

Mmmm . . . hmm-hmm . . .”

He hummed softly in key to the tones that floated in the chamber, resounding against the high roofs, drifting through the echoing halls. He had always liked Tchaikovsky.

Scratching at the thick paper with the fountain pen, he muttered and dipped it back into the ink well. He had full access to a console, of course; he could have even used a touch screen and programmed it to display as if he were writing with an old utensil like this one. But there was an inimitable appeal in scribbling with something as basic as a gravity-driven fountain pen. Maybe it was the sheer difficulty of use; as if the patience and effort associated with each page, each line, each word somehow made the letters themselves more meaningful. Certainly it made one less drawn to frivolity.

*. . . and though that shining sun
Doth flash its rays so bright.
And endless burning fire
cascade a wrathful light.
The battle will not end,
though blazing shots sing by at me.
The final shot will not be cast—
'til Man at last lies free.*

He tapped the last line out of the fading ink, then dipped once more to scrawl his trademark signature in a heavy, bold black at the bottom of the sheet. Then he wiped the nib and placed the pen in a drawer, laying the parchment on top of it. He would do something with it, later.

Rising from the writing desk, he walked softly out of the chamber and down the long corridor. The high, marble walls and wooden rafters glowed with warmth, and the carvings on the floor felt comfortable beneath his bare feet. He reached the end of the corridor and cracked open the door. The fast, crisp tones of the violin has eased away into smooth, subdued, lilting cries.

He let the door slide open and leaned against the frame, staring inside.

Catherine was sitting, poised like a bird on the edge of a stool in the center of the room. The vast, empty chamber conducted sound beautifully, and he knew that it was “tuned” specially so that a listener in that one spot, the exact center of the floor, would be treated to a breathtaking harmony of acoustical precision.

Her eyes were shut, as if so close to the music that she desperately hoped she would fall into it. The violin—a real violin, a 20th century viola from Italy, Old Earth—was held in one hand as gently as a lover. With the other, she held the bow, smoothing it along the top with strong, graceful strokes as her fingers moved with hummingbird-like quickness on the strings.

Unhurriedly, with a calculated and thoughtful tempo, the notes began to slow down further and further. Finally, the music smoldering, she let it die with one last, wordlessly low reverb that stretched out as long the instrument would carry it.

Then she sat, eyes still closed, violin still raised, hearing the last vestiges of the clear, humming vibration faded from the air.

He waited for several seconds, then, as quietly as he knew how, slipped into the chamber and crossed the floor. Gliding towards her, soundless as a ghost, he approached her stool.

Bending over slightly, he looked at her for a moment, then leaned in and kissed her.

If she felt a moment’s surprise, she scarcely showed it. Instead, she smiled against him and opened her eyes, meeting his gaze full-on.

He broke away, pulling ever so slightly back. Never taking his eyes away, he said, “That was supposed to surprise you.”

Catherine Richards—lady, princess, galaxy-renowned violinist, athlete, marksman, and soldier of fortune—curled up the corners of her lips into an impish grin.

“Then,” she said, “you should have found a different partner.” And she reached forward to grasp him—Angus Reverend, poet, writer, king, pilot, swordsman, soldier, and mercenary

for hire—and kissed him back.

“Excuse me.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Excuse me.”

Tap. Clank.

“Excuse—”

Exasperated, Catherine gave a heavy sigh and allowed the tip of her sword, a wood and rubber practice saber, to fall. “Yes, Sophitia?”

BAM

As soon as her guard dropped, she felt a sudden, stabbing pain above her right ear, and then blinked, nonplussed, to discover herself on the ground. She groaned at the throbbing sensation behind her eyes and looked up.

Angus’s dark, glaring visage appeared over her, blocking the light. He scowled.

“What was *that*?”

“What was *what*, you tyrant?”

He prodded her with his own sword. “Up. And this time, without the stupid.”

She crawled to her feet, grimacing. “Hold on, will you, oh Overlord?”

“Sophitia? What’s up?”

The calm, clear voice of the house AI vibrated through the air without a hint of distortion. Not speakers—holograph atmosphere-resonators. The system had been rather expensive, but was certainly easy on the ears. “There is a entity approaching the front path.”

“An entity?”

They glanced at each other. Sophitia knew everybody that they knew; friends should be identified as such, and so should hostiles. “Entity” signified someone who was a complete unknown.

“Appearance?”

“Human, or at least bipedal. Not of this world, by dress and stature. Moderately armed.”

Catherine was already at the practice room’s storage cabinet, slotting the wooden sword into a rack and pulling on a light jacket over her sparring clothes. “Just one?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She caught Angus’s thrown saber and put it away as well. In return, she lobbed him his pistol, then hit the lights. They walked out together. “Then let’s go meet our mystery man, shall we?”

The ambassador moved stiffly, as one still unaccustomed to a new world’s gravity. He wore a dark, frocked robe in the style of a monk, common to travelers of the Systems; at the gate, he had handed over to Angus a small Ryans Defensive handgun, the classic sidearm for independent defense, rugged and reliable with ammunition that could be bought anywhere. On his feet were brown UNSC issue boots, and a brimmed hat on his head, completing perfectly the image of the weary spacegoer.

Angus watched him carefully. He distrusted perfection.

They invited him into the dining room; they found it amusingly disorienting to their guests to hold meetings in unusual places. Once they had spoken with the head of the planet in the bathroom.

“You want something?” Catherine asked, making no effort to disguise her lack of interest. Like anything else, court mannering was a skill that rusted without practice. Nowadays, it was easy not to care. The man shook his head and sat quietly, folding the robe across his lap, waiting for them to take their own seats. When they had, he began to speak, his voice coarse and low, but polished—the tones of a diplomat.

“I am Ambassador LaGrange, interplanetary representative for the Terminus Fringe Colony, planet #167 of the dorsal sector. I have come on behalf of my government in a time of dire need.”

Catherine leaned back in her seat and sighed. She exchanged a look with Angus and went

to make coffee.

The small, streamlined transport spacejet slipped through the outer orbits of Pelian V, rolling around the gravity well of the wide, gaseous body to reach its next Slipspace vector.

Angus was relaxing in the transport's lounge, sitting on one of the bench seats that looked out the wide side windows of tough glasteel, slouched low against a bulkhead. Catherine had her head in his lap, curled up on the cushions as they watched the gloomy wisps of their low planetary pass slash past the ship, caught in its supraorbital wake.

"You remember the day we left?"

He stroked the soft edges of her hair away from the side of her face, his eyes following a small speck of paint detritus from the ship's hull as it slowly worked its way off the edge of the window, buffeted by the corrosive breeze. "I remember most of it."

She turned slightly, following his gaze. "Do you ever think about Cole?"

"Sometimes."

The thrum-thrum-thrum of the air circulation system changed pitch slightly, responding to some unknown fluctuation. He let his eyes rest on nothing. "He made his decision and he knew the consequences. Nobody forced him to be—to be loyal to the end."

"Nobody forced you to kill him."

"No."

"Wouldn't you have have done the same, before? Wouldn't you have died to protect your code?"

He lifted one hand slowly and touched the scar across his cheek, running his thumb down slowly. It felt cold, like an icy wind biting through a chink in his suit of armor. "I was the code."

They sat longer, feeling each other's presence like a calming aura. Then she looked up again. "Ever miss it?"

