

MEL KEEGAN

NARC

4



APHELION

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NARC #4

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

APHELION

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NARC: aphelion

CHAPTER ONE

Stray shrapnel was everywhere, windmilling at high velocity as if it had been ejected from a geocannon, and catastrophe was only a matter of time. Jerry Stone glanced sidelong at his partner's face, which reflected the weird primary colors of the dock tug's instruments. The red master alarm lights had just winked on, and the slate gray eyes were filled with witchfires.

Before he and Jarrat had even registered the warning lights, they felt the deep bell-chime of collision through the whole airframe, and Stone smothered a curse. The ice-cold fist clenching on his belly might have been his own nerves tightening or Jarrat's, and with a deliberate effort he slammed the empathic shield up between them.

A klaxon howled deeper in the body of the tug, where the pilot had gone back to kill time with a cigarette and the vidfeed from GlobalNet. On the distorted edge of hearing, Stone picked up a voice bellowing, raw with animal fear. He might have hurried aft, shouting for the man to get back to the cab, get off the engine deck, but before he could even turn he heard the heavy *thud* of pressure doors sealing. He did not even know the pilot's name.

The clipper *Cygnus Stardust* was forty minutes overdue at the Mawson Dock, and she was still holding off, twenty kilometers out, while a swarm of Tactical squad flyers formed up between her and the docks. She was idling in high orbit, vulnerable as a sleeping whale. From the cramped cockpit of the dock tug she looked like a spaceborne carnival, a kilometer-wide display of lights flung across the spectrum.

An hour ago Jarrat and Stone had been aboard, and as red telltales winked on among the instruments before him, Stone swore softly. He and Jarrat would have been safer if they had stayed aboard, waited it out, but Central's orders were specific. Bill Dupre's impatience put them on this tug, shuttling over to the NARC docks — or not, Stone thought acidly. The NARC facility was on an orbit only slightly higher than the clipper dock, and with every Tactical squad standing by the *Stardust*, the lanes between the liner and both the platforms were a mess.

The lights of Venice glittered in the velvet darkness of the planet's night side. Dawn was two hours away in the city, and people would wake up to an unusual furor on GlobalNet. Every news feed was jammed with footage from the camera ships covering the protest. The screens in the transit lounge aboard the *Stardust* were busy with live video, and Stone had watched the pictures with a muted disgust as he and Jarrat waited for the tug.

Air traffic would continue to hold off the clipper until Tactical regained some semblance of control. The Cygnus Lines dock was blockaded by a fleet of gnat-sized civilian craft, and the danger of accident was massive, especially when Tactical deployed. A few pilots pulled out before they could be imaged and ID'd; bloody-minded determination seemed to consume others, and minor collisions were commonplace as transports refused to be moved along. A few deliberately rammed the Tactical squads.

Complete catastrophe had been imminent for long minutes, and Stone knew Tac Fire Control, Hazmat, and Search and Rescue would be scrambling to launch out of cities as far apart as Venice and Hudson. The protest vessels had abandoned the marked traffic lanes and milled about between the tocamac-shape of the clipper dock and the elongated spindle-and-discs form of the NARC docks; and framed in the screen as a GlobalNet remote camera zoomed for a grainy, long-range closeup, was the *Athena* herself.

"What the hell was *that* —?" Kevin Jarrat reached over the back of the empty copilot's seat and punched up a schematic of the tug. "Christ, I don't believe this, Stoney." He zoomed on the plot of the ship. "Look at this! We're depressurizing."

The preliminary damage report scrolled rapidly through one side of the screen while the other displayed a wide shot of the impact site. The tug had taken a forty-tonne chunk of white-hot, razor-prowed and radiotoxic shrapnel in the belly, the worst place she could be hit. Like any dock tug, she was all engines, with little superstructure, no real armor, and only a comparatively tiny cab module to accommodate a regular crew of four. Two pilots and two techs were normally aboard. On this flight she had been pressed into shuttle service, and a single standby pilot was dispatched to dawdle over to the *Stardust*, pick up the NARC officers and deliver them to the carrier. The task had looked trivial.

Pressure doors continued to slam and lock, and the flight computer was murmuring in its androgynous and infuriatingly calm tones. "Warning. Hull breach. Warning. Pressure seals 7 through 9 are enabled. Warning. Reactors are compromised. Spill in progress. Warning. Number 6 Engine is ruptured. Warning —"

"We better get out," Jarrat said tersely. "She'll be hot as hell in three minutes. The pressure doors are holding her, but we're leaking like a sieve from the port-side reactor."

Stone leaned closer to read the instruments. "We might be able to contain it, buy ourselves some time."

"See what you can do." Jarrat's voice was bleak. "I'll go back and prime a bug-out pod. If I can," he added in a rasp as he slipped a comset over his ear and stepped out of the cockpit. The body of the tug was lit in bloody hazard lights, and as Kevin vanished into the murk Stone heard him calling, "Tug 757 to NARC-*Athena*. This is 9.4, *Athena*, respond, goddamn it!"

