whether the younger man knew it or not - it had been her or Gavriil. She could have shattered his mind. In such a case, you had to make decisions.

Gavriil had mindblasted her, not subtly but with all of his strength. Vessels had shattered in her brain, and the once life-giving blood now drowned all she had ever been.

She stood, quivering, at the liminality, a sort of storm front in which each of many lightning bolts was a dying memory, blazing out one last time. In the storm, a black eye was opening, waiting to swallow her forever.

Khol, he said softly. Khol. I have to know why you went rogue. I have to know who led you to your death.

She turned toward him. Her face came and went like a bad transmission. It shifted from large-eyed child to the hollow, gaunt visage they had hunted. It distorted from abstract - like the face of a Grin - to photographic as she tried to hang on to herself. She wasn't succeeding.

I was a good cop. I was.

I know. You loved the Corps. What happened?

I was- I was good...

A shrieking, then, a terrible inhuman sound that tore into him, that set his teeth on edge, that threatened to rip open his mind. For an instant he knew a terrible attraction in despair, in destruction, and yearned for oblivion so much that if he had had a PPG in his hand he might have turned it on himself.

Lightning struck, and he was on Mars. The sky was still a hurricane, the eye bigger than ever.

It struck again, and they were fingering a small object, a black fragment of something-

-which was now somehow huge, arachnoid, hideous, looming over him-

Together, he and Khol screamed, and she was shrieking away from him, into eternity, and he was following, grasping the trail of her dying mind, riding the current of her spent life toward- toward-

Something that called him. A woman's face. A man's voice. Answers...

Answers he no longer wanted. He felt his ruined hand spasm with the effort of wrenching free, of abandoning Khol's desperate flight into nothing. She wanted to die, and he did, too, to know what was beyond, oblivion or solace. The storm had him, he had gone in too far, and he was glad-

Then the eye dilated, rushed away, and she was gone. Too late, he redoubled his efforts to catch it, but it was like the old problem of taking half a step toward a door, and then half of that step, and half of that. He could get closer, but never reach it.

And he was withdrawing his bare, trembling fingers from her dead face. He was weeping.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bester," Dr. Koabawa said. "I shouldn't have asked this of you."

"No," he managed. "I'll be all right in a moment. Just- give me a moment." It felt as if something had been cut out of him, something he couldn't even remember anymore. Was it true, what they said? That a part of your soul went with those who died? How much of him was left?

Later, on the plane back to Geneva, he felt better. It was Khol's loss he felt, her trauma. The illusion of damage had been just that, an illusion.

Still, he didn't think he would do another deathbed scan. They wouldn't ask him again, not after seven. They probably wouldn't let him if he wanted to, after this performance.

He took deep, calming breaths, as Bey had taught him. He would be better soon.

He distracted himself by thinking of Alisha, how good it would be to see her, to not be alone.

Maybe this time she would conceive. That would please everyone. He knew she wanted a child, and he himself had begun to think of it as more than a duty. He had seen a lot of death - a bit of life would be nice. A new life that was a part of him, a continuation of him.

The liminality represented the past, threatening to draw him to his doom. Alisha, children- life- they were the future, and for the first time in many years it was the future that he wanted. His future, Alfred Bester's future, not some vague and nameless legacy of parents he had never known.

He squeezed that thought away even as it formed. He had no parents. The Corps was his parents, and that was all he needed, all he cared for.

He slept. There were nightmares, of course, but when he awoke, it was to hope.

Back in Teeptown, he bought some flowers and headed straight for his apartment. Alisha probably wouldn't be there - he was too early for her to expect him, and he didn't remember her work schedule - but she might be in. If she wasn't, he would put them in a vase and see what he could do about making a meal, something Alisha would like. Coq au vin, maybe, or duck with olives.

Smiling in anticipation of her reaction, he keyed the door open.

He was so distracted by his plans, he didn't catch what was in the air until too late. Then he saw the table settings, the wine, and smiled. The smile faded as he understood that the bottle was empty, the food eaten, and only then did he feel the faint palpitations coming from the next room.

In one jarring instant he was a child again, on that mountain, eavesdropping on Julia and Brett, feeling their lips brushing as if against his own. But this time he already knew the feel of one of the pair, the peculiar way she knotted her hands together across a back. It was his- had been his...

The flowers slipped to the floor. He looked down at them dumbly for a time, then knelt to gather them up.

He placed them in a vase and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

He didn't look down when he heard the approaching footsteps. He kept his eyes on the stars, on the thin films of clouds, on the vague secrets the patterns of light and darkness implied. Mysteries, cryptograms.

Secrets.

"I'm- I'm sorry, Al."

He shrugged. "I suppose I should have expected it. I had no right not to."

"You don't believe that."

"No," he admitted. Then he asked, "Why did you marry me?"

"You know why."

"No. There was no need to marry. We could have conceived a child for the Corps - through artificial insemination, even. It's done every day. But you wanted to marry. Why?"

"Because they asked me to."

He sat back against the pedestal that supported the statue of William Karges. "I see. Another attempt to save poor Alfie Bester. To put him on the right track."

"They said you were becoming- erratic. And I- I admire you, Al. I like you. I wanted to help."

"What's his name?"

"Do you really need to-"

"What is his name?" Now he met her eyes. She had been crying, but he found he didn't care.

"Jared. Jared Dawson."

"Well. Another P12, at least."

"I knew him long ago, Al. We were lovers before I ever met you, but our genetic profiles showed a lower compatibility. And-" She broke off. "Al, you don't love me. We both know that."

"That doesn't mean you have to make a fool out of me. A laughingstock in front of the whole Corps."

"Is that what worries you? I've been very careful about that, Al. No one knows. I swear it." She knelt in front of him, reached her hand to touch his chin. "It won't happen again, Al. I swear. I told him it was over."

"Spare me your pity, Alisha. You're right- I don't love you any more than you love me. I just thought- I just thought we could be friends. I thought we could trust each other."

"I'm sorry. It's all I can say. I won't do it again."

"Oh. Good. Now I trust you completely. That was easy."

"Al-"

"Go home, Alisha. Go home. I'll be there after a while."

Their words served only to ease them from one silence to another over the next week. They lived in the spaces. Al tried to come home as seldom as he could, but it was a slow week. The underground was quiet, and all incidents were local enough not to require the intervention of an external investigator. Al kept his feelers out, waiting, hoping for a distraction.

Alisha tried- he could tell she was trying. For the moment, at least, she was sincere about making their "marriage" work. But he knew he couldn't trust her, knew he never should have. The Grins had taught him that, long ago. Why did he keep forgetting? Was it some animal instinct, this blind desire to trust? Some chemical necessity?

It was ten days before he got the call he had been waiting for. Alisha was in the kitchenette.

"Who was that?" she asked.

He left without a word.

"His name is Karl Jovovich," the young medic said. "Massive trauma; his heart took a bullet. We have him on a mechanical pump, but he's rejecting. We've got a heart for him, but I don't expect - well, the collateral damage is extensive. He took five hits in the upper chest."

"So you want me to stand by during the operation."

"Yes. A scan right now would kill him for certain, and would violate his rights-"

"I'm aware of the law," Al said softly.

"I'm sure you are." The medic was a normal. He didn't like Al, that much was clear. He didn't like the whole situation.

"I'll wait," Al assured him. "I'll wait until you give the word."

"If I give the word." *Goddamn vulture.*

Al smiled, very thinly. "You have your job, and I have mine. I hope your man lives. But if he doesn't, isn't it better that we catch his killer?" He was lying. The man in the bed was a mundane. Al didn't

care if he recovered. If he had been shot by another mundane - well, what better justice than that they should all kill one another? But, in these situations, it was best to be diplomatic. Mundanes were better off believing that the Corps was, as advertised, their friend.

He waited impatiently as the fellow was taken into surgery. He had chosen a mundane, in a mundane hospital, volunteering through the court system. That likely meant that MetaPol didn't yet know he was doing this. If they did, they might try to stop him, and he couldn't have that. Every moment he had to wait increased the chances someone in his division would realize what he was up to.

No matter what, this was the last time. The Corps couldn't possibly risk one of their best - and yes, he was one of their best, there was no need for false humility - on an eighth deathbed scan.

That was okay. One more was all he needed.

They worked hard, deep into the night. He watched the earnest young surgeons, tasted their desperate faith, their passion for saving life, and wanted to laugh at them. Everyone died. Who did they think they were? But they sweated and cursed and finally wept when the heartbeat went flat, and they reluctantly called him over.

He worked fast. Once the pulse was gone, there was no time to spare. He pulled off the resuscitator, stripped the glove from his right hand, and touched the clammy brow. The man was young, a little weak-chinned. He had crow's-feet, despite his youth - perhaps he had laughed a lot.

Al closed his eyes, and set foot on a dark highway. He was walking next to the young man, who turned to face him.

"You the angel of death?"

"Maybe. You know you're dying?"

"I know. I can feel it. You see the end up ahead?" He laughed bitterly. "End of the road."

"Anything you want to tell me first? Who killed you?"

"No. Why does it matter?"

"I would think you would want revenge."

The young man shook his head. "You know that poem? I forget exactly how it goes. Death is the enemy, not my fellow man. I won't betray someone else to death."

"Even the one who killed you?"

"Nope."

"How noble. But you are scared."

"I'm terrified. Who wouldn't be?" The road had begun to move beneath them, like a sidewalk. Landscape whipped by them - sights, sounds, events - Al ignored them. The young man didn't care who had killed him, and neither did Al. That's not what he was here for.

"You dying, too?" the fellow asked.

"No. But I'm going with you."

"How 'bout you just take my place, if you're so damn eager?"

"I thought death was the enemy."

"Yeah. But you seem so all-fired anxious."

"I am."

"Why?"

"I want to see what's out there. Beyond that."

The liminality was approaching; Al had come to recognize it, whatever its form. The road was curling up at the edges as it raced along, black walls going higher and higher, and finally closing, becoming a tunnel of nothing. Their pace was fantastic now, and the young man was starting to blur, to coruscate. Bits of his form were streaming behind him like the tail of a comet.

"This isn't so bad," the young man whispered. "I guess I can use the company. You want to take my hand?"

Al didn't want to, but that seemed the surest way. He reached out and did so, just as direction seemed to change, as horizontal motion became vertical - down, like falling toward Mars, like falling in a nightmare.

For an instant he knew the sheerest terror he had ever known. Then the universe seemed to flatten, as all of him squeezed into a ribbon, a globe, a single, dimensionless point- then, nothing, save a humming like wind, and lights like stars, and the most interesting sensation of turning inside out, like a sock.

The young man was gone. Everything was gone. But he wasn't. He remained, somehow. And he spoke to himself.

He spoke to himself, but he spoke in voices. He spoke first in the voice of Sandoval Bey.

What did I hope to find here?

And he answered in the voice of Elizabeth Montoya.

The truth. The truth about my parents.

But I know that truth, Bey's voice replied. I didn't have to come here for that. And it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter who or what my parents were.

And now he spoke in the voice of Stephen Walters, the rogue he had killed. *There is nothing here. The only thing here is what I bring with me.*

And in the most ancient voice he knew, the voice of a woman. Of his mother. *I only bring what is in my heart. That is all that survives beyond the liminality, the contents of the heart.*

And finally, in his own voice. *And there is nothing here. There is nothing left in my heart at all.*

There wasn't. There wasn't. His skin was all that remained, inside out, empty.

He awoke with his back arched, the surgeon standing over him, sweating, mask down. A sparkling numbness was just working through his toes, presumably from the heart-lung stimulator on his chest.

"Got you," the surgeon said. "Goddamn it, I got you."

"Congratulations, Doctor," Al said, weakly. "You seem to have saved my life."

They still wouldn't let him out of bed the next day, when Alisha came to see him.

"Hello, my dear," he said, pushing himself upright against the pillows.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Oh- nothing much. I lost control of the scan. I guess I shouldn't have tried to do it so soon after the last one."

"You shouldn't have tried another one at all."

He patted her hand. "Your concern is touching. It really is. But there's nothing to fear - I won't be doing it again."

"I hope not"

"How did you get here so quickly?"

"The hospital called the Corps, and they informed me. I took the first flight."

"Yes. They informed my loving wife, of course."

"Al-"

"No, I'm sorry. That was inappropriate of me. Thank you for coming." He took her hand again, and sensed- something more.

"You have something to tell me?" he asked.

"I was going to wait-"

"No time like the present. I'm fine, Alisha."

She nodded. "Very well. Alfred, I'm pregnant."

He blinked. "Wonderful." Was it his? Probably he would never know. Nor did he really care.

"I hoped you would be happy."

"A fine, strong P12 for the Corps? Of course I'm happy."

She attempted a smile. "I'm glad. I'm glad you're okay. I was worried that you might want-"

He shook his head, reached up, and pecked her on the cheek. "You're my wife. That's how it should be. And now we have a child on the way. The timing isn't what it could have been, but we'll work it out."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't I tell you? I requested a transfer to Mars. Babineau was in here just before you, to tell me it was approved. It's a great opportunity, darling, for all of us. All of the big stuff is happening on Mars. I can't turn it down. I think you understand."

She drew back a little. "I- think I do."

"I knew you would. But I'll write, of course, and send vids, and come home on leave every chance I get."

"I can get a transfer, too. I can go with you-"

"In your condition? And I know how upsetting space travel is to you. No, I can't ask you to do that." He said it firmly, finally, and she understood.

"If that's what you want."

"What we want doesn't matter. We do what we must." He smiled. "Thank you for coming to see me. I think I would like to rest again."

"Okay. Rest well."

He could feel her relief. If his heart weren't empty, it might have bothered him.

He slept like a baby.

part iv Ascendance

chapter 1

"I hate the way they look at us," Ysidra Tapia said, lifting her chin incrementally at the crowd waiting on the train platform. Most looked like miners, though there were a few white-collar types. All stared at Al and Tapia with varying degrees of vehemence.

He shrugged. "I take comfort in the little things," he told her. "Things that give me a sense of security, of permanency. The sun rises and sets every day, objects in a gravity well fall down and not up, and normals hate telepaths. It's comforting, really, when you get to my age. It tells you that God is in heaven and all is right with the world."

Tapia smiled nervously. She was dreadfully young, a P12 at the start of her internship. She was slim and tall and dark. She reminded him uncomfortably of Elizabeth Montoya.

"Stinking mindfrikkers."

He didn't need his psi to hear that. It had been meant for his ears and for everyone on the platform.

It was easy, too, to single out the individual who had spoken - a tough-looking miner of about forty. Her muscular arms hung almost gorillalike at her sides. "You heard me," she said, dangerously. "Mindfrikker."

"Good day to you, too," Al said, with exaggerated brightness.

"Come on, Endra." Another miner - a younger woman-tugged on her arm.

"Come on?" she snapped. "Have you forgotten starving? The food riots? These mindfrikkers, fat and lazy, watching us starve?"

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you decided to sit out the Earth-Minbari War," Tapia snapped, suddenly. Al was mildly surprised. Apparently the trainee had some of Montoya's fire, as well.

"Wasn't our war. We didn't start it."

"Wasn't your war?" Tapia snapped. "You cowards. My father died on the Line. And my brother. Earth boiled a million gallons of blood into a vacuum to save the Human race while you guys sat here like the Marsie cowards you are."

"You better keep your little pup on the curb, Mr. P-sicko," Endra said. Her voice moved into what Al recognized as a red zone. A murmur rose among the rest of the crowd - they were getting angrier by

the second. He knew he ought to do something.

But he wanted to see how Tapia would handle it. She, in turn, seemed to think she had overstepped her bounds and suddenly became quiet.

Then the tube car arrived.

"Take the next one, mindfrikkers," the woman named Endra said, as the doors sighed open.

"I don't think we will," Tapia said. In the lull, some of her confidence had flagged, but Al could tell she was going to bluff it out, now that she was committed.

"Yeah? Well, just come on." A silicon cutter appeared in the miner's hand, a wicked tool with an edge only a few molecules wide. She brandished it, and with her other hand made a gesture of contempt at least as old as ancient Rome. "Next time you freaks'll know to travel in a real pack, rather than just one old scrag and his little puppy-bitch."

"That's illegal possession of a weapon, under Earth Provisional Government regulation-" Tapia was still reciting the regs and reaching for her PPG when Endra threw the knife.

The years had taken away some of Bester's speed, but the same years of training had helped wear neural grooves deeper than reflexes. Al managed to knock Tapia far enough aside to save her life, but the spinning blade nevertheless slipped almost frictionlessly through her biceps. For an instant, it almost seemed as if it had missed, and then Tapia's arm sagged halfway off, blood fountaining out.

Cursing himself for not stepping in sooner, Al jammed Endra's mind and watched her drop. Then he pulled his PPG and shot four other miners in the legs as the rest, howling with fear, crushed onto the train.

Ignoring the groans of the injured mundanes, Al knelt quickly, used Endra's knife to cut a tourniquet from his shirt, then called for medics on his link. He laid Tapia's head back gently.