Gently, he tweaked her ear, and she grinned. "What is this, twenty questions?"

"Hey, your lordship, bite me."

He did.

Yelping, she snapped her head down, butting him in the abdomen to elicit an "oof." He responded by levering her up by the neck and applying a rear strangle.

After several minutes of rolling around, they stopped again, both panting from exertion. He was lying atop her now, their faces mere inches apart. Leaning in, he nuzzled lightly under her chin with the tip of his nose, making her giggle. He pulled back and spoke.

"Yeah, I miss it sometimes. The sworn royalty on Nimravus wasn't the same as true royalty, or even a good aristocracy, but it was still a different way of life, another world. Good and bad. We left because of the bad, but you can't ignore the good."

Catherine smiled slightly and said softly, "You owned a world, Angus. Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it."

"I loved it." He sighed and pulled himself off her, settling in beside her warm form. "I loved it. That's why I had to leave."

They were silent again. Catherine turned her head and brought her gaze back out the window, awed as always by the tiny, hard points of the stars and the washing auras of angry EM fields. An insidious lethargy had begun to seep into her body, as if infiltrating and corrupting the cells that drove her; she felt with surprising intensity that she could lie here forever, untouched by the chaos and blinded motivations of fear and fire and war. She blinked as Angus kissed her gently on the cheek, breaking her trance. Almost too quickly, she looked up at him, and he smiled at the girlish excitement in her face.

"We could stop, you know. We don't have to do this—any of it."

Fixing his gaze in her bright, glinting eyes, his face twitched involuntarily around the scar as it sometimes did. Ignoring it, he murmured back, "We do."

"No." She spoke firmly but with an undertone of panicked resignation, as if trying against all better sense to convince herself as much as him. "We don't have to, we don't. We could leave, Angus. We're the best, we've always been the best. We—"

He shushed her with a steady finger on her moving lips as he told her what she already

knew. “We can’t.”

“We—”

“We are political exiles, Catherine. Your family has renounced you and my government has declared me a seditionist and a lunatic in exchange for leaving me with my title. We are *tolerated*, Cathy, on the sole condition that we continue to serve.”

She stiffened slightly and said, “I am no servant.”

“You are. I am. We roam freely in our cage, but it’s still a cage, no matter how comfortable; the day we pull our names from the All Rogues Guild database, and shut our doors, and turn away fawning and polite messengers like dear Mr. LaGrange is the day that our quiet world becomes our bier. Every day we live is borrowed time, a testament to the magnanimity of our fellows. Our little personal rebellions failed. These are the consequences.”

Closing her eyes for a moment, either in shame or to blink back tears, Catherine wavered momentarily. Then again she looked at him, and something new shone in her.

“We could go to Earth.”

He answered bluntly and without emotion.

“Earth is gone.”

She looked up in shock.

“Gone. Oh, there’s still a big ball of dirt spinning around Sol somewhere out there. But it’s cold and silent. The Covenant burned it so hot that oxygen can’t even form anymore. They say that after the bombardment was over, the mantle itself was almost gone, gassed into orbit. Got a nice ring now.”

Opening her mouth, then shutting it, she stared at him in disbelief, thoughts firing through her head—memories of people and things, dreams, hopes, all faced now by the guileless but unrelenting torch of harsh reality.

Finally it broke, the thing inside her that identified her humanity, the small piece of her soul that said, “Whatever else, first I am this.” Her face cracked and Angus quickly pulled her toward him. Her sobs tore into his chest as he held her tight, tight; she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed back, needing his presence like physical sustenance. He made no attempt to console her, only letting his warmth and humanity lend as much strength as she needed.

Shuddering, she managed to ask him, “When?”

“I don’t know,” he responded quietly. “The courier drone came in yesterday, but the piece wasn’t timestamped. Just a personal note from Donaker at sc. Probably last week. They’ll know on Terminus.”

“We’ve—we’ve got to—”

“I know.”

Eventually he let himself relax his own barriers, and wept with her, as they fell back on their old bonds for strength. Grieving not for what they had lost, but for what it had taken from them, the two rough warriors cried for a long time.

The only words that could be heard were Catherine’s, as she whispered to him and to herself, “Never again . . . never again . . .”

The transport touched down on the flatpad outside the headquarters for the Department of Social Engineering, the government’s securities and intelligence force, whose aggressively circumlocutory name was “a very old joke that became tradition before anybody got around to dealing with it,” according to Duncan LaGrange, who had met them on the tarmac and was now leading them to their briefing room and giving a potted tour as they went. Angus was slightly on edge from the landing. The transport was small enough to function as its own shuttle, its motile jets rotating downward to turn into atmospheric canards; however, the functional yet inelegant result had properties much like a falling brick, and their landing had brought them to universal agreement that Terminus’s main flaw was being a hard son of a bitch.

“By the way,” LaGrange said, mirroring Angus’s thoughts, “you may have noticed that we’re a little clunkier here than you’re used to. Nothing serious, just another .15 of a G, but enough to rattle your bones. I wouldn’t make a home here unless you’re willing to go through

the gravity inoculation treatments, which aren't a lot of fun. Most of the citizens on-world here are natives; visitors tend to be temporary, or they go to live on the belt." He nodded in a vaguely upward direction, indicating the planet's OPR, the orbital partial-ring where approximately half of the world's population and all of the spacefaring industry was located, all focused around servicing a massive UNSC shipyard.

"What's more, we've still got a real colonial attitude here—a few generations doesn't take that away, and a lot of the original colonists are still around, anyway. So be polite and reasonable, and—well, I suppose you can handle yourselves, but don't go starting any fights, hear? Around here people consider their pride about the most important thing they've got. Throwback to the early days. Anyway."

Angus was nodding. His practiced eye had noticed the clips, straps, and peeking holsters of concealed pistols and knives on almost everybody they'd passed, even the narrow-faced desk workers and intel flunkies in the base's administrative section. Outside, Catherine had nudged him and pointed out a short, brown-skinned man working on a plasma conduit who appeared to be wearing a two-handed blackjack in a sheath down his back, as comfortable as an extension of his body.

They reached another double-sided security door, and again LaGrange had to present the ID card dangling from his neck, press his hand against an optical reader, and submit to something Angus had never seen before: a hard-scope biological proportions scan. LaGrange explained it to him as "a full-body scan based around the same concepts as an x-ray," though more safe and subtle; upon revealing the full extent of his skeletal structure, the proportions of his arms, legs, skull, hands, feet, and "vertebral spread" were all measured and matched against known values within the personnel database. "The idea," he explained, "is that while virtually anything in your appearance can be masked or altered now, even unique attributes such as epidermal signatures, only highly significant surgical procedure can modify the length of your fibulae, the ratios of your spine, the shape of your skull, and so forth." He shrugged. "Seems like a good concept, though I'm sure it's only a matter of time until someone comes up with a counter. They do these upgrades to support the local industry. Nobody's ever attempted to breach the security here."

The door clacked open, whirring as the magnetic field was released, and the guard waved them through from behind the glasteel window. They moved through quickly, entering the inner sanctum of the Command division.