She had gone into shock, eyes glassy, but he had seen a lot of wounds in his time and suspected she would live.

So would those he had shot. He turned to them.

"I want you to remember something," he said, very softly, but very distinctly. "I want you to watch this, and remember it, and I want you to tell your friends." He stood up and walked toward where Endra lay puddled.

Her eyes were starting to clear. "First of all, this isn't Earth. You people turned your backs on Earth, remember? The officers who run the provisional government here- men and woman who fought in the war for you-well, they don't really care so much if you Marsies don't receive the full protection of Earth law.

"So, for instance, if something like this were to happen-" He pushed, and Endra screamed, trying, it

seemed, to touch the back of her head to the heels of her feet. "Well, on Earth someone might wonder why I did it. They might even bring it up in a court of law. Not here. Or maybe-" Just for form's sake, he hit the woman with a deep, hard scan. Unearthed her hatred of the Corps, saw how she had lost a child in the food riots, found- something else. Something buried, encrypted, hidden.

It was entombed in her hatred, but she hadn't repressed the memory by herself. He recognized the signs - a P12 had cauterized a memory. A sloppy job, though, and it was still half there.

He yanked it out, like a rotten tooth, set it aside, and got back to the business at hand. He sparked her mind and then diced it. It was so easy to do to normals. When he was done, she just lay there, drooling, staring at the ceiling and making gagging noises.

Then he pushed each of the other four, just a little, so they would worry about what he might have done to them. "Touch one of my telepaths again, and what I've done to her will seem a kindness," he promised. "Are you all quite clear on that?"

The four nodded vigorously, and about that time the medical team arrived.

Satisfied that Tapia would live, he went back to his apartment and carefully unwrapped the thing he had torn from Endra's mind. Not surprisingly, it had Psi Corps in it, everywhere, all around her. Department Sigma.

Interested, he sifted the broken strands, weaving here, extrapolating there. He had worked with Department Sigma on a number of occasions, and was aware of some of their projects, but to a large extent they were still a black box to him. He didn't like that.

He saw Endra working for them, running a backhoe, cutting blocks of rust-red permafrost with a silicon knife - that's where she had come by it. Digging for something in the Martian dirt.

The digging was just the frame of the picture. Endra Nadja had been digging most of her adult life. No, it was where she was digging - and why - that they had cut out.

He carefully worked his way to the core of the burned memories, and in the ashes, in the powdery place between what is forgotten and what was never known, he found spiders. Spiders boiling out of her flesh, spiders crowded on her eyeballs, spiders invading her mouth.

Strange. The records showed that Endra Nadja had been bon on Mars and had never been off planet.

Where would she have seen spiders?

He supposed someone in the Corps might have planted the images there, as some sort of punishment,

but that seemed unlikely - this was the part of the memory that was most damaged, that had been most viciously suppressed.

Anyway, it explained Endra's bolder-than-normal hatred. She didn't remember being hurt by a Psi Cop, but one had hurt her a great deal, doing this. The buried memory had fed her natural antipathy. Whoever had done this deserved a reprimand for such a half-assed job.

It wasn't a signature he recognized. He shrugged and started to file it away again, but paused for a long moment.

There was something familiar about this. But what?

He stood with his eternally clenched hand pressed against the macromolecular glass, staring out over the battered surface of Mars. His mind traced back through the years, in search of the feeling of spiders, of an alien touch...

The rogue in Brasilia. What was it, more than twenty years ago? She had had some sort of thing going with spiders. And hadn't she come from Mars?

Yes, this certainly went into the "to be considered" file.

Tapia dimpled at the flowers. "Thank you, Mr. Bester."

"Don't mention it. Next time, though, you should try to catch the knife by the hilt."

"I'll try to remember that. If it weren't for you, I'd be dead now. I guess- I guess I lost control."

"We all do that now and then," Al said. "It's perfectly natural to get frustrated, especially with mundanes. They can't understand us, any more than a blind man can understand a roomful of painters discussing a landscape."

"I know." She looked at him very seriously. "May I ask you a personal question? How have you been able to stand it all of these years?"

He looked her dead level in the eye. "It's very simple," he said. "I always have the Corps behind me. My family. And then, of course, I have my loving wife, and my son-"

"They live here, on Mars?"

"My wife is still on Earth-though she's thinking about moving up here, next year, now that the kid's out of the house. She doesn't deal with space travel very well. My son is grown and in the Corps back on

Earth, I'm happy to say."

"You must be lonely. Haven't you ever considered requesting assignment on Earth?"

"It's hard, but I feel I'm needed here, on Mars, and with my Black Omega Squadron. As much as it hurts, we do what we must."

"It's romantic, in a way," Tapia said.

"Yes. In a way. And now I want you to get some rest, because when you get out of here, you'll have some hard training ahead of you. No slackers in the Black Omegas, I promise you."

"Yes, Mr.Bester."

He made his way to his office, put off combing through a year's worth of backed-up paperwork in favor of glancing at the Universe Today headlines. He took notes on two items of mild interest.

The first concerned telepaths on Io who had cooperated in a union work shutdown. This wasn't news to Al, and the idiots had been dealt with already. After all, telepaths had a union, Psi Corps - they had no business entangling their allegiances, officially or unofficially. For Al, the article was noteworthy because of its very existence - the whole affair was supposed to have been stifled.

Again, someone had been sloppy.

A little more interesting was a profile of William Edgars, an up-and-coming billionaire in the pharmaceutical industry. Edgars was one of the contractors who produced sleepers, so anything concerning him was of interest. The article was typical Fortune 500 stuff, though - hobbies, carefully chosen political views, photos with the dog. When asked about business teeps, he seemed to avoid the question, an interesting thing in and of itself.

He moved from the paper to the revised hunt list but had only read a page when his vidcom belled.

"Answer," he told it. "Bester here."

A face appeared, a receding blond hairline, strong jaw, very white teeth. He had the momentary disorientation that came from recognizing someone once well-known, but transformed.

"Brett?" he asked, a little incredulously.

"Hello, Al. I was wondering if you'd remember me."

"Of course I do. Cadre Prime. What can I do for you?"

Brett hesitated for an instant. "Al, I'm on Mars. I wondered if I might look you up?"

That was- odd. He and Brett hadn't seen each other except in passing, in the halls back in Geneva, for more than thirty years. Thirty.

"Yes, of course. Where would you like to meet?"

"Well, I've never been on Mars before, and I don't have long here. I was thinking about hiking a little around the slopes of Olympus Mons."

"You're kidding."

"No, not at all."

"I can tell you're a tourist. Not all the way up, I trust."

"Probably not. Are you game?"

"I-" Something was wrong here. "Sure."

"Great. When are you free?"

Al didn't much like being outside on Mars. He didn't like trusting his life to canned air. And he didn't like the distant horizons, with no walls to put his back to. How many ways could you kill a man outside? It was easy enough on Earth: a hidden marksman, a well-timed avalanche, a falling accident. On Mars, it was so much simpler. A cracked air valve and a faulty gauge. A few molecules of any of a number of nerve toxins placed in the breathing mix.

Sure, it was the same inside the domes, but written on a larger page, and scale did make a difference. Few people would blow up a whole dome, or poison the entire colonial air system just to kill Alfred Bester. He could think of many who wouldn't mind waiting in a fissure on Olympus Mons, even for hours, peering through a telescopic sight.

A lot of people stood between him and death. That made him very uncomfortable.

Brett could well be one of those people. They had always been rivals. He had left Brett in the dust, rankwise, many years ago. Was he here to beg a recommendation - or earn one from Al's enemies?

"Ever climbed this whole thing?" Brett gestured at Olympus Mons, which dominated not just the sky,

but the world. The tallest volcano in the solar system, its fifteen miles of height were difficult for the mind to comprehend. They were only about a mile up from the base, and already the puny horizon of Mars made the planet seem smaller, while the endless slope rose above them.

"C'mon, Brett." Al paused on a ledge. "We haven't spoken in more years than I can remember. Let's be honest. We were never friends, not really. You didn't bring me out here to renew an old acquaintance or to chat about our childhoods."

Brett stared up the vast slope. "Okay, Al. It's true. You were always the strange one in the cadre. I always did sort of like you, whether you knew it or not. We all did. You were just- you wanted more than we did, maybe. But you were Cadre Prime, Al, and I was Cadre Prime. We are alike in a way that others can't be."

Here it came. Brett wanted something, all right, and he was hoping to key in on the only thing he could, the only thing the two of them had in common.

"Even after all of these years? You really think we share that much? Twelve years out of sixty-four?"

"Yes, I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here. We were never friends, Al, but we were brothers."

"So we were taught. But isn't everyone in the Corps brother and sister?"

Brett shook his head and started forward on the slope. He moved with greater ease than Bester. After years in the Martian gravity, Al's muscles had weakened somewhat. Brett was still used to the heavier pull of their home planet. "You remember what they told us? The Grins? That we, Cadre Prime, had a special duty?"

Al laughed harshly. "How could I forget?"

"Al, we were born in the Corps. Everyone else in our cadre joined before they were seven, and all of them were born manifested. Between us, we celebrated only one birthday. Remember? I still celebrate it. I'll bet you still do, too - and I'll bet you never tried to find out what day you were actually born."

Al shrugged.

"You don't think that makes us different? We see things, Al, in a way that those who joined the Corps when they were twelve, or fifteen, or twenty simply can't. They grew up as mundanes, then learned to be Corps. We grew up as the real thing."

"I'll grant you that. What's your point?"

"My point is that the director is a mundane."

"Very good, Brett. Perhaps that's because the Corps' charter states that the director will be assigned by the EA senate and shall always be a normal?"

"Yes. But Director Vacit was a telepath, you know."

"What?"

"You heard me. He was a telepath. He put the Corps together, him and Senator Crawford. It's not what they taught us as kids, but-"

"Yes, yes, of course I knew the William Karges story was a fairy tale - but Vacit?"

"You met him once."

"Yes." He could picture him, too, that fine, wrinkled skin and white, close-cropped hair. The faint feeling, like a wind. "You felt something?" Vacit had asked. "Interesting. Most don't."

And then Director Johnston's interest in him, because Vacit had been interested...

"How do you know?"

"Al, you've been in the field. I've mostly been in administration. You hear things there. A few people knew all along. Johnston suspects it, if he can't prove it."

"I fail to see what any of this has to do with me," Al said.

"Have you been to Teeptown lately, Al? Have you been in the classrooms, seen what they're teaching the kids? It's not the same as what we learned." He considered, for a moment. "On the surface it is. But underneath, the message has changed."

"Changed how?"

"We always learned that we were special - better than mundanes. That all telepaths were brothers, even the Blips we have to track down. Now it's- it's just the Corps, Al. Blips are enemies. They do things to them-"

"We always did things to them," Al said. "Have you ever seen a reeducation camp? Or someone on sleepers?"

"Have you ever seen one telepath dissect another?" Brett countered. "Have you ever seen one driven mad, when they tried to push him past P12 with drugs?"

"I've heard of such things, of course. Sometimes they may be necessary. You know as well as I do that one day there will be a war against the mundanes, Brett, a war we cannot lose. I, for one, am willing to make a few sacrifices to see that my people aren't slaughtered."

"Of course. I don't question that, Al. Any of us should be happy to sacrifice anything and everything for the others. What I'm trying to tell you is that this isn't being done for us - for teeps - it's being done to us. By mundanes."

"When Vacit was in charge - and for years after - the Corps was controlled by telepaths. Now it's not. They aren't experimenting for our own benefit, but to make us better weapons. Hell, surely you've heard about dust?"

"Yes. What's wrong with trying to enhance our powers?"

"Bull. Dust was developed to give mundanes psi, Al. To undercut us completely." He stopped, picked up a Martian rock, turned it at a few angles, then let it drop. "It's a matter of control, Al. In the old days, Cadre Primers were placed in strategic positions. The low-level ones became instructors, but the P12s went on to high command. Now there's a black box out there that they won't let any of us into. Because we're all suspect. Do you know how many of us have died?"

"No."

"Most of us, Al. Milla's gone. And Menno. Ekko. And I went back through the older generations. You met Natasha Alexander once?"

"Yes. Here, on Mars. She was the commander of Department Sigma."

"One of the first from Cadre Prime, and her mother and her mother's mother were both in the Metasensory Regulation Authority before it became Psi Corps. She was assassinated. She used to be Vacit's aide, did you know that? No Primers in Department Sigma, Al. Or in top Admin. She was in the black box and so they got her out. You should have been promoted all the way to the top, years ago. You know it, I know it.

"Oh, they let you have your Black Omega Squadron to keep you busy, but you know you're still on the outside. You have to. I should be higher up, too, though I never had the ambition you did. They've held us down, Al. And if they ever think they can't, they'll kill us."

"They? Who is they?" Al demanded angrily. Montoya had spoken of they.

"Johnston and his cronies, his pet telepaths, laterals all- And behind them, a select group of senators, governors, industrialists- IPX especially. Mundanes, Al, mundanes. They're taking it away from us. From our children." He grabbed Al's arm. "Don't you know why Sandoval Bey was killed? You were his friend, don't you want to know?"

"Enough!" Al shouted. Despite his full-throated roar, his voice was surrealistically thin in the Martian air.

"What are you here for? Are you trying to talk me into some kind of revolution? Assuming all you say is true, you think the two of us can just-"

But Brett was shaking his head. "No, Al. I'm just trying to save your life. I've already given up on mine."

"What?"

"I investigated. I left a trail. They'll find me."

"Oh. Wonderful. And you've led them right to me. It's so good to have friends."

"No, I promise you, I've fixed that. Anyway, they may have already been coming for you. Whether they were or not, something is happening here, on Mars, in Department Sigma. Something very big and very nasty."

"And what would that be?"

"They found something. Lots of somethings, actually, out there on Syria Planum - some of it long, long ago. Hell, the facility has been there since '73! Some of it we now think is Vorlon - organic technology, anyway. More recently, though, they found other things-" He stopped and took Al by both shoulders. "Some very bad things have been happening to telepaths on Mars, Al."

"You have proof of any of this?"

"No. But look- look very carefully- and you'll find it. You're better placed than I, smarter than I, stronger than I. You have your Black Omega Squadron and bloodhound units loyal to you. Al, whether you know it or not, you're the most powerful man on our side. You're the Black Pope."

"What side is that, Brett?"

"The only side that really matters, Al. The teep side. Don't you see, they've played you against the rogues, kept you occupied so you don't ask questions. But soon now, very soon, they won't be able to hide all of it from you. Then they'll have to do something about you. Something permanent."

"If what you say is true, they have their excuse now - you're talking to me."

"No. As I said, I've fixed that."

Brett was good. Al caught his intent an instant too late. The larger man's fist drove into his face, ripping the breather half off. His sharp intake of breath was already in progress, but it was almost all CO₂, and his head swam. Brett helped out by hitting him again, and his knees buckled, but Brett took him down gently to the jagged rocks.

"Sorry, Al." Brett yanked Al's PPG from its holster. "Just make sure you pick this up," he said. "And don't forget what I said. You're the one, Al. The only one who can save us. The Corps is mother. The Corps is father."

Brett shot himself in the face.

Al fumbled his mask into place and stood shakily, staring at Brett's corpse, determined not to move again until he had worked out exactly what to do. On consideration, he unholstered Brett's weapon and fired it - once into the side of the mountain, once so that it scorched his arm. PPGs had faintly different signatures and the weapons were registered - an investigation would tell who had fired which.

Then he took his own weapon from Brett's outstretched hand and replaced it with the other. He closed the dead fingers and squeezed them, and he remembered, so, so long ago, playing cops and blips, pretending Brett wasn't a good guy. Betraying him. His brother.

"I'm sorry, Brett," he said softly. "I really am."

And for the first time in a very, very long time he felt something that might have been a tear start in the corner of his eye.

He cracked the mask, let the desiccated Martian atmosphere have it. He had no time for that.

He could hardly doubt that Brett believed what he said - he had died for it. Brett might be wrong, but too much of what he said fit too well with what Al already suspected. He had known about Johnston for years.

Indeed, he and Johnston would have a personal meeting one day, to discuss purely personal matters - that was certain.

But the larger conspiracy - he hadn't exactly seen the shape of it until now.

If Brett was right, this amounted to much more than a political game inside the Corps. His telepaths were in danger. Alfred Bester's telepaths. They were all he had, all he cared about.

God help anyone who got in his way.

chapter 2

Glass shattered, and though it was up ahead somewhere, Bester ducked reflexively. He signaled his bloodhounds, and they spread out around him, their excitement barely contained.

They relayed their impressions back toward him in a chain. He loved it, hunting with his hounds. It was like being the conductor of a symphony. For the moment he conducted them like bassoons and low strings, plucked, as they crept like thieves through ruined corridors of antique white and aquamarine.

A hundred yards ahead, they came across a normal. Like the others they had found, he was curled against the wall, his expression slack. Blood seeped through a crack in his faceplate, but he was still alive. One eye was a bloody ruin, but the normal didn't care. He was more occupied with the nightmare his remaining eye saw, wherever it tried to look.

I don't understand, Tapia mused. *Why is he doing this?*

"Shh. Don't 'cast," Bester warned. He noted that she seemed to have recovered most- but not all- of the use of her arm. He had heard that she was proud of the injury, because it made her more like him. She was a good cop, and one of the few he was certain he could trust, especially now.

"Yes, sir. But McDwyer is smarter than this. I trained with him. If he were going Blip, he wouldn't-

"No, no, Ms. Tapia. He hasn't gone Blip. That's not what's going on here."

His link quietly vibrated. He touched it on. "Bester."

"Sir, this is Donne. Sir, I've been watching like you said. Another team just came in. Looks like Sigma, all right."

"Good work, Ms. Donne. You know the plan. I'm sending a few back to help. Just keep them busy for a few minutes. Nothing overt, nothing we can't plausibly deny."

"On it, sir."

He motioned to a couple of the bloodhounds, and they turned and raced the way they had come.

"What's going on, sir?" Tapia asked.

"Better you don't know right now," he told her. "If everything goes as I want it to, I'll tell you. Meantime, our job is to concentrate on catching McDwyer. Alive."

"Yes, sir."

They passed through a high-ceilinged chamber that must have once been the resort's ballroom. Modest in size by Earth standards, by Martian standards it was lavish.

And in ruins. No one had even bothered to loot it - the shattered crystal of candelabras littered the floor, and once plush, real-leather sofas cracked in the dry Martian air. A fine coat of red dust covered everything, puffing up as they moved through it.

The Earth-Minbari War, the embargo that had followed, and the provisional Mars government hadn't done much to help the old tourist industry. New Vegas had survived, as had the upper-crust entertainments of Olympus Mons, but none of the more exclusive - and isolated - imitators. This one, the hotel Tharsis, would likely never open again. It was home to fifty or so squatters, some fugitives from the EPG, some just half-crazed outbackers.

McDwyer had made a sizable dent in their active population - the trail of bodies was even clearer than his footprints in the Martian dust.

Something else, breaking ahead, and three of his bloodhounds bolted forward. As per orders, they didn't draw their PPGs. Bester hurried his own pace, through the ballroom and into a wing of suites.

The hounds were already down when he entered, clutching their heads in stunned agony.

McDwyer sat across the room, balanced on the high back of a chair, feet in the seat. He was leaning forward, posed like a cross between a gargoyle and Rodin's Thinker. Behind him there was a large picture window, threaded with cracks. A dune of rusty sand piled against the outside, obscuring more than half the view. The plain beyond was lit by a rare, amber sky. The light from the window tinged everything in the room with a faintly sulfurous hue.

"Hello," McDwyer said, not looking up.

"Hello, Mr. McDwyer," Bester said. "I've come to help you."

He couldn't see the man's face behind the respirator, but a shim of glee drifted up from him, though it had an odd quality to it. Like honey with an aftertaste of anise. McDwyer's mind imago resembled a blob of caviar, a thousand little black bubbles, shifting this way and that.

McDwyer slowly shook a finger at him. "You know that pi doesn't resolve. But neither does two plus two. It's just an approximation, you know?"

"No, I don't. Help me understand."

A muffled laugh. "You just want me to go back. But I'm already back, that's what you don't know. They're everywhere. Scratch the fabric of space, and you find their eyes, looking at you. You know? So why should I go back? I just wait, I wait, sometimes I forget, but then they return, because they never left-" He shook his head. "You want to see? You wanted me to see, and now you don't want to see? You still think pi resolves? You-"

"All right," Bester said. "Show me."

McDwyer clutched at his head. "Oh, sure-"

The caviar-mass of his mind suddenly jiggled, and each tiny egg split open- no, slitted open, like an eye. The whole thing had changed, become like the compound eye of an insect. Glyphs swarmed out. Madness swarmed out. Things like spiders, like black sea urchins, stinging things, poison ampoules. But that was only the beginning - it was the tide of feeling that hurt so, brought emotions like the scent of formaldehyde, the taste of rotted meat, the sound of a drill in a tooth. Passions that felt like skin tearing between fingers, a paper cut on an eyeball, the almost-pleasurable rupturing of a pus-filled wound. Desires that meant nothing, could mean nothing, to a warm-blooded mammal.

All of that hit Bester in under a second, and he snapped his guards up. Nonetheless, he was stunned by the intensity of the wave.

"No!" McDwyer screamed. His head jerked up. "You said you wanted to see!" He slammed the glyphs back at Bester, who countered, though he was still weakened by the experience of McDwyer's insanity.

Things from McDwyer's nightmare attacked him; chitinous stings bristling with hairs, and each hair an eye.

The clacking mandibles of a spider, or a mantis. Ropes of maggoty sinews. Bester fell back before the onslaught. Drawing McDwyer out, a bullfighter waving his cloak.

When the attack thinned, when it seemed overextended, Bester struck back, a hard spark to the backbrain, meant to disable.

But the madman's defenses were too powerful, too alien. It was as if McDwyer's brain had been imprinted with something not Human at all - it didn't react like a Human brain, or even like the Minbari prisoners Bester had scanned during the war.

McDwyer renewed his assault, and it was all snapping in like a bear trap. For the first time it occurred to Bester that he might lose this battle. After all, he was strong, but not the strongest by far - He couldn't get out the way he had come in - it was a sort of Chinese finger-puzzle - so he plunged forward and burrowed out. Blood vessels exploded like water balloons, and he had no idea whose they were.

Then he was outside, looking through his own eyes. McDwyer sighed and fell off of the chair. Thank you, he said, very faintly. Then massive hemorrhaging took him away.

Bester wasn't remotely interested in following. Whatever hell McDwyer was off to couldn't compare to the one he had just been in.

"Whoof," he muttered, sitting down in another chair-a hardwood that creaked dangerously. Someone came into the room behind him.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Quite all right. I-"

"Then what the hell is going on here?"

Bester turned to regard a tall, almost gigantic frame filling the doorway. Behind him there were at least ten men in black uniforms and hoods, not unlike Bester's own bloodhound units.

"We apprehended a rogue," Bester said, indicating the dead McDwyer. "I'm Alfred Bester, attached to the MarsDome precinct. And you are...?"

"Who I am is of no concern. You, Mr. Bester, are a long way from home, and this is Department Sigma business."

"Well, it wasn't specified as such on the distress signal we received from the hotel."

"Hotel? There is no hotel - this is a ruin! Who notified you that McDwyer was here?"

"One of the residents - one of the dead ones, I believe. He called MarsDome and they patched it to me. What's the problem?"

"One problem is that this man was carrying classified information. The other is that I have a deep suspicion that some of your bloodhounds laid false trails, to slow me and my people up."

Bester shrugged dispassionately. "Well. As you may or may not know - I'm sorry, I still haven't caught your name - I am cleared up to level A."

"Yes? Well-"

"Surely this matter couldn't require clearance above that? What's your clearance? And, again, your name?"

"Ah- I'm Joseph Talmedge. My clearance is B."

"So you see? There is no problem. I have higher clearance than you do."

"Sir- I'm afraid you'll still have to be debriefed."

"No doubt. I was prepared for that. I'll follow you to Syria Planum - don't worry, I know the way."

"As I told your man, I have the clearance. Now I want to exercise it."

"Yes, in theory you have the clearance, Mr. Bester," Aubrey Pierre-Louis replied, bushy grey eyebrows sinking lower and lower on his forehead. "But this is a singular situation, and in fact, you may not be cleared for this."

Bester crossed his left hand across his belly and fingered his chin with the right. "I don't see how that can be, Mr. Pierre-Louis. Maybe you can explain it to me. Perhaps this is a need-to-know situation? Well, then, I have a need to know."

"In case you were asleep when it happened, one of our better P12s just went completely berserk. He was driven berserk by something right here. A new drug? A new technique to push past P12? Was he a volunteer? I don't care. But to do my job, and to keep things like this from leaking out- to the provisional government, for instance- I. Need. To. Know. Keeping me in the dark is simply stupid, and is a greater threat to Corps security than telling me."

"Al-"

"Don't 'Al' me, Aubrey, unless you plan to do something here."

"Al, you have every right to be upset-"

"Wrong. I have every right to know what the hell is going on. I have the obligation to be upset. Now are you going to tell me, or do I keep going over your head?"

Here was where his bluff rested on a fine line. Bester had worked for almost two months, keeping careful watch on Sigma's movements, waiting for something like the McDwyer breakout, an event that would allow him to claim privilege. He had even cultivated Pierre-Louis as best he could, hanging out in the chief's favorite bar, swapping war stories.

If Brett was right, and this went much higher, he was likely to hit a stone wall. His security clearance might even be in jeopardy. He had called in half a dozen favors just to get where he was at this moment.

If Pierre-Louis didn't cave, it was over.

"Very well," the older man sighed. "I suppose you should see. But this- this is top secret, you have to understand that. This goes way beyond clearance."

"I understand," Bester said. "I will be the soul of discretion."

"My God," Bester said. "What is it?"

"We aren't sure. We think it's a ship."

It was more than he had ever imagined. Ship? No. It was a fallen angel. Just the sight of it ate at his backbrain, at the part of him that remembered the days before life crawled out of the oceans, when things like this ate his wormlike, notochord ancestors. This is what had bred spiders in Endra, who had never seen a spider. It was what had driven McDwyer as mad as the hatter in Alice.

A scene flashed behind his retinas, so vivid and disorienting that he nearly stumbled. Suddenly he was six years old, facing Director Vacit. Every detail was as clear as a photograph. *Watch for the Shadows*, Vacit had said. *Watch and beware.*

It chilled him to the marrow.

The ship was huge, even only half excavated. Its skin was black, but all shades of black - not the absence of color, but the maiming of it. It moved, it shifted. And he could feel it.

"Is it alive?"

"Yes. It is. Or we think it is, anyway."

"Sentient?"

"That's what we were trying to find out when McDwyer touched it. You saw the answer we got."

"Yes, I suppose I did. How long has it been here?"

"We don't know. It was buried, not covered by natural deposition. We think maybe two thousand years, maybe more."

"It's beautiful, in a way."

"It gives me the shakes," Pierre-Louis confessed.

"Beauty should shake you up, Aubrey. It should shake you to the core."

"Very nice philosophy, but if that's the case, I'll stick to the plain and ugly, thank you. I can do without the nightmares."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Study it. See what makes it tick. It's clearly more advanced than anything any of the races we know possesses, with the possible exception of the Vorlons - and there, of course, we only go on rumor."

"And the Corps has it. Wonderful. Does EarthGov know?"

"Al- you really don't want to know who knows about this thing. You really, really don't."

"I'll take your word for it. But- can we work a little more closely from now on? You're the administrator. It's your job to provide the Corps with a future. It's my job to catch rogues, solve crimes, keep the peace. When those things overlap, as they did today, we should talk. Otherwise, I'll try to stay out of your hair. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Bester looked back at the ship. "I think I'm starting to agree with you about this thing. Why don't I buy you a drink?"

"Not a bad suggestion."

Bester left with the feeling that he had approached the edge of a very deep canyon, teetered on the rim, and then withdrawn safely.

It was time to lay low. Brett had voiced suspicions, about a mundane-backed hegemony in the upper ranks of the Corps. Even if they were unfounded - and Bester didn't think they were - it still wasn't wise to attract undue attention. Especially now. Because it was clear that Brett was right about at least one thing: big happenings were afoot, very big. Bester was determined to be a part of them, but he would have to be patient.

A few days will tell if I've gone too far, he thought. Mentally, he crossed his fingers.

chapter 3

Three days later, he got a call from assistant director Menendez. There were four assistant directors - Bester usually dealt with Kaufman, in the Mars office. Menendez he had never spoken to. On the vid he looked awfully young, almost baby-faced.

"Beta Colony?" Bester repeated, politely.

"Yes. It's priority one."

Bester considered Menendez for a moment. "I can have my Black Omega Squadron ready in four hours."

"Negative on that. Black Omega Squadron is needed on Mars."

Bester blinked. "She's my squadron. I fought for years to form her."

"Mr. Bester, whatever role you had in the formation of the Black Omegas, they - like you - belong to the Corps."

"Of course. But I command them. Are you relieving me of that command?"

"No, Mr. Bester, I am not. These are delicate times. We need you at Beta Colony and we need your squadron near Mars, on standby."

"You're expecting trouble."

"Maybe."

"Very well, then. How do I get to Beta Colony?"

"The way anyone else would, Mr. Bester. We bought you tickets on a commercial transport."

"And how many of my bloodhounds may I take?"

"What's needed on Beta is an investigator, not a whole unit. Beta is not particularly - friendly - to the Corps, so we have to do this without much intrusion. The local office will supply you all the people you need."

"With all respect, I work better with my own people."

"I'm sure you do. But it's not going to happen."

Bester shrugged. "If that's the way the ball bounces... When do I leave?"

"You have two hours."

All the way to his quarters, and even while packing, he fought through his outrage, looking for perspective.

They wanted him alone, far from his troops. If they had just sent him to Beta Colony, he would have considered it a distraction, something to get him away from Mars - and the black ship - for a time. But this - well, he must have miscalculated. He must have gone too far, after all.

He regretted, for a moment, putting off the appointment he had been planning. True, he had wanted to find precisely the right time, but...

No matter. He would survive this. The time would come, soon enough. It was inevitable; it was destiny.

There were a lot of things Al Bester might not have - true love, deep friendships, a beatific relationship with a happy cosmos - but if there was one thing he did have, it was a destiny.

"Well, place-names go through fashions," Bester was explaining to his fellow passenger. He was a man in early middle age, who identified himself as an insurance broker. "You have to consider the historical context."

"What historical context could there be for there to be fourteen 'Beta' colonies in Human space?"

"Well, you're from North America, right?"

"The United States," he said, a trace of pride in his voice.

Ah. A romantic, potentially even a national separatist, Bester thought, and filed it away for future reference.

You never knew, with mundanes.

"Well, think. Almost every state in the United States has at least one 'Columbus' or 'Columbia,' one 'Franklin,' one 'Madison'-usually more than one. These names crop up everywhere because they were a part of the collective unconscious of the European-American settlers."

"Yeah, but those places are named after people."

"Well, consider the Springdales, the Oaklands, the Lake Cities."

"Still, Beta...?"

"I think it's two things. First, we keep coming back to Greek. It symbolizes certain things to us - democracy, learning, literature, education. Never mind that Greeks were, for the most part, very undemocratic and not particularly literary or advanced compared to, say, China at the time - the symbolism remains. Oh, Greek went out of fashion - Sanskrit and Mandarin were all the rage in the last century. At the beginning of this century, Centauri had a brief heyday. Then, yet another Greek revival - I think in response to the fear of having our culture swamped by alien influences. Greek, Latin, Sumerian - all became very popular again. I'll bet you had at least one grandfather named Achilles and one named Gilgamesh."

The fellow nodded.

"The funny thing is," Bester continued, "the Centauri picked up on that, too. If you'll remember, at the time they were trying to convince us we were a lost Centauri colony. They started using Greek and Roman names and their derivatives to translate the names of their planets and star systems. Oddly enough, a bunch of their colony worlds ended up being 'Beta' this and that, because in their settlement system there could be only one 'Alpha'- Centauri Prime.

"That's the second thing, of course. By the time we started setting up colonies, 'Beta' had almost become a slang word for 'less important colony.' It's not systematic - look at any star system with more than one colony. Odds are you won't see an Alpha, Gamma, or Delta colony - but it's even odds that at least a city somewhere will be named 'Beta.' "

"That makes sense, I guess. Do you teach geography or something in the Psi Corps?" His eye was drawn, as it had been several times, to Bester's badge.

"Oh, no. But the last guy I sat next to on a ship was a geography professor."

"And he told you all of this?"

Bester forced his face into a puzzled frown. "No. Why would you ask that?"

He loved the expression on their faces when he said things like that. Some men liked fine cigars, some liked French brandy. He preferred the man next to him, trying to laugh it off as a joke - and in the end, failing. In point of fact, he had read everything he just said in a standard tourist guide, but he wasn't going to tell his seat-mate that.

An hour later he set foot for the first time on Beta Colony. This particular Beta was one in a system of only two colonies - unless you counted the minor settlements in the metal-rich asteroids. In that case, there were four.

The system's largest colony was on the fourth planet from the star, a world called simply Sheffer 4 on the star charts, and Aztlan by its inhabitants.

Beta was the third planet. Smaller than Aztlan, it still boasted almost half as many settlers as Mars - one million, two-thirds of them located in the polar industrial city, also called Beta. Only the poles were cool enough to be habitable, but that was greatly outweighed by the fact that the atmosphere had free oxygen in quantities sufficient to sustain Human life, and plenty of nitrogen, necessary for food crops.