Shuffling around the table almost self-consciously, the two mercenaries wordlessly found seats at the long, unfettered conference table. At the head was a single figure in a dark suit, a neat stack of papers at his left hand and a clean, full glass of water at his right. He was astonishingly bland: plainly cut brown hair in no particular style, his suit expensive but not overly so, the same skin tone that virtually every other citizen of Terminus seemed to share, an even blend of dark and light. His build was moderate, his gaze even, and if he weren't quite so ordinary, he might have fit into any board room, office, or cubicle around the galaxy.

It was his exact lack of character that rang their alarm bells, though, and Angus had to resist an urge to freeze at the doorway like a rabbit in headlights. Nobody was so normal, so steady; everybody had quirks, glitches in their appearance and behavior. Robots and blocks of wood could be entirely ordinary—humans never were, at least never unintentionally. All too aware that he had been stripped of his sidearm at the gate, as he slipped into a seat he quietly wrapped his hand around one of the metal styluses that lay on the table, holding it in a loose hammerfist.

The man smiled at them both as he spoke, his voice soft and even.

"Welcome to Terminus, Mr. Reverend, Ms. Richards. I won't insult your intelligence by making small talk, but do you have any questions before we begin?"

They exchanged a glance. Angus's hand twitched on the pen, trying to look casual with all of his warning signals going off as he stared into the face of this man. Beside him, Catherine cleared her throat and answered brusquely, "Money."

A smile. "Of course. We are willing to offer your usual rate, 8,000 credits apiece per day; plus your offworld fee, hazardous duty, and expenses, of course."

With Angus still tight as a drum, Catherine looked over at him and then back. There was a beat, then—”No.”

The man blinked and shifted his gaze slightly, his first show of emotion. “No?”

“No. Our fee will be doubled for all services rendered, and we will be paid an additional 40.000CD upon successful completion of our mission goals.” Even Angus was nonplussed by that, but years of negotiations, in both of his trades, had tempered his poker face into an iron shroud against showing surprise. “You will not reimburse us for our expenses, either; instead, you will place 150.000 credits in a standalone account to act as a petty cash reserve, which we will draw upon as the need arises.

“Furthermore”—here her voice hardened—”at the first indication that you have withheld information, misrepresented yourself, or otherwise failed to provide us with every piece of relevant and accurate intelligence regarding this matter, we will withdraw the entirety of that fund and abandon the planet, and yourself, to its own problems. We’re not fucking around with this; you should keep that in mind when you make your briefing, Mister—”

Unfazed, the man tilted his head and offered blithely, “Baker.”

“Mr. Baker.”

She waited a beat, then sat back into her chair, taut.

Baker, still unblinking, drummed lightly against the stack of papers until he was sure that she had finished. Then he spoke again, in the same unhurried tone. “I appreciate your candor. My power to negotiate here is fairly limited, but I believe that your requests so far are tenable, if only because those concerned feel so strongly about the urgency of this situation.”

He was silent then; a cool breath of air and Baker’s gaze was on Angus.

He was whispering.

“Do you remember four years ago, Angus? Right after the second Winterfall?”

Angus’s eyes widened ever so slightly, like he’d been slapped, but Baker didn’t stop.

“The merc division had met up with the main scout, and we were encamped in the fields south of Alterna, just out of sight of the first berms. We had the hammocks up, even the brass, and everyone was relaxing there after the day’s march, letting that liquid humidity sit on us like a steam bath. The cooks all swore they were cleaning their pans and pots just by leaving them out for a few minutes, scrubbing them and drying them off.

“We’d all finished prepping our gear, cleaning the rifles and putting that waterproof shit on the ammo and the armor, and the guys were talking a little or writing. The mercs were set up a couple dozen meters from the rest of the camp. They had those birds, the huge ones you never saw, but they’d cry and cry all night, like a thousand assholes cutting wood with jigsaws. After long enough, you didn’t really hear them anymore, but you heard the rhythm, and if one of them shut up you’d notice.

Catherine was saying nothing, just watching Angus as his breathing grew heavier and his eyes narrower.

“I was rigged up under a big tree, one of those hard barkless fuckers, off on the perimeter, buddied with David Spaulding—remember? He had that jester’s cap, would always put it on at the weirdest times and fucking start singing. I’m pretty sure he was the first one; the sappers got right behind him and tore his throat open with a machete, couple of seconds. Most useful thing he did was to leak air and get me to look up in time to grab my plastic and cut two of them to pieces, woke up the whole camp with the noise, but half of us had already been taken out.

Baker stopped for a moment, and to Catherine’s surprise Angus filled the silence, his voice low and dark.

“Central had to send a high-altitude bombardment that took out the entire camp. The flames caught on the trees and kept spreading until they made another strike from low orbit and cauterized the entire surrounding area with a wide laser. Everyone within fifty feet of the camp was either burned soon or evaporated later. By the time it was done, there was about twenty of us left alive from the cadre of 200, the bastards smart enough or lucky enough to bug out. Central couldn’t push forward the attack and had to withdraw us the next day. The rebels kept the city.”

Baker nodded slightly, their eyes still linked tightly. “But the third push by the Covenant glassed the planet a month later anyway. Eight million souls.”

Dead silence.

The next cold pause was broken before it could begin by both men standing suddenly and leaning forward to embrace, grinning and grimacing, pounding each other on the back.

“What the hell are you up to, you old fucker? How’d you find me?” Angus had a smile curling past his rough whiskers, eyes drifting with memories. Baker was struck with the man’s strength, a firm yet soft strength, fleeting, as if it were afraid to commit.

“Shit, all of us knew you, you asshole. You and your sword. How many of the other officers assigned themselves to the front lines? How many were *ex no-yal-tee*?” He grinned as he let an Alterna twang surface momentarily. “Big boys here are pissing all over themselves to deal with this before it deals with them, and I just couldn’t seem to forget that brooding motherfucker in the 21st Mercs.”

“Did you go through the Guild?”

“Sort of. I’m a big boy now with a name that doesn’t change and a salary that ain’t all in cash, but I still have some of my old contacts, and every damned filer at Guild HQ knows you by reputation, if not by dossier. I didn’t have to search the database.” Catherine nosed in between them and gently pried the heavy metal stylus out of Angus’s now loosened hand. Baker glanced down at it briefly and smiled.

“You’re gonna die. But not today.”

At last he leaned back and picked up the stack of papers, still smirking a little. “All right, let’s see if we can get through this. I’ll give you the official bureashit, then my take on it, then you can throw questions my way and I’ll avoid them. I’ll get you guys your money, no problem; these guys are sheep and they’re scared. Might even bug out with you when you finish this up, if you’ve got some room to give a poor old hired gun a lift. There’s some appeal in not being shot at, but I can tell you, it sure gets boring as fuck sometimes. There anything you want me to start with?”

Angus, finally relaxed, rolled his shoulders a bit and loosened his sleeves. He sat back and looked at Catherine.

“Force dispositions and terrain,” she said.

He nodded, shuffled papers, and began.

The hum of the ionic coolers gave a subtle backdrop to the dim light of the hotel room, the air gentle and slightly “smooth” with the effects of the processor; Angus had tinted the windows and lowered the lights to provide a soft twilight ambience. Neither of them felt up to facing the daylight, so they had relaxed in the room for several hours, packing and planning, until Terminus had set and the warm, lusty sky was smoldering and dark.