Bester found Beta City to be quite impressive. The buildings had a massive, muscular feel - after all, they had to cope with the same gravity that was nagging Bester at the moment, nearly one and a quarter times that of Earth. A hot, blustery wind combed through them - which after his years in the thin, frigid air of Mars, proved more than welcome. The wind smelled something like ginger.

Around the city, what looked like tall-grass prairie flowed off to mountains - distant except to the north, where a long row of them scraped at the sky. The sun looked almost exactly like the sun of Earth, and the sky was a velvety blue.

"Mr. Bester, I presume?"

He turned his attention from the view to a really quite attractive young woman - early twenties - with coppery hair cut in a Dutch bob.

"Yes?"

"I'm Lyta Alexander. I'll be your assistant while you're here."

"Well, a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Alexander. How long have you worked here?"

She blushed. "Actually, only a few weeks. I came here to intern with MetaPol - not as a cop, because I'm only a P5 - but as a profiler. Unfortunately, the department is shorthanded, so they couldn't spare a real cop - or someone with more experience on the planet - to assist you."

"Why are they so shorthanded?"

"We've lost two men in the last two weeks, and their replacements haven't arrived."

"Lost?"

"Killed. By the Blinder."

"Blinder?"

"It's what we call the serial killer."

"Ah. My quarry."

"Yes, sir."

"Well. Let's get started, then."

"Let me get your bag."

"No. I've got it. Though it seems like it weighs twice what it did when I left home. I must learn to resist those duty-free shops."

"Well," Lyta began, tentatively. "You're aware the gravity is a little higher here..."

"It was a joke, Lyta. May I call you Lyta?"

"Oh. I- I'm sorry, yes, please do."

"For some reason, no one ever expects me to have a sense of humor," he mused. He noticed her smile hesitantly. "Alexander," he mused. "Any relation to Natasha Alexander?"

"My grandmother," she said, a bit surprised.

"I met her once."

Lyta smiled. "When I was a little girl, she used to bring me presents - well, they came through the Grins, of course, but I always knew they really came from Grandma."

"You were in Cadre Prime?"

She nodded affirmatively. "My mother was the only woman in our line in the last four generations who wasn't. She was only a P2, so she was in the Basement at first, but when she was still pretty young, Grandma arranged for some relatives to raise her outside Teetown. She was monitored, of course, but never actively attached to the Corps."

"Four generations?"

"Six, really - all the way back to Desa Alexander, back before it was even Psi Corps."

"Yes, I guessed you were from one of the old families, since you kept your mitochondrial name. I was a Cadre Primer myself, you know."

She nodded again, and they went a few steps in silence.

"Lyta, I'm a little slight on the details of this case. The killer isn't a telepath?"

"No, sir- we don't think so."

"So I was brought in because he killed Psi Cops?"

"Oh, no, sir. That's only happened in the past two days. He's killed four other telepaths. He only kills telepaths."

"I see. Well, I suppose I should get briefed on the forensics data, then have a look at the crime scenes-"

"Actually, sir, I have some bad news. We found another body just a few hours before you arrived. Looks like the same killer. Our station chief is out of town, and local law enforcement has been wanting to go in, but we've been trying to hold it for you. I don't know how much longer we can."

"Oh. By all means, then- let's go."

They took a surface car, something Bester hadn't done in quite some time. They kept the top down, driving through the hot wind past rows of single-story buildings made of cut and dressed volcanic stone, with pitched metal roofs. Most of the houses had gardens. This was a roomy city, lots of space. Wide streets. Not like Mars - or many places on Earth, for that matter.

They stopped at a house that- in most cities on Earth - would have been a mansion. On Mars it would have been quite simply unthinkable. Here it seemed to be better than modest.

The street out front was swarming with police cars, reporters, gawkers.

"Oh, no," Lyta said. "It looks like they've gone in." She opened her door, jumped out, and came around to let him out, but he was already out, staring at the house.

They pushed quickly through the crowd and up to the police line. A young fellow was manning it - his uniform was unfamiliar in detail, but obvious in type. He was a deputy or the equivalent. He looked at Bester and Lyta and clearly didn't like what he saw, but he let them in, if reluctantly.

"It's time to clear up a few things," Bester confided to Lyta.

There was blood - and a body - but for the moment he ignored them, and instead picked the man who looked to be in charge and walked up to him.

"You're the detective in charge?" he asked.

The fellow looked away from his notepad and down at Bester. Physically, he gave Bester the impression of a snowman made of ground beef, with two olives for eyes. Bester had once seen such an atrocity at the Museum of Modern Art on Mars. "Yer a regular mind reader," the detective said, eyeing Bester's badge and grinning broadly at his own joke.

"That's terribly funny," Bester said. "And I do mean terribly. My name is Alfred Bester. You are aware that this investigation has come under Psi Corps jurisdiction?"

"I know that the Blinder killings are under Psi Corps jurisdiction, yeah. I had no way of knowing this was one of his without investigating, though. Do I need to draw you a picture, or can you just suck it right out of me?"

Bester frowned slightly and turned to survey the crime scene. "She was a registered telepath?"

"Yep. Business esper, pretty well-to-do. They all are."

"What?"

"Your business telepaths. All pretty well-to-do."

"Ah. You don't care for telepaths, Mr..."

"Stesco. Captain Stesco. No, I can't say that I do. Most of us immigrated here to get away from 'em, and-"

"Really? You came all this way just to get away from telepaths? And everyone else on the planet did, too?"

He kept talking because he was looking at the body. He kept talking to stay detached.

The most obvious thing about the dead woman was that her eyes were gone.

"Not just telepaths," Stesco modified. "There were lots of things we didn't like about Earth. Hey, don't get me wrong- I'm no bigot. I've got nothing against any of you personally. It's just- I just think if a fellow wants to live someplace with no fear his mind is gonna be picked over by somebody, he ought to have the right."

"Separate but equal, Mr. Stesco?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Why don't you have local laws against the use of business telepaths?"

"We did, until a few years ago."

"So who let the snake into your little garden?"

"A coalition of businesses. Recent immigrants. Beta's changed a lot in the past few years, not for the better. There's your proof." He waved at the corpse.

"I don't see what your complaint is," Bester said. "Up until now, you people could only daydream about killing telepaths. Now you have real, live ones to play out your fantasies with."

"Hey, like I said-"

"You aren't a bigot. Yes, I heard you the first time. How many legs does a dog have, if you count the tail as a leg?"

"Huh?"

"How many legs does a dog have if you count the tail as a leg?"

"I- five, I guess."

"Wrong. Four. Because a tail is not a leg, even if you say it is."

"Hilarious." Stesco looked as if he thought it was anything but.

"Thank you. What are these marks on her arms?"

"When we found her she was tied up and hanging from the ceiling. We cut her down."

"You what?"

"Wasn't decent, a naked woman hanging up like that. The reporters might have taken her picture."

"What a charming little world this is," Bester remarked acidly. "You didn't sew her mouth up for some reason, did you?"

"No, she was like that when we found her."

"Like this - but hanging from the ceiling."

"I told you."

"Could you clear the rest of your men out? I need to talk to you alone."

"Why alone?"

"Detective, I'm in charge here now, whether you like it or not. You know it. And I assure you, it's best that this next conversation take place without your men around."

Stesco frowned, but went over to talk to his men. Bester continued his inspection of the body.

"Were the rest like this?" he asked Lyta, who stood to one side, looking very pale.

"Yes. Eyes gouged out, mouth sewn shut. He poured something in their ears, a kind of fast-hardening epoxy."

"What was the actual cause of death?"

"Suffocation. We think that after- sealing up -everything, he pinched their noses shut."

"Yes. Maybe he did it many times? Tortured them? Brought them nearly to death and then let them breathe, repeated the process? Deprived them of their senses so they could see only through his eyes, hear only through his ears as he was killing them?"

"Maybe. The MO was a little different on the two cops."

"We'll get to that in a moment," Bester said. The door was closing, Stesco returning.

"Now what?" Stesco said. "You gonna chew me out for stepping on your investigation? You could've done that in front of my men."

"Yes, I could have," Bester replied, flashing Stesco a little smile. "But I couldn't have done this."

He hit Stesco with a fugue to hold him and then a midrange scan. The big man's knees went rubbery and he swayed there, mouth twitching, drool running down his chin. When Bester was finished, he murmured,

"And now, let's make sure you don't remember our little moment together-" and he made a few more adjustments. A moment later, Stesco's glazed eyes suddenly began seeing again.

"Whoa!" he grumbled. "Got dizzy for a second there."

"I advise you to watch your blood pressure, Captain Stesco," Bester said, helpfully. "You don't seem like a well man."

"Well, what didja want, anyway?"

"Just to thank you for your time and to assure you that I'll report whatever I come up with directly to you."

"Oh. Well, thanks. Guess I'll be goin' now."

"I guess you will."

After he was gone, he turned to Lyta and found her staring at him in undisguised horror.

"You have something to say, Lyta?"

"I- sir, that was illegal."

"Yes, well- I was tired of talking to him. The man had a foul mouth. A foul mind, too, but a scan is over with more quickly than a long conversation. Besides, it was a fairly cursory scan, with minimal damage - and he won't remember a thing."

"But sir-"

"Look at her, Lyta." He pointed toward the corpse. "Look at her. There she lies, dead and mutilated. She's not the first, but by God we can make sure she's the last. If I have to scan a few small-minded bigots to speed up the process of catching this monster and protecting our people, I'm not above it."

Her face struggled to find an expression and settled for a dead neutral.

He sighed. "Lyta, when I was younger I believed in doing things by the book. I still do, when it makes sense. But in cases like these, I've become more interested in justice than in procedure. Sue me."

"Yes, sir," she said, though it was clear to him she still did not agree. "Did you learn anything from him?"

"As it happens- yes. He isn't the killer, and he doesn't know who the killer was. He doesn't want to know who the killer was - he thinks our man is doing a fine job, ridding his planet of teeps. Which is perhaps why he hasn't mentioned to the Corps what he does know."

"Which is?"

"There was another killing a week ago that he thinks has something to do with this. A mundane named Jack Finn."

"It's not in the record."

"I didn't think it would be. You have a summary report of all of this for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll want that first. I also want you to look up anything you can find on Jack Finn." He looked around.

"What about the security system?"

"Our killer has some way around it. We almost caught him, the first time, because a call did go out. Response time was slow, probably because the house belonged to a telepath. Still, we think the patrol only missed the killer by a few minutes."

"That only happened the first time? Since then there have been no calls?"

"That's correct, sir. Umm, excuse me, sir- my tel-phone-" She unfolded the small device. "Alexander here. Oh, yes- we're at the crime scene. Yes, of course, Ms. Mallory, I'll ask." She lowered the phone. "Our station chief is back and would like to see you at your earliest convenience."

"Mallory? Would that be Anne Mallory?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her we'll be right there."

Lyta did so, then closed the phone. "You know Ms. Mallory?"

"Sure, we worked together some back on Earth. A good cop."

"Would you like to put your things in your room, before going to the office?"

"No, plenty of time for that. I don't want to keep Anne waiting."

"Al. So pleased to see you again."

"You haven't changed since we served together under de Vries, Anne. I had no idea you were out here on Beta."

"Oh, I'm here, all right, I'm sorry I couldn't join you at the crime scene - I was on the other side of the pole zone, checking out some leads to another case when we got the word. I knew your ship was getting in about that time, and I knew you were competent to handle it. Any trouble?"

"The scene had been disturbed."

"By Captain Stesco?" Her face colored. "I left definite orders-"

"Captain Stesco seems to have some problems with authority - when the authority is a teep. Don't worry - I think next time you'll find him a bit more-pliant."

Anne Mallory's narrow face took on a sudden worried caste. "Al, you didn't. I know your reputation-"

"And so does the Corps. They wouldn't have sent me, Anne, if they didn't think my methods were needed here." At least he hoped that was the case.

"Al, this isn't Mars, that's all I'm saying. The locals are sometimes- narrow-minded."

"I'm used to that. Don't worry. I'll be discreet. But I'll find the killer. You don't kill seven of my people and just walk away. How many officers can you give me?"

"For walking around? Just Ms. Alexander, I'm afraid. When you really need them, three." She leaned forward and clasped her hands. "I was wondering - why didn't you bring your bloodhound units?"

Bester gave her a wan smile. "You'll have to ask the central office. Personally, I think they believe I've become lazy - that I can't work a case without my minions anymore. I'll be happy to prove them wrong." He didn't tell her his deeper suspicion - that there were probably those in the Corps who would be just as happy if he didn't return from this assignment.

"Tell me about your cops - Ran and Farmer? Ms. Alexander said the MO was different."

"A little. Sort of a quickie version. Their eyes were scooped out, but he just taped and glued their mouths shut."

"I've looked at the reports on the other victims. At first I thought we had something fairly typical, here - the victim forced to look through the eyes of the killer as the deed is done. I worked a case in Buenos Aires like that. Every mundane psycho who comes up with it thinks he's the Thomas Edison of serial killings, when in fact it's so obvious..." He trailed off. "But I didn't notice the rest of it right away. All of the other body orifices were sewn up, too - the cops?"

"Epoxyed," she corrected, with a slight quiver in her voice.

"So it's something more ritualistic. Something to do with the soul, the life force. Our killer has religious beliefs."

"Are you familiar with the religion?" she asked.

"No. Nor do I intend to become familiar with it."

"What do you mean?"

"One of my first lessons as an investigator was to learn to see things from my quarry's point of view. If you can understand your enemy, you can defeat him. But Anne- I'm getting old. I don't want to understand this sick son of a bitch. I just want to find him and punish him. Is that all right with you?"

She looked at him for a long moment, then nodded, grimly, a new determination settling upon her features.

"Good," he said. "And now, I think I'll go put my bags in my room and freshen up a bit. Then I'll want to go over the evidence in more detail. Do you have a list of suspects, witnesses?"

"No."

"No? That was a big house. Didn't she have any servants?"

"She had a houseboy, a maid, and a cook. None of them remember anything useful."

"Did you scan them?"

"No. None of them would agree to it. As you may have gathered, the locals are squeamish about telepathy."

"I want to see them anyway. You can promise them they won't be scanned, if you wish."

"Will I be lying?"

"Anne. What you don't know for sure, you can't lie about."

"Good enough."

"I'm glad to see you coming around. I think I'll go to my room now. See you later."

Lyta was waiting for him outside the office. "You're ready to go to the hotel?"

"Hotel?"

"Unless you'd like to spend the night in a holding cell. The local office doesn't have dorms - everyone lives in private homes."

"And you, Ms. Alexander?"

"I'm still in the hotel. Since I'm an intern, I'm allowed to comp it."

"I see. Well, the hotel it is."

Bester meant to drop his bags and get straight to work, but the room seduced him. The high gravity was already wearing out its welcome with his knees and lower back. The bed was huge - bigger, almost, than his entire bedroom on Mars.

But it was the tub that brought him to at least a conditional surrender. It was enormous, with massage jets.

The guidebooks all said off-worlders from lower-gravity worlds should bathe often, to give their skeletons and muscles a break.

He started running the water, then went to a terminal and used his access code to call up and execute a notepad copy of the report Alexander had given him. He took his usual security precautions and then, with the pad in his good right hand, he sank thankfully into the buoyant waters.

With the exception of the two cops, all of the victims had been business teeps. Some good basic work had been done already, including a list of clients for each victim going back several months, cross-referenced in several ways - by company, association, type of transaction. Several firms showed up more than once, but that was to be expected in a community of this size. Interestingly, all of the victims had been freelancers, rather than being attached to a particular corporation.

He looked over the list carefully. The victims had been chosen because they were telepaths, and business teeps were the easiest to come by. They made their livings by being accessible. Most likely,

the killer had called them, set up an appointment, met them, killed them.

But in the lists of meetings, phone calls, and correspondence, no common denominator had turned up that checked out.

So try it from another angle. The bodies of the business teeps were all found in their homes. A servant?

Some sort of maintenance worker?

He closed his eyes. He was tired, more tired than he had any right to be. The water felt very, very good.

No. He couldn't rest yet. Miles to go and all of that. He opened his eyes and focused on the report again. The letters seemed to swim. Too tired. He closed them again, and let his mind flow out. It had been a long time, he realized, since he had listened to a new city. He had never listened to one in another star system. For a moment, he felt an almost youthful excitement at the idea.

And yet there was nothing.

He concentrated, and more nothing.

Something in the stone the building was made of? In the atmosphere? In the solar wind? And yet he had had no trouble earlier, when he scanned Stesco. Indeed, he had been in fine form.

His head bumped back into the edge of the tub, and he suddenly realized how slow and stupid he felt. Too slow, too stupid to be explained by fatigue.

With a snarl that came out only as a snort, he started trying to lever himself out of the tub. He was only halfway out when the man in the black hood stepped into the bathroom.

chapter 4

Bester sat back down in the tub. "I don't suppose you came to scrub my back?" he asked.