Angus was padding softly around their room, wearing his fatigue casuals, moving back and forth between the three large, dinged oblong metal cases propped in the corner, clamshelled open to reveal their day gear. All weapons were required to be cleared against the planet’s SecCustoms routines, a process which had taken nearly eight hours and needed to be conducted on the OPR; Baker had sent a grim-faced customs official and two attendants to bring them their equipment once it had survived the rigmarole. Angus shuffled between the cases, pulling pieces of gear and apparel from straps and pads and bringing them back to the room’s desk, where he was laying it out in stacks, then slipping it into their tacbags, bandoliers, or holsters.

Catherine was lying back on the bed, portable computer in her lap and jacked into the citywide network using the data passes they had been given: a small black box beside her repeatedly demanded her thumbprint before zapping a burst of compressed encryption keys for a range of three feet, just far enough to be received by her terminal. Neither of them had any idea how it worked; she remarked that the Terminus government was so paranoid it was a wonder they ever let anybody on-planet except their own blood relatives.

She was surfing through the nav and tac data Baker had squirted them in the meeting, making use of the more detailed maps and background files available on the milnet. She had a stack of printouts beside her, thick packets of probable target data and weather patterns, but the first step of their mission was pure intelligence work: Find them. She was scanning now through number-heavy diplomatic white papers and promotional material from the

Interplanetary Department of Transportation, trying to get a feel for the people they would be working with.

“Look at this,” she said. “While 90% of the Terminus surface population falls into the highest tier of UNHT’s technology classification ranking, more than half of them are working in agriculture. These are farmers with computers.”

Angus looked up from a small reactor handgun through which he had been cycling ammunition. His eyes went glassy in thought for a moment, then he replied, “The core of the economy here is centered around support for the OPR and its fleet activities. This is a major industrial center for UNSC.”

“But why agriculture?”

“Infrastructure. The size of the civilian population and the relative remoteness of Terminus makes it a logistical nightmare to support externally, so they made it self-sufficient . . . I don’t know when, must have been years ago. Fleet production is the main thing, but then you’ve got to support the workers, and that means housing, business, food, utilities. sc can subsidize most of it with spillover from production, but you have to feed people, no way around that. Half of the population here probably works on the ring, and most of the other half is agricultural production that either sells to the government or directly to the market.” Distant again, he crooked his head and let the tip of the pistol drop to rest on the cloudy faux-wood of the table. “Say, can you pull up a population density map on there?”

Catherine nodded absently, and several minutes later said, “Here’s one. I’ll print it.”

She tapped a few keys, then began scrolling through her visual display. “Okay, this planet is basically a garden. Hardly seems like a surprise that they’re losing patrols; there’s massive tracts of completely virginal land here without a soul inhabiting it—probably thousands of miles of space to hide an ambush.

“Surveillance?” Angus asked.

“Pretty minimal in the unmanned regions. Farmers here and there. Nowhere near enough orbital coverage to keep a constant patrol; they can look at specific spots, but they’ve got to know where. You could probably hide an armada for days out there.”

Frowning slightly, Angus looked down, then raised the weapon again and click-clicked the last of the smooth, matte cartridges out of the ejector port. He was several moments before he responded with a slight roll of his head and a glance up to her. “All right. I guess that’s the job, then.”

He began picking up the shells and clipping them back into the circular magazine, as the sky outside turned to liquid night.

Terminus City was a brash amalgam of laser-edge technological industry and prosperous, effective, yet millenia-old street markets. Walking down city’s the central road, which radiated off the government plaza like a long spike through the oblong stretch of the urban sprawl, they passed one after another of the small, utilitarian stalls and shops, some with brazen vendors hawking their wares, others with quiet attendants almost hidden as they worked with one thing or another in the shadowy rear, but all with bins or shelves of food prominently displayed—mostly raw goods like wheat and corn, but some finished products like “maranas,” the local specialty, made from a mixture of barley, corn, and local cheese, cooked in citrus. “The Terminus environment,” LaGrange had told them with blithe frankness, “is so ideal for cultivation that we can feed ourselves, support the OPR, and still end up exporting hundreds of tons of excess production every day. Between the wildly different climates and terrain available on the three continents, almost anything from an Earth-normal habitat can be grown here.”

“It’s like a citywide bargain sale,” Catherine remarked. It became quickly apparent that very few centralized markets existed in the city; nearly all commerce took place in public offerings such as those they experienced as they passed through the main boulevard. Angus called it “astonishingly medieval,” and when Catherine objected, said bluntly, “I’m not condemning it. I’m amazed. The unique circumstances of this planet have conspired to create an economic and practical reality that’s friendly to a form of fiscal interaction which has not existed on this scale for hundreds of years. It’s unusual.”

They turned off onto a smaller side street, no particular aim in mind, as he glanced over at her and met her eyes briefly. “Unusual is rarely incidental. I doubt if it’s a coincidence that we’re here.”

Wandering farther, they found before long that the city had very little in the way of geographic distinction—it was essentially homogenous, becoming only less dense as they approached the outskirts. Belying the haggling that occurred on the streets in a manner thousands of years old, sharp, towering buildings stabbed into the sky on every crisp rectangular block, and long sections of the city were walled off to protect the advanced production facilities that turned out supplies for the OPR’s day-to-day functions. The city was an exercise in dichotomy, and the two of them spent hours just walking, following whatever road appeared beneath their feet, acclimatizing themselves to the environment and its citizens.

As the night turned from dim to black—Terminus boasted a wide diameter and excruciatingly slow rotation, resulting in a nearly 36-hour day, as well as a deep night that was lit only by the distant stars—the two mercenaries found themselves passing through rapidly emptying streets as shopkeepers closed down their booths. Tall, startlingly bright street lamps were kindled one by one: large, dull crystals whose solid cores turned a furious blue-white under harsh kinetic currents. Tired and needing to recharge edges dulled in the long Slip-space flight, they found a terminal, and Catherine accessed the public datanet to find the nearest rec center; it was less than four blocks away, an unexpectedly long stretch given the unusually lengthy city streets, but still barely five minutes at a brisk walk. They reached the stunted, modern building, round and glassine, and quickly took shelter inside from the rapidly dropping temperature.

They rented a speedball court for twenty credits, showing the attendant the temporary identification badges Baker had supplied them before they left the Department of Social Engineering. Every UNSC citizen living legally on Terminus was logged as a *de facto* reservist in the planetary database. Though they had never been mobilized in quantity, or indeed activated at all, they were still required by law to carry official identification at all times. What was more, and somewhat unnervingly, the squat badges held a tiny alert beeper and a radio receiver that could pick up a broadcast signal from any of the large space or landbound antennae centered on Terminus’s major population centers, summoning what amounted to the entire planet to report to predesignated rally points. Distrusting the embedded antenna, which could send just as easily as receive, Angus had disabled both badges with a hammer and metal punch.

Warming up and stretching quickly, they unlocked the broad, smooth-floored court and flooded it with light. Angus had never played a competitive sport seriously before he met Catherine, but she was slowly teaching him the subtleties of the game, drawing on the twenty years she had spent as an Olympic speedball prospective.

But now, they needed only the catharsis of sweat, and both played hard and mercilessly. An hour later, the windows outside as black as if they had been painted, Catherine was leading the game by 80 points, and with a lithe feint, slammed the whistling puck onto a whirling, rolling course that lanced through the air past Angus into the scoring loop. A blue light blinked to announce the point and a snap-kinetic field flashed on ephemerally to deaden the puck’s velocity, which could reach and did reach upwards of 130 kilometers an hour.

Angus settled his feet evenly beneath him, feeling the high-tension friction shoes freeze to the polished floor as though they’d been nailed. He elevated his chin and smiled across the circular arena to Catherine.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Unsure of the existence or reliability of a public transportation system in Terminus City, and not wanting to impose on overworked UN staff to act as a glorified taxi service, they zipped up their densely lined amorphous-cell coats and began the walk back to their room, a private but government-subsidized hostel near the center of the city, halfway filled at any given time with Navy crews on furlough. The streets were wholly abandoned.

“Quite a night life,” Catherine whispered to Angus, who shook his head uneasily, nerves set on edge by the ghost-town atmosphere in what had hours earlier been a bustling

thoroughfare.

The tall, harsh street lamps, though stunningly bright, betrayed an attempt to compensate for inefficient lighting with brute force: only several blazing poles adorned each block, resulting in razor-sharp, discretely-graduated fields of near-day and gloomily dark shadow. Seemingly alone on the streets but made wary by the alien feel of the city, they stayed in the lighted center of the road until they rounded the turn that led them to their hotel, and that was when they were caught.

Angling toward the side of the street at the intersection, they were passing a hooded shopfront when the hidden figure materialized without warning from the shadows, less than a meter away.

He was already reaching out toward Angus when Catherine glimpsed the flash of steel in her peripheral vision; there was a mental stutter as long-honed reflexes clicked on, like well-used gears falling into place, and then she felt herself caught by the subliminal surge of instinct. Riding it without thought, she fell on her left foot into a thunderous dropstep, wheeling her right elbow blindly overhead in a diagonal strike. It connected solidly just before her foot landed, driving her weight behind the blow, and she stepped inward again, this time offline, bringing one hand up to cover while she shot the other to her waistband where a slender dagger was sheathed.

By the time it was drawn and she had looked up, Angus had a handful of the man's face and was hurtling him into the pavement, the attacker's foot already nailed to the ground by one of his own. She darted forward and met the man on the ground with a savage, swinging kick that intercepted his right hand and batted out its contents: a silvery, glinting blade, catching the dim light like a glistening minnow. It spun off into the darkness.

She glanced at Angus, ready to take a knee and finish the job with her dagger, but his pistol was in his hand, and she looked away instead, covering her ears just in time to deaden the *crump, crump* of the .357.

In a moment, it was gloomily silent again, and her heart hammering in her ears was the only evidence of the altercation. She lowered her knife, then carefully resheathed it before her hands began to shake.

Angus cleared his weapon, then knelt beside the now-motionless figure, ignoring the spreading pool of red-black blood. A mass of shattered bone, matted hair, and barely-visible brain matter, all glossy with blood, was all that remained of the back of his head. Wordless, face blank, Angus began to methodically check the clothing, patting through the fabric and emptying the pockets. Catherine stepped away, turning her head so she wouldn't have to watch the blood soak into Angus's pants and boots. Pulling her transcom, she hit the emergency button and scrambled the duty officer at the base. Within moments he was promising that a detachment was on its way.

The base was not far, and the responder team screamed through the streets with unnecessary lights and sirens, but before it arrived, both of them still had time, trembling with adrenaline, to heave out their guts onto the pavement.

"No, really. It won't be necessary." Angus pushed the man toward the door, gently but inexorably. "We appreciate the offer."

"It's really no—"

"Thanks again." He shut the door and immediately locked it.

It was early on the morning after the attack, and while they had declared emphatically that nobody was to bother them before dawn, since then Terminus officials had been calling on them almost continuously—the investigating officers from the military police, multiple apologetic representatives from the city government and the Terminus UN post, and LaGrange, who had made the third (by then) offer to detail them with a security detachment, only leaving after they had made it abundantly clear that they weren't interested. Baker was no help, only able to tell them that their attacker, who had been sent to the base medical section for an expedited forensic examination, was Savid Jameson, a local reseller of technical supplies, with both a streetfront and off-world distribution, had no criminal record, no family, no time in the service, and absolutely nothing of interest on his record.

“Deep cover?” Angus asked into the video screen of the transcom.

Baker’s tiny image shrugged. “Your call. Fleet counterintel screens all of the colonists on vital posts like Terminus, but that sieve is only meant to catch certain kinds of people. Either he came here as part of a sleeper element or he was turned after he arrived, no big difference.”

“Or he was hired on-task for this job.”

“Aye, or that.” Baker gave him a beady eye, and only half in jest, asked “You know something we don’t?”

“Just thinking,” Angus replied in a deadpan, and killed the connection.

They were both coming down from the adrenaline peak and crash of the night before, and it was not the best time for intensive thought. Eight hours of uninterrupted sleep had helped, though, and in any case, there was no avoiding it: they had to move on this immediately, or lose the trail.

They had already made plans to “walk the streets” today, and needed only to modify them slightly to follow up on their new data. Only two things had been on the body of their attacker that they hadn’t shared with the investigators when they arrived. The first was a simple electronic key, with a color-code ID that could match any shop in Terminus City or none of them.

The second was an encrypted radar beacon, small and unmarked. It had been plugged into Catherine’s portable computer throughout the night and well into the morning, with Sophitia’s brute-force modules trying unsuccessfully to break through the coding.

“I’m going to leave this running today,” Catherine said, “but don’t get your hopes up. We could get better odds with more power, but not much better, and we can’t ship in more hardware soon enough to make a difference.”

“They probably have a Superarray on the OPR. We—”

“Not a chance.” Even with Baker pulling strings, they both doubted that they would be able to get the resources they needed without delay, and if they did give it to UNSC, odds were just as good that Intelligence would simply sit on it until they could hand it off to a team of their own.

Baker *was* able, however, to supply them with the names of the contractors responsible for installing the electronic door locks for most of the prefab shops in Terminus City, and after a few hours of calling around, along with heavy invocations of governmental authority and a few unsubstantiated threats, they had compiled a list of the possible buildings that might fit the key they had found.

“Christ,” Angus said, as he watched the list peel off the printer. “This is half the city.”

They were in the streets by noon—“Just in time for the rush,” Catherine commented, citing a claim in the information files that the peak period for business was between 12:00 and 16:00, though the official business day did not end until 22:00. This had surprised them both until they realized that the Terminus sun didn’t set until midnight, ushering in the 12-hour duration of “subnight,” a tacked-on period that served only to permit the inhabitants of Terminus Prime to use the standard Earth-based UNSC clock without major modification. Generally, sleep and indoor recreation was done during subnight, under shelter from the nearly pitch black and very cold nighttimes, allowing the workers to hit the streets promptly at sunrise, ready for another 24-hour day. But at midday, the main tide was just starting to swell, and the two mercenaries found themselves bracketed on all sides with teeming masses of brown-clothed merchants and buyers.

They had determined in their casual reconnaissance the previous day that the vast majority of the vendor stalls lining the main drag were virtually identical: built and owned by the government in vast swaths, then leased out at easy rates to any citizen with a product. Rows and rows of the squat, cloned buildings streamed up the endless road like a colossal railway, at times drifting off into the rest of the city or interjected by the outskirts of a factory development. They had decided already to concentrate their efforts on the main road—Tarehart Boulevard—for straightforward reasons of prioritization: more than 90% of the public shops in Terminus City were located somewhere along its range, and it would be a simple matter to work through them systematically. If they failed there, they could spread their net more, but that would mean many days lost.