The black-hooded figure didn't answer, but he did raise a wicked-looking weapon, rather unhurriedly. Bester thought it might be a Narn hunting pistol.

Bester raised his own PPG out of the tub in something more of a hurry. His first shot missed, as the water dripping from the muzzle of the weapon vaporized and distorted the path of the phased plasma. His second shot was dead on target and caught the black-clad man in the right shoulder. Something splattered against the tile behind him - presumably something fired from the pistol - and he quickly scrambled out of the tub, for fear that the ampoule had contained enough nerve toxin to affect him even though it had diffused in the water.

He kept his own weapon level.

The hooded man moaned, leaning against the door frame and obviously in pain. There was a good bit of blood.

"Yes, I know I'm a bit old to keep toys in the tub." Bester held up the PPG. "My version of a rubber ducky, I suppose. Push that weapon toward me, will you?"

The fellow managed to, though it wasn't easy for him. He sank to the floor. "Don't kill me, " he said.

"Hurt a poor, disturbed serial killer like you?" Bester said, taking a robe down from its hook on the wall and slipping into it. "Now why should I do that? You want to pull that mask off, or shall I shoot it off?"

Struggling into a sitting position against the commode, the would-be assassin managed to pull the hood off with his left hand. The face beneath was unfamiliar, the green eyes startling jewels in a nearly ebony setting.

"You got something into my bathwater? Something like sleepers? I'm guessing that because I'm feeling better already." It was a lie, but at least he wasn't feeling any woozier. When he tried to scan the fellow, though, all he got was a frustrating sensation of needing to sneeze, almost being able to sneeze - but not quite sneezing.

"Yes. In your water. May I tie a tourniquet?"

"Not just yet. You aren't the serial killer, are you? I'm guessing your bag has all of the right tools - needle and thread, epoxy, rope - but you aren't him. You came here to kill me, and with equipment I

seriously doubt anyone outside of Psi Corps could get their hands on."

The man just looked at him sullenly.

"Okay. Get up. We're going in the next room, where we can have a civilized conversation." He motioned with the weapon.

"I've lost too much blood. I can't stand up."

"Shall I cauterize that wound for you? Sometimes, at the medium setting, if you hit just right-"

The fellow shook his head and climbed reluctantly to his feet. At Bester's direction he stumbled out onto the balcony and into a chair.

"There," Bester said. "This is tiled, too, so the maid won't have a lot of trouble cleaning it up. Now, why did you try to kill me? No, let me make it simpler for you. Who sent you to kill me?"

"Scan me and find out."

"I will, in due time. What did you hit me with? Sleepers don't work that quickly, certainly not absorbed through the skin. Something new Department Sigma is developing?"

"You're letting me bleed to death. Let me tie this off and I'll tell you everything."

"Very well. I'll call for some help." He backed into the room and picked up the tel-phone that lay on the counter.

The assassin bolted out of his chair. Bester dropped the muzzle of the PPG, to aim at his knees- Too late. He had misjudged the man. Helped him, even.

Disgusted, he walked back to the balcony. Here, six stories was more like eight or nine on Earth. The broken body was already starting to draw a crowd. He sighed, punched a code into the phone. After an instant, a female voice answered from the other end.

"Lyta, could you come up to my room? I need you."

From the tone of her affirmative answer, he could guess at least one thing she might be imagining. He didn't have the energy to care.

They had coffee the next morning in the hotel restaurant, and a local breakfast specialty called poksh, a sort of heavy, steamed, sweet bread.

"But how can you be sure, sir, that this Koste wasn't the killer we're after?"

"First off because that's not his real name," Bester said. The coffee was heavy and pungent, and left a complex aftertaste. Not exactly like any he'd had on Earth or Mars. He wondered if it was one of Beta Colony's exports - if it wasn't, it ought to be. "I tracked him through two aliases before I lost him. No, he was a professional assassin, and other than wishing to make it look as if I was killed by our local hero, I'm afraid he brings us no closer to resolving the case."

"I see. But who would want to kill you, sir?"

Bester laughed, his first genuine laugh in a long time. "You don't know me very well, Lyta." He took another sip of the coffee and a bite of the poksh. He found the bread less inspiring than the coffee.

"What did you find out about Jack Finn?"

"Well, only that he disappeared a week ago, about the same time the Psi Cops were killed. They found his body two days ago, in a field about twenty klicks from town. I don't see a connection. He wasn't a teep, and he wasn't killed like the others. He was stabbed in the heart, very simple."

"Huh. Yet there was a clear connection in Stesco's mind."

"Maybe it was simple association."

"Maybe. What did Finn do?"

"He was the chief information ecologist for the city. That is, he monitored the way flows of information - in computer networks, id-phone and link calls, and so on - related to power flow in the city."

"That's interesting. What else do we know about him?"

"He was an Adamist."

That got Bester's attention. "In other words, he was a Teep-hater."

"Yes, sir. But about half the population of Beta has Adamist leanings."

"Yes, what a surprise. But still- think about it. Were he still alive, Finn would be a prime suspect."

"How do you figure that?"

"All of the security systems in the victims' houses were linked to a citywide system. Finn was in a position to put kinks in that, if he wanted to. To block calls at the metropolitan level long enough to gain entry."

"Maybe. I think it would be more complicated than that, if you don't mind my saying so. He would still need the particular code, retina and fingerprint information, and so on for each house in question."

"It's worth checking into."

"You think he might have been working with the killer?"

"That would be highly unusual - if our killer is really a serial killer. They usually work alone." He ticked his finger against the table. "Our good friend Captain Stesco thinks Finn's murder is connected, doesn't he? But he doesn't know why he thinks that, or I would know. It's a gut instinct, on his part."

"Anyway," Lyta said, "even if Finn was working with our killer, he couldn't have been in on the last murder. He was already dead."

"True. Ah, well. Today I want to do a series of interviews. Domestics, servicemen - anyone recorded as going near the houses in question. Also-I'm assuming the reports regarding the two cops are in a separate file?"

"Oh- yes, sir. I was going to give them to you when you finished the first. It's procedure here, I guess-"

"Right now what I want to know is this - where were the cops found?"

"In their homes, like the others."

"And yet, they were 'quickie' versions. Serial killers like to be in control, and their rituals put them in control. They tend to follow scripts to the letter. The cops must have been getting close to him - but if he went so far as to kill them in their homes, why not go all the way and do it right?"

"Maybe he felt pressed for time, having to do two in one night. Maybe he has some arbitrary deadline he wants to be done by."

"Good thinking. But the time of death of the other victims doesn't seem to confirm that - at least, I don't see any obvious pattern. Would you run an analysis? Just search for any patterning in the time of death. Meanwhile, I have some interviews to conduct."

Bester glanced at Lyta every now and then during the "questioning." For the most part she kept her eyes fixed firmly on her notepad, undoubtedly working on the time-of-death problems, but just as certainly trying to pretend she wasn't aware of what was happening.

Anne was better, and even helped him. A few years of isolation from the rest of the Corps might have made her a little timid, but she remembered who she was. She understood that minor damage to some mundanes wasn't important compared to saving the life of every teep the killer might have targeted.

He got quite a lot from the interviewees - images of delivery-men, repairmen, details about their own household duties. None seemed to have an explicit knowledge of the murders.

He scanned them, erased the knowledge of the scan, and sent them out. Let them worry about the blank places in their memories - he didn't have time to.

By the afternoon he was tired and frustrated, but Lyta managed to cheer him up.

"Sir, I think I have something."

"What's that, Lyta?"

"There is a regularity in the time of murder - it was so obvious - I don't know why it took me so long to get it."

"Well?"

"The murders are all on record in local time."

"Of course."

"The first murder happened around 10 p.m. The next happened a week later a little after 3 p.m. The next was two days later around 8 p.m."

"And you see a pattern in this?"

"Yes, sir. If you add a little wiggle-room for the forensic uncertainty, you get a factor of 2.5 - that is, for each day after the first murder, you add 2.5 hours."

He got it. "The local day is 2.5 hours shorter than Earth's day."

"Exactly, sir," she said, triumphantly. "He's killing them all between midnight and one o'clock in the morning - Earth time."

"The witching hour."

"Yes, sir."

"And he had to rush the cops - he had to do one, then drive to the house of the other and do him, too, before the clock struck one. Brilliant, Lyta. I'm impressed." He rubbed his chin. "So far that doesn't tell us any more about who our killer is. But that settles one problem - he didn't pick the cops as victims because they were teeps, but because they were cops. He followed his MO as best he could - because they were teeps. I'll bet he imagines he feeds on their souls, or sends them to hell - something like that. That would explain why Finn was killed without the ritual - he wasn't a teep. Check the station log. See if either or both cops had paid a visit to Finn."

She nodded and worked at her terminal for a moment. "No, sir- but-" She looked up, excitedly. "But

they did visit the information ecology office. Something about the flow grids."

"That's it. That's it." He clapped his hands together. "Finn was helping him, all right- but they weren't accomplices."

"I- don't get it."

"Imagine you're Finn. You hate telepaths, despise them. Your father came all of the way to Beta Colony to keep you away from them, and you grew up in a religion that preaches their destruction. And now, suddenly, in your own lifetime, the colony council votes to start letting business teeps in. You watch them become wealthy while you, a public servant, have to scrape by on what you always have. You hate them, but you're too timid to do anything about it, so your frustration builds up.

"Then you read about the first killing. You understand this killer - oh, he's a little wacko, what with the way he kills them - but you don't really care. At least somebody is doing something. Only, when you go back over your information flow records for that night, you notice he almost got caught.

"Well, this is your job, this is what you do. You can help him. You can fix it so the security calls just disappear somewhere."

"But Finn was dead, for the last murder-"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. You were right about the difficulty of breaking individual systems - that's not what he did. After the first few murders, Finn figured out the same thing you did - that the time for the killings was always midnight, Earth time. He put the whole city on a timer. I'll guarantee you that when we check, we'll find that at twelve midnight, Earth time, the whole system does a little hiccup - goes off-line for just a second, then comes back on. In other words, Finn opened every house for a minute or so every night, knowing that only one person would take advantage of it - the killer."

"No one noticed this?"

"No reason to. It didn't shut down banks or businesses - their systems are smart enough to know when they aren't online. Most home systems aren't.

"On the other hand, our two cops did figure it out. So did Detective Stesco. He knows why Finn died."

"But he doesn't know who killed him. Or care." Her eyes widened. "We could set a trap!"

"We could, but it's risky. We might still not know the whole story. How did the killer find out he was being helped? How did he know to kill the cops after they went to the office of information ecology? That's the missing piece, Lyta. If we know that, I think we know who our killer is."

"Well, it could just be someone Finn knew. In the end, they might still have been in it together."

"I don't believe it. And how did Stesco know these killings were connected?"

"That part's simple. He knew Finn was covering for the killer."

"Which means that either Stesco is a better detective than I gave him credit for or-"

"-or Finn bragged. To someone. Somewhere."

Bester smiled slowly. "He was an Adamite. Who might an Adamite brag to?"

"Other Adamites - people he was certain wouldn't tell."

Bester nodded grimly. "I think it's time we see our friend Detective Stesco one more time."

chapter 5

Bester glanced at Stesco's quivering body. "He'll need to be cleaned up, this time," he said.

Lyta - ashen - nodded.

"He heard Finn bragging in a bar - I'll make you good odds that it's an Adamite bar and that the killer frequents it, too." He thought for just a moment, then flipped open his tel-phone and entered a code.

"Annie?" he said when the station chief picked up. "Why don't you let me buy you a drink?"

The bar fell silent like a scene from a bad western. The place didn't really look much like a saloon - it was a scrubbed-clean-looking place. There were perhaps thirty patrons. Some of them looked tough enough to play the cowpoke role - most did not. They all watched Bester and Lyta with less-than-friendly expressions.

"Stop me if you've heard this one," Bester said, loudly enough for everyone to hear him. "A telepath walks into a bar. He goes up to the bartender and says, 'I want to talk with each of your patrons, one at a time, in the back room, starting right now.' "

The bartender, a tall, slight man with a thin horseshoe of hair, frowned, gaped, then said, "Hey, you can't just come in here and- and..."

"Replied the very articulate barkeep," Bester continued. " 'But the place is surrounded,' the telepath - that would be me - responded. 'And if you don't do what I say, you're going to be very, very sorry. On the other hand, all I want to do is to ask each of you a few questions, out of earshot of the rest. It won't take long.' "

They commandeered the bartender's office. Bester and Anne started with the bartender. They didn't waste time asking him anything - they just scanned him. Then they started working through the patrons, taking turns to keep from wearing out.

Lyta, he noticed, seemed more and more uncomfortable. He began wondering, again, if she might be a problem. Sometimes it took a little nudge to get someone to see the big picture. A bit of personal involvement.

"Lyta," he said, as patron number six exited. "Would you scan the next informant, please? I need to catch my breath."

Her eyes widened, and for a moment he thought she would refuse, until Anne added, quietly, "Intern."

She did it, though Bester monitored the whole thing and helped her excise the memory.

"Next."

The next fellow was a middle-aged, paunchy fellow. He drew a PPG almost as soon as he entered.

"Well, hello," Bester said softly. "We were expecting you."

The man looked at the three of them with curious eyes. "I had to do it, you know," he said.

"Of course you did," Bester replied. "Nasty telepaths, always screwing around with your head."

"It's not like that," the fellow said. "I want you to understand, I loved them."

"Oh, I don't really care to understand that," Bester said. "I don't care about that in the least."

The killer turned and pointed the PPG at Bester's face. Bester seized his nervous system, felt him trying to depress the contact. Such a little motion, one that would close the gap between life and death.

For a second, he thought he might lose the contest - the man's thoughts were like greased roaches, disgusting, slippery, distracting. But he held firm, which was unfortunate, because that put him far enough in to see the life going out of their eyes, the victims, one by one, feel an almost crushing affection-

"This is really him," he said. "Lyta, if you could take his gun?"

Lyta gingerly removed the weapon. The hand stayed out, trembling.

"Anne, could you cuff him?"

As soon as that was done, Bester blacked him out.

"Let's take him to the station," Bester said. "I want to take my time."

"What do you mean?" Lyta asked. "Don't we turn him over to Earth security now?"

"Lyta, surely you understand that all of the evidence we have indicating this man's guilt - all of the evidence leading to us even finding him - was obtained illegally. He won't be going to trial." He patted the man on the head. "No, I have very special plans for him."

"What did you do?" Lyta asked, staring at the prisoner. He wore a straitjacket, and his eyes bulged.

His breath came in quick, animal pants - then he would go an entire minute without inhaling at all. Now and again his eyes would dart exactly like those of a person in REM sleep. A rubber ball was strapped into his mouth.

"If he could only escape his jacket," Bester said, "he would know a moment of perfect, absolute pleasure. He would tear out his own eyes, bite off his tongue, render himself by degrees into one of his own victims. It's the only thing he can imagine that might give him peace, allow him to escape from the things he sees - and he can never do it. He'll stay bound for the rest of his life or he'll die. It's that simple."

"It's horrible. And what you did to all of those people..."

"Five doctors go duck hunting," Bester said. "A general practitioner, a pediatrician, a psychiatrist, a surgeon, and a pathologist. A bird comes flying over. The GP is the first to see it - he raises his shotgun, but he doesn't shoot. He thinks, 'Maybe it's not really a duck. I should get a second opinion.' By then the bird is long gone. Another bird flies overhead, and this time the pediatrician gets it in his sights. But he thinks, 'I'm not sure if that's a duck - besides, it might have babies.' And so, on flies the bird. Next bird flies over, and this time the psychiatrist sees it first. Being pretty sharp-eyed, he knows for sure it's a duck, but he thinks, 'I know it's a duck- but does it know it's a duck?' and while he's worrying about that, the duck escapes. Now along comes a fourth bird, and this time it's the surgeon's turn. Boom! He shoots immediately. Down comes the bird. The surgeon turns to the pathologist and says, 'Go see if that was a duck, will you?' He smiled. "I'm the surgeon, Lyta. Sometimes you just have to call one in."

"You'll pardon me if I- if I don't think that's at all funny."

"Was what I did somehow more horrible than what he did? Worse than what he would have done again, if he had escaped, or the courts had released him? Now there's nothing to fear. The second he's unrestrained he'll start killing himself. You don't find it poetic?"

"No."

"I hear you've applied for a transfer to business."

"Yes."

"That might be just as well, if you don't have the stomach for police work."

"Mr. Bester, I just can't believe this is what police work is supposed to consist of."

"Lyta-" He sighed. "One day, sooner or later, you will understand. In a way, I'm sorry for that, because the truth won't set you free. It will circumscribe you. It will make you understand what has to be done, and that what has to be done isn't necessarily pleasant. I don't enjoy what I do. But I know that it's the right thing."

"You'll pardon me again, Mr. Bester, if I can't take your word for all that."

"Of course. It's been a pleasure working with you, Lyta. I trust we'll meet again."