If they were forced to move their investigation outside of Terminus City, into the surrounding rural sprawl or even another city entirely, they would have to try another approach—they had nowhere near the resources for a planet-wide canvass, even with the relatively small colonial base of Terminus Prime when compared to a major population center like Earth or Reach. Certainly they did not have the ability to follow the scent to the OPR; if the trail took them there, they would be forced to hand over the reins to UNSC's hard-nosed internal teams.

In the meantime, they blended into the crowd and began to move through the street, assuming the roles of local merchants out for their daily acquisitions. They had picked up enough of the local language and customs the previous day to present a fairly convincing front; it would not hold up if pressed for long, but they had no intention of striking up any hour-long debates.

Their routine was unoriginal, but effective. More importantly, they had enough experience with it to pull it off in their sleep.

As they approached the first shop, Angus bled off wordlessly and let the swarm of the crowd carry him several feet away, turning instantly invisible as he assumed his "aimless drifter" aura and began to wander. Catherine headed straight for the shop's entrance and assumed a face of mellow professionalism, turning over several of the wares and pretending to be impressed.

The owner came over, digipad and stylus in his hands. "Fair shopping. Interested in a load?"

In truth, Catherine had no idea what she was handling. They were fuzzy brown spheres, slightly lopsided, similar to coconuts. She coughed, stalling, and then asked, "How much?"

"Twenty credits a tenweight. Buy a hundredweight and I'll have it shipped to you anywhere in the city, no charge."

She made a face. One didn't need to know the product to know how to barter. "Twenty credits? What is this, the finest crop in the last fifty years?"

The man squinted at her, sizing her up, then set down his pad and folded his arms. Behind him, without moving her eyes, Catherine saw Angus slip away from the crowd and drift silently toward the side door of the building. She could see him try the electronic key, then shake his head at her; she looked away, but watched in her peripheral vision as his hands disappeared into his pockets, coming out with tools, as Angus began to work on the door.

She resisted a smile. He was the only man she knew who could look completely appropriate and nonchalant while breaking into a building.

"Not fifty years, but at least twenty," the vendor was saying. "It's been an excellent year for sayas."

"Really." Her eyes didn't waver.

"Absolutely. But for you, I'll tell you what, I'm feeling generous—eighteen credits, I'll give you a load for eighteen."

"Fifteen."

Shaking his head, the man scowled as if she'd offered him a dead fish. "Surely you jest, miss. You trying to kill me? I could sell these on the trans-market for twenty, twenty five . . ."

"Sure, if you weren't a poor bastard without the capital to ship in bulk. You're not getting more than seventeen, eighteen for these on Terminus, and—" she picked up a saya and rolled it in her hand "—that's selling to fools and the blind. You'd be lucky to get ten credits for this garbage." Angus had the lock open, and he noiselessly cracked the door and darted inside.

The vendor covered his eyes for a moment with his hands, then dropped them again to stare at her piercingly. "You're mad, miss. This beautiful crop! Look at the color, the weight!" He grabbed a large saya from the table and shook it at her. "See how smooth! Washed and tumbled—there is none finer on the street!"

She canted her head and squinted, unimpressed. "Sixteen."

Hissing in pain, he dropped the sphere and tossed up his hands. "Ruin. My God. Fine, fine! Take it all, take everything. Sixteen credits, and my dignity."

She couldn't help but smile, but Angus was already slipping out of the building and shutting the door with a quiet click. Smoothing her hair back, she said, "Well, I'll think about it. Have to check the rest. Fair shopping—" and she was gone before he could sputter a reply.

Angus merged to her side a moment later and leaned in to say, “Nothing. Fast lock, though. This should be easy. How was the owner?”

Smirking, she replied, “Not much of an actor. I think we got a deal on . . . things.”

They continued down the street, repeating the routine with each shop and storefront on the map. Rusty reflexes quickly loosened, and both sides of the job grew faster until they were getting in and out in less than a minute. Catherine had to remind them both not to start moving so fast they became sloppy.

Hours passed, though the glaring light of the Terminus sun barely seemed to waver. The difference in upbringing between the two mercenaries—who had lived on Earth-normal worlds the majority of their lives—and the natives of Terminus City, who had grown up with a daylight cycle half again as long as Earth’s, continued to manifest itself. After hours working the street undercover, they found themselves growing more and more weary, ready to turn in for a nap and a shower.

“A *nap*,” she hissed at him when he had relayed that particular thought. “We aren’t *elderly*.”

He gave a low, rough laugh. “Not exactly the flower of youth, either, my dear.” Furtively, he glanced around, then muttered, “Moreover, unless I’ve entirely lost my eye, there are maybe *six* people on this entire goddamned boulevard who aren’t young enough to be our children.”

She glanced up quickly, but he was looking away already, not willing to broach that subject again, not today. It was true, though; the Terminus population seemed to have an unusually low mean age. She guessed that most of the natives shipped out to work for Fleet on the OPR or off-world before they passed their prime. She filed the thought away for future reference.

The crack on their age had not gone unnoticed by her, though, and she grabbed him by the collar and goosed her thumb into his brachial plexus, muttering into his ear, “Why don’t you haul your aging joints over to this next building, Master Reverend? If we hurry we should be able to get you out of this sun before you burst a blood vessel.”

He squirmed away from the hold on his pressure point, which had not been particularly gentle, and with a “Just so.” was gone into the crowd. She shook her head and made her way to the storefront, this one indoors.

“Ho there!” she called out cheerfully as she entered, having gotten well into the mood of Terminus commerce hours earlier.

The man, tall and wirey, with a natively dark complexion but incongruously large and wandering blue eyes, glanced quickly up upon hearing her voice, seemingly startled. “Fair shopping,” he murmured, looking her over vacantly for a moment.

Spending a minute looking over his wares, which included several varieties of local grain and two or three fruits that were probably imported from one of the more temperate continents, she frowned slightly. The grain was dried and packed, which was common enough, but the produce looked several days old at best, perhaps as old as a week. So far, everything she had haggled over in the shops had been fresh to the point of being ludicrous, as one would expect on an agricultural planet; they had seen several motorized carts zooming through the streets while they worked, stopping at different shops to deliver new loads of their goods. Deliveries and resupply seemed nearly constant.

She cleared her throat, and the man jerked his head up again, as if she had disturbed a reverie. No point in being subtle; anybody who stopped into his door would have noticed the state of his wares, though likely few would have bothered saying anything, there being no shortage of alternate suppliers.

“These fresh?” she asked brightly, trying to catch his eye, which kept wandering. When she spoke, he finally found her gaze, narrowing his own slightly.

“Been trouble,” he said.

She waited, but he seemed to have no interest in continuing.

“Trouble?”

Looking at her harder, eyes dark, he replied shortly, “Back on the farm. Lifter broke.”

She opened her mouth to speak again, but at that moment the tiny tranceiver in her right ear canal began to vibrate minutely, and she had to cough and turn away, pretending to check her pockets.

Angus's voice, generated in her tampanic membrane canal millimeters from the drum, sounded like the voice of God. The inside-ear receivers were fantastic for covert work, but she had never gotten used to them.

"Something new here," his booming voice hummed out, and she had to resist the urge to look around for its source. "This door's solid-core steel and it feels like it's slatted. Going to try the key in a second; what's it look like on your end?"

She didn't need to glance up; her impression was already cemented. Brushing a loose strand of hair back with her left hand, she hid her lips for a moment while she subvocalized into the hidden, wireless throat microphone. "Not right."

"Yeah." He was probably shaking his head, and she suppressed the urge to tell him to be careful. "I'm trying it now. Out."

Pretending to give up the hunt for whatever had disappeared into her pockets, she turned back to the vendor and gave a campy smile. "Oh we—"

The rolling *bbam* of a firearm discharging inside the small building swallowed her words, and the man's eyes shot open wide; his stare froze on her for a moment, then he broke and spun, starting to lunge for something under the table. Stunned but reflexive, Catherine twisted to open a break in her clothing and expose the top of her inner-waistband holster, then swept out the flat black pistol and fixed it on the man. "*Don't!*"

He hesitated for a moment, flickering his gaze up to see her again, and she opened her mouth to speak, but then another gunshot slammed through the building and she saw something desperate snap in him as he dove again under the table. Without thinking, she squeezed the trigger, and a jacketed round nailed through his left shoulder like a divot. He spun sideways from the force, but didn't stop, and with his right hand found what he was looking for and began to draw it into sight: A stubby, wide-barreled "roomsweeper" carbine, barrel sawed off so short that it was nearly a handgun. She fired again as he turned toward her, catching him this time dead-center in his sternum, just below the heart, and that one was a finisher, but he kept swinging the carbine up mechanically, and so she emptied the rest of the pistol into him, squeezing over and over, seeing the bloody holes appear like magic on his chest, stomach, one in his right bicep, one in the nape of the neck . . . by the sixth round his gun, though still rising, was barely moving, and aiming carefully with a death grip she centered her sights between his eyes and fired three times, emptying the rest of the magazine into his face. He disappeared as if swallowed by the ground; for a frozen moment she stared down the barrel of her empty weapon, seeing the blood splattered on the wall in front of it, like a grotesque telescope—eyes, back sight, front sight, blood—then she unstuck and dropped the empty magazine, pulling another from under her blouse and slamming it home, then vaulted over the table. She held her weapon on the body on the ground for a glance, but a moment's attention showed he would never be moving again, so she quickly kicked away the carbine and then darted toward the door leading into the rear of the building.

Hurrying but cautious, her left hand went to the knob, considering a traditional piece-by-piece room entry, but the sound of gunfire was harsh in her memory, spurring her on; instead, she simply slapped at the doorhandle as she kicked it open, leading with the gun in her right hand, and lunging into the room.

Bright white overhead lights illuminated the space, which seemed cavernous; it was clearly a holding area for supplies, but not a crate or bale was visible. Instead, a large table was centered in the room, chairs surrounding it, an unfolded paper map spread across the top, pens and other markers littering its surface. Other bags and supplies were scattered across the rest of the room, and—

Slumped against the wall, blood staining his shirt and jacket, was Angus Reverend, hand clutching his tiny escape derringer, a one-shot .50 palmgun that he usually wore around his neck or up his sleeve, like a trick card deck. "*Angus!*"

She shot forward, releasing her gun and dropping to her knees at his side. Throat frozen, she slapped at his face hard, finding the carotid artery at his neck with the other hand. "*Answer me! God damn it, Angus!*"

His eyes flickered. Her heart skipped a beat. Underneath her fingertips was a faint but steady pulse.

As his eyes opened slowly, pupils contracting, he found her distractedly, taking several

seconds to steady his gaze. He smiled slightly.

She slapped him again. “Don’t you *dare* grin at me, you fucking—”

In the slim pack at her waist was her trauma kit, nothing more than several wads of clotting gauze and an adhesive bandage. While she found it with unsteady fingers and slipped out a roll of gauze, her other hand jerked out the slim knife from her left boot and began to carefully slice away Angus’s upper garments with the razor-sharp blade. Immediately she could see the wound, a single bullethole that had driven through the thick fold of muscle above his shoulder, missing the nearby bundle of nerves but apparently nicking an artery; it was still pulsing with blood, a fresh surge with each beat of his heart. She immediately began packing it with gauze, and he surprised her by lifting his opposite hand to hold it into place. His eyes were still motionless as he watched her every motion wordlessly.

Adding more gauze and pressing hard directly on the wound—noting his grimace with clinical satisfaction—she began to apply the bandage, a highly adhesive cover that maintained continuing pressure by virtue of tension. By the time she was done, the bulge of gauze (a sterile packing seeded with a blood thickener to accelerate clotting) was sealed on all edges and pressing firmly into the wound, though she could see it already beginning to soak through with red.

She could hear sirens. Someone had reported gunfire.

“Cathy . . .”

Angus tried to clear his throat, then screwed up his face in pain and grunted. She touched him on the side of his face. “Don’t talk. Try not to move your chest. You’re just making the skin slide around.”

He grunted again, shook his head convulsively, then parted his lips and spoke again, voice hoarse as a dog. “No . . . Cathy . . . you have to search him.” He lifted his good arm weakly.

Turning, she saw the man crumpled on the cement floor, nearly hidden by the table, slumped next to a chair in a pool of his own blood and the remains of what looked like vodka. The now-empty bottle and a pistol lay by his side. She hadn’t even seen him. There was a neat hole in his forehead.

“Drunk but quick . . . check him before the civs get here . . .”

She let his head rest back against the wall, then stepped quickly over to the motionless figure and began feeling down his pockets, dumping everything she found into her shoulder bag. Angus kept mumbling.

“Must’ve heard me . . . barrel on me when I came through . . .” He pushed his chin down idly and eyed the seeping red bandage on his shoulder. “. . . nasty bleeder, eh . . .” His head fell back as his voice faded away.

Satisfied that she’d cleaned the man out, she grabbed the map off the table and bundled it up, including everything that had lain on top, and stuffed it into her bag as well. Then she disappeared into the front room for a moment to check the first man. The sirens were deafening now; they must have mobilized half of the civilian response force. With so much UNSC activity here, it was probably a fairly quiet city, most of the time.

She returned to the back room and shoved the ill-won door open, then carefully gathered Angus’s fluid-soaked and limp body into her arms and carried him outside.

Fifteen years ago, during a diplomatic legation to Nimravus—not when they had finally decided to run, but another, long before, though still years after they had fallen in love—Catherine had awoken in the middle of a frozen night, bitten by the deep temperatures brought on by the Nimravus winter, and walked out onto the stoop of her guest room in the low-sprawling imperial palace. Shivering in the cold, she had stepped through her door to find Angus in the dim white and gray speckling of the meditation garden, wearing only a light silk cover around his waist, torso nude, but seemingly oblivious to the touch of the still, stinging chill air. In one hand was his wingsword, sleek and slender, a sliver of flicking light, like he held a stroke of creation, Zeus for a moment; in excruciating slow motion he was stepping gracefully along the flat, gray flagstones of the garden path. Perfectly poised and delicate, he looked to her like a bug crossing the surface of a pond, afraid to break the surface and shatter the implicit agreement between gravity and magic.