"No offense, Mr. Bester, but I sincerely hope not."

He smiled indulgently, wondering if he ought to do something about her. There was little chance she could cause him any harm, unless...

He rubbed his jaw. What if she worked for Johnston and his cronies? He was more certain than ever that this whole situation had been a trap, set by the director. The assassination attempt had confirmed that, at least to him.

But what if the assassin were merely a feint, a distraction? What if the real attacker was Lyta Alexander, who might now level charges against him? Such charges would - under ordinary circumstances - be buried by the Corps.

Unless the Corps wanted to bury Al Bester instead.

The defiance in Lyta's face had become mingled with uncertainty. "Sir?" she said, questioning. He realized that he had been staring at her, silently, for quite some time.

"Nothing, Lyta," he said softly. "Just wondering if you are a shovel."

"I don't understand."

"No," he said, with some relief, "I really don't think you do. Good day."

He watched her go. He would ask Anne to arrange to have her things searched just in case she had been carrying any recording devices. He still had Anne to back him up.

Unless Anne...

No. Paranoia was healthy, but if he went too far in that direction, he would be as mad as the man in the cell, and Johnston would have won.

Let it go this time. Lyta would come around. She wasn't his enemy, she was one of his own, and someday she would realize it.

He peered back at the man in the cell, and he calmed down, like a troubled child recognizing its father.

Bester smiled, and the man started trying to scream around the rubber ball. Bester left him like that. He was humming a phrase from The Rites of Spring as he strolled up the corridor. Stravinsky.

chapter 6

Bester killed most of his velocity. The Black Omega Starfury retained a bit of spin, but he left it so he could watch stars wheel glacially by. Even though his sub-Doppler was watching for unexpected ships, he disliked the idea of not being able to see all approaches, of blind space at his back.

Besides, he liked the cold beauty of stars. He liked the irony, even, of that characterization, that the very furnaces of creation, in whose life and death all of the elements were born, consumed, reborn, should be, at a distance of poetry and literature, described as cold.

He studied his sub-Doppler radar. The other ship - the one expected - was still decelerating on a plume of newborn helium, but it was a bare exhalation now. Through the view port he could just make out the ship, moving into eclipse behind the asteroid. He saw no others.

He gave it time to reach its destination, then nudged his thrusters to life. His sleek mechanical steed responded, moving now along the curve of the potato-shaped chunk of planet-that-never-was, coasting up the kilometer or so of its length. At the end, a neat hole came into view, no more than thrice the diameter of his Starfury. He maneuvered into the hollow core of the stone.

Fifty years ago, just after the turn of the century, miners had claimed this rock, hollowed it out, refined its metals for Earth's Malthusian hordes. In the twenties, the bottom had dropped out of the domestic metals markets. The miners had cut their losses, broken down their machinery, and pulled out, leaving an empty shell of stone.

Another time, the old mine might have become the basis of a colony - many such hollowed-out asteroids had been sold to idealistic world-founders just a century earlier. But with jumpgate technology and much more hospitable colony worlds awaiting, this rock languished.

Until Bester had found it, on an old claims chart. Now it had uses once again.

He coasted along the axis until he reached the far end, where several narrow docks waited. The other ship - a battered, unmarked vessel - was already there. He hooked up to a cylinder that connected him to the air lock, making certain that there was pressure on the other side-and that that pressure consisted of an oxygen/helium mix. Then, still in his pressure suit, he moved from the ship into the inner lock. It was a small place, with ladders leading in three directions, each "down." He stepped into one and let the gentle tug of an eighth of one Earth gravity drag him down the rail.

He emerged like a slow-motion fireman into a cramped, unadorned room. The walls had been melted and smoothed. There were already three people in the room, all in shirtsleeves. Two nodded greetings to Bester.

The third-a man strapped into a chair with steel bands - merely looked at him with a sort of awful understanding. The only light in the room was a deliberately unpleasant actinic cone directed at the man in the chair.

Bester removed his helmet and, in an unhurried fashion, the rest of his pressure suit. Then he walked over to the prisoner.

"Hello, Mr. Jackson." He sat carefully on a small stool and rubbed his hands together. "I want to explain something to you. Come, look at me. Don't be afraid."

Jackson reluctantly dragged his gaze around to focus on Bester. He was a young man, only twenty-five. He had grey eyes and clean features. He looked a little like Brett had, when he had been that age, a Psi Corps poster boy.

"I don't want to do this," Bester said. "I truly don't. We are both telepaths, you and I. We are both Corps, and the Corps is our mother and our father. You're like my own child, in a deeper sense of the word than any mundane could possibly comprehend."

"The Corps is mother, the Corps is father," Jackson whispered.

"You see? We are the same. Frankly, if you were a mundane, we wouldn't be having this discussion. I would have already started doing unpleasant things to you. But you are one of mine, Timothy- may I call you Timothy? You are one of mine, and I don't want to hurt you. Even though you serve the other side, I still consider you one of mine.

"I don't want to hurt you, but if you make me, I will. There is something happening at Syria Planum. There is something happening in EarthGov. They are linked. Do you understand, Timothy? Something is happening to my telepaths, my people, my brothers and sisters and- children, and I don't believe it's anything good."

"Sir, I can't betray the Corps-"

Bester clucked his tongue. "Timothy, you're so young. I know you think you see things clearly now, know where your loyalties lie. I was born in the Corps, raised by the Corps from birth. I've never flinched from serving the Corps, even when great sacrifices were called for." He lifted his clenched hand. "Don't presume to tell me what betrays the Corps. Someone is delivering our people into the hands of someone - maybe something else. There are traitors in Psi Corps, and you have worked for them."

"Sir, the director-"

"Is a mundane, Timothy. He is a creature of the Senate, of wealthy mundanes." He inclined his head. "I don't have a lot of time. I am closely watched, and I will be missed. Timothy, I'm prepared to make another sacrifice today. It will hurt me terribly to harm you. I will carry it as a wound on my heart. But it will be one wound of many, and for the sake of my people, I will do it. That's why I risked coming to question you myself-because I cannot, will not ask anyone else to take this burden for me.

"I'm asking you - one last time - to help me."

"Sir-" His voice trembled. "Sir, I'm scared of them."

"Of course."

"They- they found something on Mars. A ship."

"I know about the ship, Timothy. I know one man touched it and died - I know a telepath touched it and went insane. I know that when it was excavated, another ship just like it came and took it away. But whose ship was it, Timothy? What race? And what do they have to do with my people?"

"Sir, I don't know. You have to believe that."

"I can't afford to believe it. You know that."

"They're all tied up with IPX, and EarthGov, like you said. I've seen EarthForce officers, and an aide to Vice President Clark-"

"The aliens," Bester softly reminded him.

"Interplanetary Expeditions tracked their ship out to the rim, a planet called Alpha Omega 3. They plan to send an archaeological team to investigate. That's all I know."

Bester nodded, sadly. "I believe you, son." Then he hit him with a hard scan.

Jackson hadn't lied, but the scan gave him more details. Faces of the IPX men, some of whom he recognized. The aide connected to Clark. More detail to help him flesh out the cabal, but not much more.

No, everything really useful had come from the boy's mouth, sad to say.

He studied the other two people in the room. To one, a tall man built of right angles, he said, "I want him reconstructed. Carefully. He still has two weeks of leave left - implant a nice memory of backpacking in the Tetons or somewhere. Rebuild his personality as much like the original as possible, but leave me a key to get in, okay? We may need him one day."

"I understand, Mr. Bester."

"I know you do, Mr. Ts'ai. I'll check on him in a few weeks." He put his hand on Ts'ai's shoulder. "Some of what we have to do is hard, but it's better than the alternative. Remember that."

"Of course." Ts'ai looked surprised that Bester had even bothered to say it. Stout fellow, Ts'ai.

"As for you, Ms. Donne - good work."

Donne shifted her competent, muscular physique and nodded briskly. "Thank you, sir."

"Is my - appointment - arranged?"

Something that was almost-but not quite-a smile ghosted Donne's tight lips. "Mr. Bester, I think you will be pleased."

"Good. I'm sure I will. Ms. Donne, another thing. I'd like some improvements in our intelligence inside IPX. And I need to know everything about this mission to the rim. We need someone on that ship."

"I'll see to it," Donne promised. "I'm headed back to Geneva as soon as we're done here."

"I know you will - and we are done here. Well. A pleasure seeing the both of you again. Hopefully next time we meet we can do something more pleasant - have dinner, perhaps."

Bester returned to his ship. Once free of the asteroid, he fired the thrusters in a single, brief burst, then waited until he had drifted for almost an hour before cutting in the main engines and pointing the Starfury's nose toward a certain transport that awaited his return.

"Did you have a nice flight?"

Bester looked up from the task of shucking off his pressure suit. He saw an earnest young man with close-cropped, blondish hair.

"Hello, Byron. Yes, very nice actually."

"Any sign of the transport?"

"None at all. It might be that we got a bad steer this time out. I wonder if we shouldn't backtrack to Ceres and start over. I'm not convinced that the captain there was entirely truthful with us."

"Mundanes never are, are they?"

"They can't help it," Bester said. "It's in their nature to fear us. What were you up to while I was out?"

"Reading one of the books you suggested. The one by that Rand person."

"Ah, yes. Did she convert you to objectivism?"

"Not exactly, but I can see what you mean. It is hard to deny that some people count more than others, in the grand scheme of things."

Bester shrugged the rest of the way out of his suit. "You have to put her in context. The discovery of the fact of evolution by Darwin created a new paradigm for thinking about old issues. It was fashionable and convenient to believe that those who were wealthy and successful were so because they were inherently superior." He changed the subject. "I'm starving. Shall we get a bite to eat?"

"Delighted," Byron replied.

A few moments later, over barely identifiable, microwaved lasagna - Bester hoped it was lasagna, in any case - Byron cleared his throat. "Do you think there was anything to it? Social Darwinism?"

"Survival of the fittest? It was a misunderstanding about how evolution worked, really. Looking back on it, it's all pretty silly - mundanes squabbling about who was more evolved. From our point of view, it's sort of like a couple of chimps arguing about which walks most upright. Social Darwinism was a pseudo-scientific rationale for laissez-faire capitalism, class domination, and racism. It was an ideology, not a scientific understanding.

"But there is such a thing as evolution, of course. For almost a million years, Homo sapiens remained virtually unchanged biologically-culture essentially arrested natural selection. Society protects its weak and stupid, helps them breed. Whatever the social Darwinists of the twentieth century thought of themselves, they were, in fact, the end product of a million years of unnatural and unplanned selection - every bit as much as the factory workers and welfare cheats they lorded themselves over.

"In a million years, the only biological improvement in the Human race has been us, Byron." He smiled.

"You see, I'm not a social Darwinist - just a Darwinist, plain and simple."

"It seems obvious," Byron said. "That's why normals fear us."

"Imagine what the apes who stayed in trees must have thought of those new creatures who went walking upright across the savannah. There has to be an impulse in a species that understands it's about to be replaced, a last desperate effort to rescue itself, to save its genes from oblivion."

"So why did you suggest I read Rand, if you think so little of the premises of her reasoning?"

"Why, to make you think, Byron. A Psi Cop has to know how to think, how to evaluate, how to judge. I picked you to train because I think you have more potential than I've seen in a long time - you can be a first-rate Psi Cop, if you want. Not a bloodhound - of course, we need good bloodhounds, don't get me wrong - but you could be a leader. You could go far."

"I- I appreciate the opportunity, sir. I hope I don't let you down."

"It's a pleasure, Byron. I'm sure you'll make me proud. I could wish for a son like you..."

He broke off, unsure why he had said that - he said things like that all the time, because making people feel special made them like you, and that made them useful.

Except- he saw what bothered him- he genuinely meant what he had just told the boy. He liked Byron. He enjoyed teaching him, shaping him. It was odd. It was the first such feeling he had experienced in a long time. He really wasn't sure whether he liked it, whether it was appropriate. Perhaps he should pass Byron along to someone else to tutor. Yes, that might be best, all in all. He would have to give it some more thought.

Meanwhile, they did have a rogue to catch, an important date to keep. The diversion to the asteroid had been just that, a diversion so he could conduct business secretly. While most of the transport crew were from his inner circle, others - Byron, for instance - still didn't need to know everything he did.

The man they were tracking was almost certainly headed for Io, in hopes of using the jumpgate there. He had to be stopped, but there was really no hurry. What he didn't know was that there was a tracking beacon on board his stolen vessel. There always had been. Telemetry placed his ship on a trajectory to Jupiter, and their transport could easily catch up.

And now, there was another matter that required his immediate attention. He needed to know everything, and more than everything, about the expedition that was headed toward the rim.

A few minutes in front of his AI terminal got him a screenful of data - Donne, efficient as ever, had already filtered a lot of the information.

The *Icarus*. Ostensibly an IPX ship. He scrolled through the assignments, saw a few familiar names. Chang.

Hidalgo- Bester smiled. Hidalgo owed him a few favors.

Another name caught his eye- Sheridan. Anna Sheridan. A relative, perhaps, of the famous war hero?

He would have to check on that, too.

They hadn't assigned a telepath yet - indeed, it would be some weeks before they started actually assembling the crew. Good. That gave him time. He could concentrate on the business at hand, on his coming appointment. All he had to do was plausibly draw this telepath hunt out for another two days, and everything would be in place.

chapter 7

Bester shook off the lingering nightmare that clung to his backbrain.

"Very good, Byron. That was well done."

"Thank you, sir." He beamed. "Though I suspect you let me win."

"I didn't let you win. I offered you an opening, true, but it's an opening that very few would have noticed. I don't give praise unless it's deserved - surely you know that about me by now."

"So they tell me. Can we go 'round again? I'm still having trouble with that middle series of blocks."

"Best rest up. In eight hours we'll catch up with the Blip, and I don't want you all worn out."

"Does that mean I'll be going along?" The eagerness in his voice was palpable.

"Yes, I think you're ready."

"I don't feel ready."

Bester considered for an instant. "There are ways of preparing, other than scan/block drills. How would you like to watch a movie?"

"A movie?"

"An old-style vid."

"Sounds fun, but-"

"There is a point to this, I assure you. It's called Rashomon . . ."

As he watched the black-and-white images play across the screen, Bester felt an odd sort of peace. He had wondered, once- when he was the "statue of the day" -how many different roles he would play in life. Now, as his years advanced, he had a sort of answer, but not one he had ever imagined as a

boy.

He had been the child, the prodigy of Cadre Prime. He had been the apprentice - had he failed Bey or had Bey failed him? It didn't matter; it had failed. He had been the young lover, another failure. He had been, for a short time, the husband. Yes, he was still married, but he was no longer husband in any real sense, hadn't been for decades. Father? Well, there was a man who counted him his father, but that was as far as it went.

He wasn't so foolish or self-damaging as to take all of the blame for those failures - Cadre Prime, Bey, Montoya, Alisha - all of them shared the failures, and there had been less visible hands at work in his life as well. Yet still, no matter how he rationalized it, he had passed briefly through roles but never lived them, never owned them, never been anything Human. Only the efficient hunter, the cop.

But now, imperceptibly, it seemed, he had grown into another role, one he might at last do well at. He had never quite been child, brother, son, lover, husband, or father. But the young people under his command - well, to put aside false modesty, many of them worshiped him. He had respect, and adulation. He had a chance with them, a chance to create a kind of legacy. When he looked at Byron, he saw him through the same eyes that Bey had seen him through, all those years ago.

Perhaps all of the failures, all of the trials, had brought him to this one moment, this one role he would finally fill perfectly - that of mentor.

A risk, perhaps - the risk of failing again - but it seemed worth it. It made him feel paradoxically young.

"Turning, sir," Ysidra Tapia said, from the pilot's station. The ship vibrated subtly, and the view changed.

Byron gave a soft gasp of admiration. Besides the three of them, the bridge was empty - it would be some time before a full complement was needed.

"Your first time this close to Jupiter?" Bester asked.

Byron nodded, his features betraying awe. "It's magnificent. What a bloody magnificent planet."

"Yes it is."

"I mean, I've seen vids, and holographs, but still-"

"Wait until you see it from Io," Bester said. "That close, there's nothing but Jupiter. You can lose yourself in it, watching a tiny whirl in a storm, and then realize that that little spiral could swallow all

of Earth. An eddy so insignificant that if you looked away, you could never find it again. It tends to create a certain- perspective."

Just then, Jupiter was the apparent size of a grapefruit. They were falling toward the king of gods at many clicks per second, but the scale of things dwarfed their speed. They ate up thousands of kilometers without any perceptible change in the gas giant.

Still, you couldn't escape the feeling that once Jupiter had you, it would never let you go. And Jupiter had them. It would take more thrust than was needed to escape the surface of the Earth to climb back even this far out of the hole Jupiter's mass had dug around them.

"You are keeping track of our target as you appreciate this grandeur, I hope."

"Oh, yes- I've still got him on the optical telescope. He comes and goes on the other sensors."

"Of course. Using Jupiter's EM as a screen is a game as old as criminals in space."

"It's good we got the optical lock on him before we went too deep into the field."

"Yes. Have you tried to touch him yet?"

"He's too far away, isn't he?"

"You never know, when you have line of sight. It's a funny thing. Give it a try."

Byron nodded. He closed his eyes, relaxed the muscles of his face, then opened them again. He concentrated on the distant dot for a few moments, then, with a soft grunting noise, tightened his lips. Sweat broke out on his brow.

"Easy, Byron," Bester cautioned. "Don't strain yourself. I only said to try. It's always worthwhile to try."

"I'm sorry, sir. I couldn't get anything."

"It's too far, or he's blocking, or both," Bester told him. "Don't worry. We'll get him."

While Jupiter stayed roughly the same apparent size, the dot in the optical scope grew quickly, gaining definition. It was an old ship, a modified asteroid tug more than fifty years old. Bester was surprised it was flying at all. Certainly it had no chance of outdistancing his state-of-the-art craft.

Or of outfighting it. When they were within a hundred clicks, it opened its single weapons port and fired two missiles. After they shot those out of space, it fired on them with a mining laser.

"What now?" asked Tapia, at the weapons console.

"I want him alive, of course," Bester murmured. "See if you can get the idiot to answer another hail. If you can't, try a pinpoint strike at the laser. That hull won't take much of a pounding."

"Right."

The hail failed again, so Bester ended up watching, tight-lipped, as Tapia drew the wicked scalpel of their own laser cannon across the other ship.

"I think that gets it, sir. His hull still looks good."

"Perfect. Well done, Ysidra."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, Byron, are you ready to fly a Starfury?"

Byron's grin was more eloquent than any other answer he could have given.

Bester watched Byron's Starfury as it grappled the tug and reeled it in.

"Omega 7 to Omega 1. He's still not responding. Could he be dead? Or unconscious?"

Bester considered that. "It's possible," he allowed. "Cover me, now, while I grapple."

A few moments later, the task done, he returned his attention to the ship. A funny feeling swept over him.

"Okay," Byron said, over the headset. "I'm preparing to go EVA, so I can force the hatch."

"Hang on, just a second, Byron." He stared at the battered ship, willing himself to see beyond- *wrong approach*. He opened his mind, instead, as if listening to a city. As in some of his earliest drills, he started filtering the voices out, one by one.

When he had pared it down to just himself and Byron, he still had no sense that there was anyone on the ship.

Frowning, he called Tapia on a secure channel, so Byron couldn't listen in.

"Sir?"

"Ysidra, who planted the tracking device on this ship?"

"Let me see - that would have been Zee."

"Where did he do it?"

"On Ceres, sir. We guessed that our Blip would come through there, and Zee left this ship where it would be 'available' to him."

"Yes, yes, I remember the plan." Something was wrong. Bester had arranged things very carefully - or so he thought. He'd needed an excuse to visit the asteroid belt, so he could interrogate Jackson, and another excuse to go to Jupiter. He'd set things up so that a certain Blip would find his way to Ceres, steal a ship with a tracking device, and flee toward Io.

A delicate plan, but so far, so good. But what if-

"Find Zee. Check with him. I want to know the serial number and configurations of the ship he wired."

"That might take a few moments."

"We've nothing but time."

Which wasn't true, of course. He had someplace to be in under ten hours, and a narrow window in which to be there. But his instincts-Well, they wouldn't have stopped him when he was twenty. Maybe it was just old age and paranoia. Of course, for him, the distinction between paranoia and common sense was rather pointless. But if someone knew what he was up to right now-the wrong someone-that could be very, very bad.

"Sir?" It was Tapia, and she sounded a little funny.

"Yes?"

"Zee's been missing from Ceres base for two days now."

"Ysidra, move the transport away, now, go." He punched over to Byron's frequency. "Byron, cut loose and hit your thrusters."

"What? Sir, what's-"

"Do it! " He cut his own, hit thrusters, and spun around, then engaged all four ion jets at once. With the sudden g-force, directionless space acquired an up-and-down-his back was down, the ship was down, the stars were up, far away.

And so it was below him that a flower of light opened its petals, from below him that a thousand shards of hull metal spattered onto his own hull, into the straining Copeland engines. His own weight seemed to wrap around him like a hand, squeezed impossibly tight, and then mercifully loosened. Direction vanished again, and he was merely tumbling through the void. A band tightened across his chest and eyes, blood thundered in his ears, and he almost lost consciousness. He almost lost his breakfast, too, but he kept it down.

Groggily, still fighting dizziness and double vision, he ran through his systems, looking for something that worked.

The first thing he noticed was that he was about to explode. His instruments - those still functioning - warned him the ion suppression tines on the drives had melted and crumpled in, but the engines were still on.

He cut them, but odds were that wouldn't be good enough.

"Ysidra? Ysidra, are you there?"

Static.

"Byron?"

He should jettison. But if he did that, and both the transport and Byron were disabled...

He gritted his teeth, watched the instruments. Things were starting to cool down now, though he wasn't nearly out of the danger zone.

Well. Someone had tried to kill him.

That struck him as funny, and he started to chuckle. He was still chuckling when he heard Byron's voice in his head.

Mr. Bester? Are you okay?

Hello, Byron. Yes. What about you?

I've lost two engines, but I think I'll be fine. Are you- laughing ?

Yes.

May I ask why?

The universe is full of irony, Byron. Never forget that. He paused. I'll explain it to you, someday. Can you see the transport?

Yes, sir. I've got Ysidra on the com. But we couldn't raise you.

My systems are pretty badly damaged. In fact, now that I know you guys are okay, I'm jettisoning...

He paused. How smart was that? What if Ysidra, Byron, the rest- what if they were in on it?

Well, then he was doomed. *Screw it.*

He jettisoned.

Have Ysidra send someone out to reel me in, he 'cast.

They're already on their way. What do you think happened?

Our friend was never on the ship. It was a trap.

The rogues are more vicious than I ever imagined, Byron 'cast, shimming self-righteous indignation.

Bester sighed. For all of his good qualities, Byron was a bit naive. Still, at the moment there was no point in disabusing him of the notion. Besides, there was some very small chance that the attempt had been made by the underground. Certainly that's who would officially end up taking the blame.

But Bester- he knew better. That's why he laughed. *Synchronicity.*

Ganymede was a ruined jade, cracked and spalled white as if the gods had used it in a few too many cosmic games of marbles. Bester liked her blemished beauty. Ganymede was a dark woman with many secrets.

They were dropping toward one of those secrets just now.

"They're asking for clearance, sir."

"Put them on."

A voice came through, edged with the constant crackle that colored all transmissions near Jupiter. The static, however, couldn't hide the crisp Manchester accent.

"I repeat, identify yourselves."

"Mr. Drew, this is Alfred Bester. What seems to be the problem? You've identified my ships, I'm certain, and we sent the security codes."

"But, Mr. Bester, this is highly irregular. I was not informed that you would be arriving."

"My crew and I have been in hot pursuit of a Blip, Mr. Drew. It's been a very hard ride. We - in effect - lost two Starfuries and our transport is damaged. We need repairs, not to mention hospitality. So I hope you don't mind if we impose on you a bit. We are, after all, family." He forced out a laugh. "Unless you have some sort of standing orders against me in particular..."

"Oh, no, Mr. Bester. Of course not. I'm clearing you to land right now. Welcome to Ganymede."

"Thank you," Bester replied.

"A Psi Corps base on Ganymede?" Byron said. "I didn't know."

"It's on a need-to-know basis," Bester said.

"... and I didn't need to know. Yes, I think I've heard that a few times now, thank you, Mr. Bester."

"There isn't much to it, is there?" Byron noticed, as they shucked off their EVA suits. The chamber that lay beyond the inner lock was cramped and severe, with low ceilings and passageways leading off that were somehow - despite their angularity - more reminiscent of tunnels in an anthill than of Human architecture.

A couple of normals in EarthForce uniforms watched them suspiciously.

A third man - also in uniform but wearing a Psi Corps badge - waited for them to collect themselves, then stepped forward. "It's not a very old base, or a very important one," he said, in the now-familiar accent. "I'm Charles Drew. Welcome to the Icehouse." He chuckled as he said it.

"Thank you," Bester said. "I like what you've done with the place."

"Yes, well, it's spare of necessity. We're a hardened facility - sunk down into the water-ice crust. It requires a certain architectural economy."

"It's a military base, then?" Byron asked.

"You really don't want to know what they do here, Byron," Bester said. "They would have to kill you."

"I thought all the hush-hush stuff went on at Syria Planum."

Drew smiled nervously. "Well, there's hush-hush and then there's hush-hush, if you know what I mean."

"If we keep this up, we'll sound like an ancient locomotive," Bester noted, "Hush-hush-hush-hush hush-hush-hush-hush..."

Drew laughed. It sounded almost genuine. "Indeed," he said. "Would you gentlemen join me for some refreshment?"

"Wonderful," Bester said. "Some hot tea would be very nice."

They traveled up one of the corridors to a small kitchenette, where Drew busied himself making tea. As Bester and Byron seated themselves, another man entered the room from an opposite passage. He was a handsome fellow, dapper in a crisply pressed suit. He had black hair and dark, haunted eyes.

"Well- here's what all the fuss was about," he said, taking in Bester and Byron.

"Not expecting someone else, I hope?" Bester said. "I'm Al Bester. This is my associate, Byron Gordon."

"Actually," the fellow said, "I was told we were expecting visitors..."

"Mr. Bester and Mr. Gordon are making an emergency stop here," Drew hastily cut in. "They were quite unexpected. Mr. Bester, Mr. Gordon- may I introduce Dr. Morden?"

"Doctor?" Bester said curiously. He shook his head. "My, my- the people you meet at small outposts. M.D. or Ph.D.?"

"Ph.D. In archaeolinguistics."

"Really? Fascinating."

"You know the subject?"

"No, but I am nonetheless fascinated." He let that hang for a moment, as Drew set out the tea service.

"This is really very good," Bester said, after a sip.

"Thank you," Drew replied. "We do try to maintain what amenities we can."

"Dr. Morden," Bester said, "dare I ask what brings an archaeolinguist all the way out to Ganymede?"

Morden exchanged glances with Drew, but Bester wasn't entirely certain what was communicated. Morden was a mundane, but Drew, a P10, would notice a scan.

Morden took a seat. "My position is actually with EarthForce, and not with Psi Corps, so I'm unsure of who I can and can't talk to in these situations. On the other hand, I'm happy to say I don't actually know what I'm doing on Ganymede, so I don't actually have to evade your question."

Bester raised his teacup. "Dr. Morden - you will consider it a compliment, I hope, when I tell you that I feel sure that if you wanted to evade one of my questions, you could do so."

"Oh, in all humility, I doubt that," Morden replied.

There followed a silence that Bester sensed was uncomfortable to everyone but him. He hoped it was, anyway.

"If I may," Drew asked, politely, a few moments later, "I should like to ask how many of your crew will be coming onto the station."

"Well, there are twelve of us," Bester said. "Will that press you for room? Dr. Morden mentioned some other guests arriving?"

"Within the hour, actually, and I'll have to excuse myself to go greet them momentarily. I can only accommodate three of your party tonight, I'm afraid."

"Can the others come in just to stretch their legs, a few at a time? I understand you have an exercise room."

He set his teacup down. "Anyone I know?"

"Pardon?"

"Your visitors. Anyone I know?"

Drew appeared to dither for a few moments. "It's classified," he said, after a moment.

"Well, how about this - Whoever it is, you mention to them that I'm here. I don't know why, but I have a hunch that they might want to see me."

"Of course. And yes, your people are welcome to come on for a bit of a stretch."

"Something's up, right?" Byron asked, once they had been shown to their room. The quarters were very simple, bunk beds and a desk that folded from the wall.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean- this is a Psi Corps base, right? So why are all of the guards mundanes? And who is that Morden character? And why are they hiding things from you, of all people?"

"Well, Byron, don't exaggerate my importance. As for the rest, it's all perfectly natural. Psi Corps and EarthForce are allies. They work on real black-hole stuff here, things critical to Earth Alliance security, so you shouldn't be surprised by their precautions." He followed with a quick 'cast. *Don't ask too many questions, Byron. And don't imagine they can't hear us.*

Byron's chagrined expression made it clear he understood, but to his credit he managed to cover it by nodding. "Yes, that all makes sense, I suppose. I'm just not used to the world of high intrigue. Well. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Byron."

Bester was almost asleep when the door to their quarters opened and the lights came up. Four men in EA uniforms quickly entered the room. All bore PPG rifles.

One - a burly fellow with a broken nose and two chipped front teeth - nudged Bester with his weapon.

"Get up," he snapped. "You're coming with us."

chapter 8

He was little Alfie Bester, being escorted by the Grins to an unknown fate. He was Al Bester, going exactly where he wanted to go, keeping an appointment that was decades late. Could he disconnect memory and perception? It didn't seem so. The only context for understanding the present was the past.

And so, for the second time in his life - albeit with almost six decades intervening - he was hauled from his bed in the middle of the night and brought before the director of Psi Corps.

The years had been kind to Director Johnston only in that they had let him live. Some would argue it was no kindness at all.

Whereas Vacit had been wrinkled like antique paper, Johnston had shriveled. His bones seemed to have crumpled inward with the collapse of the skin, like a plastic figure that had gotten too hot. His hair was sparse, wet-looking. He sat behind a desk, but that didn't hide the rest of what Bester knew was there; the chair kept his body functioning and gave him mobility.

Yet his eyes were still alive. They poked from beneath the brows of his time-wrecked face like the points of steel knives. And his hatred was still there, as fresh and pure as the day Bester had first felt it - when he was six.

The director considered him. At each hand stood a black-clad Psi Cop. The EA men went back outside, doubtless to stand guard. They had already searched him, of course.

"Good evening, Director, " Bester said. "Or is it good morning?"

The director didn't say anything for a moment. Then he showed his teeth - still perfect, regular, white. It might have been a grin or a snarl.

"Mr. Bester, what are you doing here?"

"Sir, with all due respect, what are you doing here? A man your age - you're in no condition to travel."

Johnston's eyes widened fractionally. "I asked you a question."

Bester scrunched his eyebrows thoughtfully. "The question has a number of answers, Director. It depends upon what you mean, doesn't it? Do you mean in the philosophical sense - why am I here? Why are any of us here? Are we really here at all? I don't know the answer to that. Do you mean, why am I here before you at this instant? That would be because your men took me from my room, strip-

searched me, and hauled me in front of you. If you mean, what am I doing in the vicinity, then you certainly have access to the records I've left of my movements over the last month or so. I'm going to guess, Director, that you don't mean any of these things."

"Mr. Bester..." The tone carried both weariness and venom.

"No, I'm going to guess you meant, 'Mr. Bester, what are you doing here when you ought to be dead?'"

Johnston had scowled throughout, sometimes looking as though he was about to interrupt. But now he closed his cracked lips. He looked at Bester for a moment, then bobbed his head. "You are a very stupid man, if you figured that out, and still came here. But I don't suppose you knew I was coming here, too, did you? Well. I had hoped to be subtler about all of this, but you may as well disappear on Ganymede as anywhere. We have the facilities for it."

"Good thinking, sir," Bester told him.

"You seem to think I won't do it."

"Oh, it's not that," Bester said, hastily. "But I wonder - would you care to explain why?"

"Why? No, I don't care to explain. You don't fit into the modern Corps, that's all. You're an impediment."

"I see. Director, we've never really talked, you and I. I think we should, just for the record."

"I'm tired, Bester. I don't have any more time to waste with you. I'm going to have you broken, and everyone in your crew. Once we have everything you know, we'll find something convenient to do with you. You have a lot of enemies. No one will wonder about you - or mourn you, for that matter." He signed to the two cops.

"Hugin," Bester said, quietly. "Munin." And at the same time he released a string of key glyphs.

The cops stopped in their tracks - in fact, took a step backward.

"What?" The director scowled.

"Hugin and Munin. Thought and memory. The two ravens who perched on the shoulders of the Norse god Odin."

The director noticed that his bodyguards weren't moving. He looked from one to the other. "Hey!" he said.

"Funny god, Odin. One of his attributes was madness. The warriors he loved best, he would drive berserk, make them gnaw their shields. They were virtually invincible in battle. Unless, of course, Odin wanted them in his own private war party - you see, he knew one day that the gods were going to have a great battle, a battle to the death, and then he would need the best warriors at his side. So if

he looked down and saw a truly great warrior, he would - arrange - for them to stumble in battle, or for the sun to shine in their eyes at exactly the wrong moment. A god of madness and betrayal. Not, all in all, a nice guy."

"Stein? Dorset?"

"They can't hear you. Or, rather, they do hear you, but they won't respond. They will respond to me, and only me. May I sit down? Thank you." Bester lowered himself into a chair.