As she watched, the sword came up, a silky drop of oil, neither running against nor cutting

through the air, but seeming to slide between it, and he directed it into a smooth strike along an imaginary axis, blade and body a single motion, like the snake and its fangs. His bare skin was scarred but still smooth, and as it moved across the lean ridges of muscle, the sword shifting in space, Angus's eyes seemed to pierce his imaginary target and plunge past it, through the disappearing point, to something far deeper, Catherine felt the entire image was frozen and preserved, a moment stuck in time—if she lifted a hand, plucked at its seams, she could pull it away, fold it, slide it under her pillow, save it for all eternity.

But when she moved, the spell was broken, and he lowered the weapon, mere mortal again—beautiful, the king of a world, as perfectly in place as the sun in the sky, but just a human being, just the man that she loved. They spoke for a long time, and he explained about the wingswords; how they were crafted after conception and tempered at the moment of birth, bonded to their master, carried for his entire life in peace and in war, and in death, broken, the shards laid upon his body in the place of rest.

“They say,” he told her, “that our souls are tethered to the hilt with invisible string, and the metal keeps it anchored to us while we’re alive. When we die, the wings”—he gestured to the crossguard, which had the traditional form of two upswept wingspans—“carry us away from our bodies, into the stars.”

He gave a sardonic wink, but it seemed forced. “Thus the fearsome risks of a life of sin—which would make the soul heavy to carry, and the journey long and treacherous—or of shallowness of character, which would make it so light, it might could blow away with the wind.”

He stepped toward her, raising the hilt to his lips in a fencer's salute.

“And to love, why, naturally—that is worst of all.”

She sought him out in his eyes, as she often did, and this time found a strange gleam that frightened her and drew her in all at once. “And what then?” she found the strength to say. He swept the blade back, as if to acknowledge a return salute, the tip now downward, pointing into the dark earth.

“What then?” He smiled mirthlessly, but in his eyes, though she searched, she saw no regret. “Why, then, of course, the soul will be hopelessly tangled with its mate, the poor wings rendered helpless; and the luckless soul will be bound forever to the earth, sentenced to wander this existence for all eternity, tied to its partner in knots it cannot undo, and never will they see the stars.”

They stood in silence for a moment, then Angus spun the sword back to the front of his body and reversed it in his grip, then, holding it in both hands with the point hanging, stepped toward Catherine and offered her the hilt. “Would you like to try?”

Catherine had been sitting in a small collapsible chair just outside the dust-sealed door to the surgery room for almost five hours. It was the closest she could get to Angus where he lay under the laser, and every ten minutes or so she tried again to open the door—but it was hermetically locked to safeguard against infection, and she knew that even if she could get it open, it would only put him in danger. Twice, she had spoken to passing orderlies or nurses, who invariably were on other business and knew nothing about his status; once she had gotten up to find the main desk, but they could tell her nothing either, except to wait. Three times, despite her attempts at breath control and meditation to keep herself in check, the shaking had gotten too bad, and she'd run for the bathroom to vomit out whatever she had managed to eat since the last time. As she hunched over the smooth synthetic basin, the image of Angus's blood-soaked figure kept appearing before her eyes, and she heaved and heaved, trying to push it out.

On her third such trip, as the retching began to subside, she looked up into the mirror and realized that this was different. As mercenaries, both of them had made close brushes with their mortality many times. Even before the beginning of their current frequently-deadly career, Angus—as part of a society that recognized its rulers not only as political leaders but martial ones as well—had known the taste of his own death many times, and Catherine herself had spent years leveraging her influence to seek out training and experiences “unbecoming a lady.” Yet in all that, there had never been fear. Combat fear, of course, and without question

they feared for their lives in the same instinctive way that any living thing does, and all the more so being warriors accustomed to its guise. They met tragedy and overcame crisis and survived on their personal as well as combined strength.

But they had never really believed that they could lose each other.

She leaned her head against the smooth surface of the mirror, looking at her own reflection inches away. *But we do bleed. Our scars aren't just memories; they're misses. One piece of metal in the wrong place, one bad angle or moment, and we're not Angus Reverend and Catherine Richards, brighter than life; we're meat and blood and hollow grief.*

What had changed? What happened to the infamous devil-may-care dyad that had once penetrated a fully-manned pirate battlecruiser in the Outer Reaches and stolen a contentious datachip from under the captain's nose? To the pair that had not wasted breath advocating a life of dazzling vibrancy, but had instead lived it, almost daring fate to match their willing audacity?

Were they getting *old*?

Or merely tired?

"Not with a bang but a whimper," she whispered to her doppledanger. Wiping her eyes and washing her hands, she found her way back to her door and her chair, where the doctor was waiting.

There was a stool built into the side of the immersion station, and Catherine slipped into it, but was out in a moment and leaning forward, hovering over Angus's immobile form as she sobbed and kissed him, letting her tears mingle with his. The large, sarcophagus-like immersion station was designed for full-body care, and most of its systems were now inactive, but the immobilization elements had been pushed against Angus's nerve clusters and switched on, his major muscle groups as frozen as if he'd been paralyzed. The doctors had said that the measure had been prompted by a number of irregularities encountered during the surgery; once they had obtained another few hours of data, they would "unlock" him, barring any further deviations. The immobilizers had no effect from the neck up, at least, and when Catherine finally broke the kiss he darted his eyes around in an expressive gesture and said hoarsely, "Bit of a step up from the last time I had a bullet pulled out of me," and astonishingly, winked at her, which almost set her off again. Angus's last bullet wound had come three years ago in an intelligence job on Sabitha IV that had gone bad; their contact had snapped and put a small-caliber pistol round into Angus's left hamstring, and it had had to be removed by a nervous Marine medtech using bloody forceps and mountains of gauze during the turbulent, raging ride on a troop shuttle up to their evac ship, fleeing the planet under a blown cover. Angus coughed convulsively, throat dry from disuse while he'd been under the laser. "Listen," he muttered, and she stayed close, head to head to make sure she heard him. "What did we get?"

"Just relax, we'll deal with—"

"I did not"—cough, wheeze—"I did not get my ass shot up for the fun of it, my love. Tell me I'm here for a good reason."

Reluctant but assenting, she looked around briefly then leaned back in. "All right, lots of crap, two things we care about. They had the decrypt key for the beacon—"

He let out a relieved sigh at that.

"—so that was definitely the place, counter intel guys are swarming all over the building now, not finding much. There was also a marked map, heavily marked, not really much that I can decipher, but it's a map of the western continent, and the labels are concentrated in a pretty remote area."

Letting his eyes roll up as he concentrated, then shutting them completely, Angus paused, then asked, "Recon?"

"I talked to Baker. No low drones we can use, they don't have that kind of equipment here; there's a small bevy of recon sats in asynchronous orbit, though, not even a full spread—remember where we are, Angus; there's usually crap-all to take pictures of on this fucking planet except fields. And the OPR doesn't overlap that region."

"Fine. The recon birds?"

"Yeah," she glanced down reflexively as if to check her possessions, but she was carrying

nothing. “I got some shots, they’re on the computer. Nothing much, though, it just shows the terrain. Either nothing’s there, or I didn’t spread the search wide enough, or whatever it is it’s just too well hidden to show up on a high-flying low-tech satellite scan.”

He nodded slightly. “We’ll have to check it in person.”

Frowning down at his mostly comatose figure, she gave him the glare she usually saved for her opponents on the speedball court. “No, *I* will have to check. You are in the hospital, in case you missed that turn of events, Mister Reverend.”

[end without ceremony—continued at a future date]