"Guards!"

"No, they can't hear you either. Different cause, same effect - they're dead. See, I've been planning this for a very long time. That little attempt to blow me up yesterday really worried me - not because you tried to kill me, you've done that often enough - but because I thought you were onto me. Years and years of planning, shot to hell. But no, fortunately it turned out to be just a coincidence."

"What are you talking about?"

"Director, I've been planning this moment since I was fifteen. Oh, I didn't know it then - I blamed Bey's death on him, on the underground. Well, Bey was weak, in a way - he did have sympathy for the rogues. It's the same sympathy that allowed him to catch them, and maybe it got a little out of hand. But he was no traitor. And then there was Montoya, and Brett - well, I'm not going to go through it all. I understood that you were a danger to the Corps that first day I met you, when I was six. I knew even then that you hated us."

"I'm the director of Psi Corps, you idiot."

"And a fine one you've been. Slowly selling us out to the mundanes, bit by bit. And to someone else, yes? Aren't you curious as to how I knew you would be here, when almost no one else in the universe did?"

"I think you're going to tell me, regardless."

"When the alien ship on Mars woke up and flew off, it had some effect here as well. I'm not sure what, I'll admit, but a flurry of messages concerning Ganymede was an impossible correlation to miss. So I kept my ear to the ground, and here we are. I knew they would send you here."

"Just who exactly do you suppose they are, Mr. Bester?"

"I don't know all of the details, of course. I know some of the players. Vice President Clark, for instance, and the upper management of IPX. Certain senators and industrialists. And- I think- whoever built those ships. I freely admit, I have no idea who they are. I don't really care - you've betrayed the Corps. Beyond that, you could have betrayed all of humanity and it would be secondary as far as I'm concerned. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The director straightened, an operation that seemed painful and almost non-Euclidean in its geometry. "Do you plan to scan me? Is that what this is all about?"

"Scan you? Maybe. First and foremost, I plan to execute you."

"Of course. But why? That's what I still don't understand. Bester, I'm an old man. I don't have long to live anyway. Surely you don't think that killing me will change anything? There are ten people groomed for my position, and you won't like any of them any more than you like me. We have too much momentum to be deterred in the slightest by the death of a single man. Kill me if you will, but 'they' will still run over you like an insect."

Bester smiled. "God grant me the strength to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference."

"What an amazingly sickening platitude."

"Isn't it? It was hanging, in needlepoint, in the home of some rogue sympathizers I found hiding a Blip. They weren't very serene about what I did to them."

"Your point?"

"You and I are very much alike, on one level. Both of us know the truth of our situation. Oh, we talk the talk in public. 'Psi Corps is your friend.' But you and I, we know the truth. Sooner or later- and probably sooner, in the great, grand scheme of things- it's going to come down to your kind or my kind. Humanity simply won't tolerate Homo superior in its midst. Mundanes and telepaths are going to stand face-to-face, but only one is going to walk away."

He leaned forward. "I'm here to tell you, Director, it's going to be us. Just as, at the end of this day, it's going to be me and not you walking out of this room. Yes, yes- I know it won't change anything. I know you will die soon whether I act or not. But what matters to me, you see - Director - what matters to me is that I kill you, that you know I killed you. Do you understand? All my life I've lived for the Corps. I've done everything for the Corps. This- this is just for me. I've been working on it for a long time. Hugin and Munin there, for instance. I studied the criteria you use to pick your personal teeps and started conditioning possible candidates twenty years ago. My greatest worry, Director, was that you would drop dead before I was ready."

Johnston was the color of chalk. "They'll know you did it. They'll kill you, too."

"No. They won't. In fact, I'm going to be injured trying to save you. Isn't that nice? And then- we'll see about the rest. I'm patient, as you have seen. I intend to live a lot longer. I will see my people set right again before I die, Director."

"You won't get anything if you scan me."

"C'est la vie."

"I've had a cascade trigger planted in my mind. A deep scan will set it off and wipe pertinent parts of my memory."

"How you must have hated that- letting a dirty telepath into your head."

Johnston laughed harshly. "I did. But it was necessary."

"Let's see." Bester wrenched into his mind. After studying what he found there a moment, he backed out.

"Well. The truth. But I expected it, really, No matter, Director- I'll find out what I need to know elsewhere. I didn't have time to really scan you, anyway."

"This whole conversation has been recorded, you know."

"Actually- it hasn't. You forgot to flip the camera on, I'm afraid."

"They'll be able to tell the switch was tampered with."

"I don't think so. Good-bye, Director. Hugin."

The telepath raised her PPG.

"Careful," Bester cautioned.

She fired. Bester stifled a scream as the burst scorched across his thigh. For an instant he felt a surge of wild hope from Johnston, but then the director must have seen it in Bester's eyes.

"Munin," Bester breathed.

The other telepath walked to the far wall and exploded, even as Bester fell forward to the floor.

Shaped charges are wonderful things, Bester thought, as thunder clapped. A brilliant, dazzling heat scorched every inch of him, but he knew it would be no worse than a bad sunburn. The next step was the risky part, the part that worried him ever so slightly.

The wall was gone. Beyond it was the permanent glacial crust of Ganymede, a small fragment of which had been turned liquid by the burst of heat. Small in terms of the total volume of ice on Ganymede, not in terms of the cubic meters the room could contain. Even as Bester made it to his feet and rushed to the door, the first wave hit him at the knees.

It was cold, and the air temperature was dropping very quickly. He pressed the door open and fell through, the water surging behind him now up to his waist. He felt his body going into shock, as if he had just jumped into an arctic sea. He heard a sudden hiss-and-shush behind him and hoped it was what he thought it was, because he couldn't stand up anymore.

He fell into water that was already thinned down to a few inches and lay there, gasping. He turned back toward the blasted room. The shield door had come down.

Icehouse was hardened, but a nuclear strike would melt the water around it, of course. As a precaution, each individual unit of the facility had been built to cut itself free and float. The section the director was in had been cut off from the rest of the facility, though it was still in place.

Back in that room, temperatures must be rapidly approaching Ganymede normal. That was to say, colder than Satan's heart.

"Mr. Bester!"

He tried to turn, but found he was having trouble moving. Someone rolled him over. It was Drew.

"What happened? You're shot!"

Bester managed to gesture toward the shield door. "The director- tried to save- help him.."

Inwardly, he grinned like a cat. If he didn't die of pneumonia- and if Ysidra and the others had taken care of the dead guards- everything was going to be just fine.

"Are you sure you're okay, sir?" Byron asked.

"I'm fine. Just a little freezer burn. The PPG blast missed everything important."

"I wish we'd had a chance to scan those rogues."

"Or whoever they were. But they must be long gone by now. They planned their assassination well."

"I'm glad they didn't get you, too."

In that instant, Bester nearly told him. One day, when he was absolutely sure, Byron would be added to the inner circle, and he would probably find out what had really happened here. He might feel foolish - after all, he was the only one on board completely oblivious to the truth.

Still, it was too soon. Byron had all of the makings of one of the elite, but he hadn't yet truly proved where his loyalties were. He hadn't been marked, initiated. These were important things, not to be dismissed lightly.

But today Bester felt good. He felt- well, invincible. Like that first time he had used his powers against a normal, that train cop en route to Paris.

It was a good feeling to have, at his age. A rare one.

He was almost sure of Byron, but he should wait. It was time to test him.

"Thank you, Byron. I'm glad they didn't get me, too."

Donne's hard face on the screen was unreadable, and her voice was nearly as uninflected as ever, but

something about her seemed excited.

"Everything went well at Jupiter, sir?"

"Very. We're repaired and resupplied and headed back to the inner system. Something must be happening on your end."

"Yes, sir. We've been keeping tabs, as you said. I'd barely gotten here when there was an- incident."

"Oh?"

"One of the freelance researchers - an Anna Sheridan - was doing some experiments with some sort of organic technology found at an archaeological dig on Theta Omega 2. She had a business teep named Hilliard try to- scan it."

"This doesn't sound good."

"It turned his brains to jelly. Not only that, but every low-level teep within three miles was affected the same way."

"No," Bester said, slowly. "No, that's not good at all. Are there any more of these devices?"

"Yes."

"I'm putting some calls through, right now. I want that technology confiscated, and I want you on this mission to the Rim. Are you game for that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't need to tell you how important this is. To all of us."

"No. I appreciate your trust, sir."

"Keep it. Don't let your- personal satisfactions -get in the way of doing your job. But do what you have to. I give you license. We'll fix it later. It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission, after all." He considered.

"All in all, it's a good time for this to have happened. The chain of command will have been shaken by events out here in Jupiter space. Their control will be weakened. They won't oppose me in this."

She chopped her chin in a Spartan nod. "Sir."

"I'll talk to you soon, Ms. Donne."

He watched the blank screen for a moment, feeling the ache return to his various body parts.

Well, invincibility only lasted so long. He had had his fun, but the real business was just getting

started.

These aliens were at the center, he was certain of it.

These new technologies had to be in the hands of the Corps - his Corps, not the mundane puppets. His Corps.

He had been brooding for about half an hour, watching Jupiter dwindle to something smaller than a nailhead - when he got a call that cheered him up considerably.

"Some weeks, fate loves me," he murmured, and left for the bridge.

"Got him?"

"Yep. Right there."

"All roads lead to Io these days, I guess."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. We've got all seven Starfuries up and running?"

"Tip-top shape, sir. We got the replacements for the lost ones the day before we shipped out."

"Fine. Let's take them all out."

"They don't appear to have any weapons, sir," Ysidra remarked.

"I want a show of force," Bester said. "We need to remind them who's boss." He turned to face Byron, manning a console a few meters away. "Byron? Ready for another hunt?"

"Always. I hope this one turns out better than the last."

"No doubts this time," Ysidra put in. "We're far enough from Jove for clear readings. Plus surveillance footage of them boarding."

"Still," Bester said, "keep the transport at a decent distance. And we won't have to board, this time. We'll have them send the teeps out in a lifepod."

He felt a stab of pride as the Starfuries took their positions with geometric precision. He had fought long and hard for the Black Omega Squadron. Initially, no one had thought it was a good idea, but he had proven their usefulness often enough that now no one in EarthGov complained—at least not overtly.

After all, they thought they were keeping him distracted, out and away from Earth, from Admin, hunting rogues among the stars.

Hadn't they ever studied history? Didn't they know the lesson of Caesar? It was foolish to put a general out among the barbarians, with an army, and leave him to his own devices. You never knew when he might march back to Rome and take it for himself.

When the time came, he was sure the Black Omega Squadron would follow him. Absolutely sure.

And it was time to make Byron one of them.

He flipped on his com. "Byron, would you do the honors?"

"Of course." Another crackle as he went to a broader band. Bester followed him. "This is Omega 7 to the captain of the civilian transport. We have you under our guns. Answer or be fired upon."

A brief pause, then a strained female voice. "Omega 7, I copy. This is Captain Freya Grettirsdottir. How can I help you?"

"Captain, don't play coy with me. You have ten rogue telepaths on your transport. You will immediately turn them over to my custody."

Another pause. "Omega 1, we have your assurance-"

"Now, Captain."

"Give us five minutes." She sighed. "We'll put them in a life-pod. We're unarmed, Omega 1, and we won't make any trouble."

"That's very wise."

Less than five minutes later, a lifepod broke loose of the transport and drifted toward its Black Omega counterpart.

"Omega 7 to Omega 1. Blips are clear. Capture transport moving into position."

Across the vacuum, Bester could make Byron out, just barely, through the clear canopy.

Well done, Byron.

Thank you, sir. I hope I sounded authoritative enough.

You were perfect.

He linked to the other Black Omegas. "Hold your positions. I want those Blips on the transport and their identities confirmed before we move an inch."

And so they waited a few moments, until the confirmation came from the transport.

"All clear," Byron said. "We can head back now."

"Not yet, Omega 7," Bester said. He put command in his voice. This was hard for some of them, the first time. They needed to be walked through it. Afterward, they always came to understand. Well, almost always.

What was important was that they felt that this time, they didn't have a choice. Afterward, they would always make the right choice - on their own. "We got this batch... but there will be others. We need to send a message."

He could feel Byron's confusion, even across the gulf. "All right... I'll arrange for them to be escorted to-"

"Negative, Omega 7. Lock all forward weapons on transport. Prepare to fire."

"Sir... they're unarmed... We can't just-"

"Prepare to fire, Omega 7." Bester found that he was actually holding his breath. This was taking longer than it should. Had he misjudged the boy? Could he have been that wrong?

"I can't..." Byron's voice was thick.

Bester found he was almost shaking. He couldn't fail here, not after his greatest triumph. Byron would not- could not betray him. Not now.

"I gave you an order Byron. Execute the order or face the consequences."

The other Starfuries turned their weapons systems toward Byron. They knew the drill. Leave him no choice.

Later he would understand. Later.

He felt a peculiar lightness in his chest. "They're just mundanes, Byron. And it's them or you. You wanted to run with the big boys, now you have to show you're up to it. Are you? Are you up to it, Byron?"

The moment stretched, and stretched. He was going to do it. Byron was going to fail him - which could only mean that he had failed Byron. Failed in his last Rashomon role- And then there was light. It was the most beautiful thing he had seen in a long time. The transport shredded under the impact of Byron's weapons, and the pitiful mindshrieks of the mundanes were swallowed by night.

Thank you, Byron. You didn't fail me. At the last...

He didn't 'cast it. What he 'cast was:

Well done, Byron. Now let's go home.

epilogue

"Yes, Kelsey, come in." He stood at the window in his office, watching a sandstorm arrive across the Martian plain. It looked like a dark brick wall, higher than heaven, falling on all of them.

He made sure it was Kelsey, of course, with a probe. There was no need to turn and face her.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir."

"It's okay. You have news?"

"Yes. I sent it to your terminal, but I thought I should come see you in person."

He turned around then. Kelsey was a tall brunette, coldly beautiful. She was young, arrogant, and entirely trustworthy. Beneath her emotionless facade, she was terribly eager to please him, and he knew it.

"Did they find him?"

"No. Not even fragments. Calculating from the last trajectory, it's possible that his ship actually went down on Venus."

"Which is to say, he's dead. Poor Byron. Do we know what happened yet?"

"It's hard to make out. He was fine until the rogue ship started firing. Telemetry doesn't show him being hit, but it does show an explosion in one of his fuel nacelles. The other Starfuries lost communication with him then, and he seems to have spun out of control. They lost him around the planetary horizon. By the time the fight was over and they were able to break free and go looking for him- nothing."

A faint, terrible suspicion touched Bester then, but he forced it down. Byron would never do that to him. It was bad enough that he should die - he would never betray the Corps, never betray Al Bester.

He felt very cold.

"Tell them to keep searching. He may be in a low orbit, without communications. If he's on the surface, we'll never find him."

"Yes, sir."

"Kelsey..."

"Sir?"

"What about that batch of transmissions we hijacked from IPX?"

"Nothing. Still no word from the *Icarus*. They've declared her lost, with all hands. They lost the original probe, too."

"So that's Donne, too. Two lost, Kelsey. Such a shame."

"Yes, sir." She couldn't entirely hide how she really felt, however. She was ambitious - she envisioned herself filling the vacuum that Byron had left.

"Thank you, Kelsey. Leave me now."

She did.

He turned back to the sandstorm. It had nearly arrived now. He could see the lower front it was pushing along ahead of itself, like a giant scuffing up dirt with his boots.

The work went on. The work went on.

In the end, perhaps, his mistake was to rely on individuals to provide him any personal sense of worth. It was ironic, really- the first true lesson that the Corps had taught him, only now revealing the depths of its truthfulness. His role wasn't that of child, brother, apprentice, lover, husband, or even mentor. He had never been meant for any of that.

His role was the Corps' role - watcher, protector. Not of the one, but of the many. He was the father, the mother, to all of them - the telepaths in Psi Corps and, whether they wanted and appreciated him or not, the telepaths outside of the Corps. Some of them needed a sterner hand than others, it was true...

He remembered something Bey had told him.

My father slapped me once. Actually, he slapped me twice- once with the back of his hand, and then, quickly, with his palm. Later, I understood. The first blow was a rejection - he was rejecting the thing I had done, I don't even remember what it was now.

The second blow - with the palm - was to take me back. "I reject you - but I take you back." That was his message. It was a good lesson. Sometimes there had to be punishment, but there must always be reconciliation in a family. There must always be a gathering back in, a second slap with the palm. Family.

Bester sat back at his desk and looked over his new orders. He couldn't imagine them coming at a worse time. Another one of Department Sigma's messes. Jason Ironheart, one of the subjects for the stable telekinetic project. It seemed that they had been somewhat too successful.

Well, maybe a challenge was what he needed right now. A hunt. Something to keep his mind off of

other things. And he had never been to Babylon 5 before. It ought to be interesting.

He began to look forward to it. Outside, Mars vanished into rusty opacity, and even through the dense dome, he could hear the shriek of the wind.