He might have been talking to himself. No signal from the carrier was getting through, and Stone was not surprised. Space was a mess, and he

could only guess that the tug itself was off the air. The aerials were more than likely mangled, and Jarrat knew it. Still, he kept calling as he made his way aft, and Stone placed comm options a close second on his list of priorities.

The tug's whole airframe had twisted through a few degrees when the engine ruptured, and he was as keenly aware as Jarrat, the escape pods might be functional, yet jammed in their cradles. He swung out the pilot's seat, dropped into it, and settled a comset into his ear as he shifted the display into damage control mode.

Jarrat's voice whispered, just in his audio range, still hailing the carrier, but Stone did not need that small contact to know where his partner was. The empathic shield had slammed up, but the cutting edge of Jarrat's emotions and sensations scythed through it like shards of broken glass. With a deliberate effort he set the phantom sensations firmly into their own perspective and turned his attention to the instruments.

His eyes skimmed the meager resources he could access, and he swore again. Not nearly enough was available to secure the tug and wait for a pickup. The best he could hope for was to slow the rot, and keys pattered under his fingers as he launched the maintenance drones.

They had already auto-prepped in the instant of the collision, and their rudimentary brains were loaded with data from a mainframe that considered itself in dire jeopardy. Four industrial drones, each the size of a Skytruck, dropped out of the blister pods in the flanks of the beleaguered engine deck, and Stone saw green blips as their propulsion came online.

"Drones away," he said to the comm, "for what it's worth. Number 6 engine is bleeding coolant like the proverbial stuck pig ... we're starting to sizzle, Kevin, and there's not much I can do about it." His hands had splayed over the flight controls, like those of a musician. "I'm trying to get hold of maneuvering. Anything. We could have a lick of emergency thrust left."

It might be enough to shift the tug's attitude and set up a gentle drift, which would send the coolant streaming away into space rather than bathing the side of the wreck. On the aftscan CRT, he was watching the belches of incandescent gas from the ruptured engine. Insidious as silver-gray fog, they wreathed the rear of the cab module and crept into the cavities where the hull had peeled open like a can.

From the remaining seven engines, he saw only negative data. They had autoscrammed to save themselves when one of the three reactors overloaded and began to spill. All engines were locked down tight, and the two surviving Prometheus units had initiated self-preservation routines. The housings were constantly flooding and purging borex vapor, at the temperature of liquid nitrogen. The machines were nominally intelligent, with a tiny self-awareness. They knew they were in trouble, and they knew they were so close to the Venice civilian docks that any 'excursion' here would exact a horrific toll in human life. Their priority was to shut down fast and survive, and Stone did not even attempt to retask them.

He was concentrating on the emergency thrusters — one-shot, solid-fuel

engines which were pathetically underpowered, and the last resort the tug possessed. Every power system was fried crisp, and he hunted for almost a minute to find a route via which he could even access the thrusters. Jarrat was still hailing the carrier, and the edge in his voice was like a knife.

"How do the pods look?" Stone said softly to the comm.

"Lousy," Jarrat told him flatly. "Two are already contaminated. One's damaged, won't even boot up, and the only one that's working is jammed in the cradle." He paused, and Stone heard him breathing heavily over the comm, as if he were trying to physically rock the pod, loosen it. "No go," he said moments later, in a rasping voice. "You can forget the pods, Stoney. And the carrier's not answering."

"I don't think we're transmitting." Stone glanced at the telemetry from the drones. They were deep in the coolant stream, half-visible on the aftscan, and assessing the damage with machine speed, and the machine's carelessness of risk. All four would be destroyed, and if they could seal the rupture in Number 6's coolant lines, Stone would count the cost cheap. He was intent on the CRT at his elbow, and when the data he had been waiting for crawled into the screen — late and painfully slow — he took a sharp breath.

"I felt that," Jarrat said into the loop. "Stoney!"

"I can get us some emergency thrust," he said quickly. "Not enough to shunt us home, but enough to get us out of the spill and the coolant stream from 6. Buys us a few more minutes."

"Do it." Jarrat was panting, and Stone felt the push and pull of his muscles, the prickle of his sweat. "A few minutes might cover it."

The escape pods might be no good, but Jarrat was onto something. Stone held his breath as he jockeyed power to the thrusters and set the igniters. The tanks were full, the power couplings looked viable, and he threw a prayer into the void as he hit the igniters.

If he had been expecting the kick in the back of real acceleration, he was disappointed. The thrusters were rudimentary, a fallback to technology so ancient, malfunction was virtually impossible: simple trans-fluorine propellant in four high-pressure tanks, a reaction chamber, an engine bell, and the most primitive electrical igniter. Stone hit the master arm and hoped some soldier's god might be listening.

Green lights winking on among the flocks of red warnings were his only sign that the thrusters had come online. Four rockets were burning in the pods under the tug's crushed belly, and as he pushed up out of the seat his eyes were fixed on the attitude indicators.

The AI had stabilized the tug in the moments after the collision, before two out of three grav generators autoscrammed. The ship had been drifting toward the *Stardust* at a few kilometers per hour, and now she was rolling. She began to drift away from the liner as he watched. Despite the drones' best efforts, she was still spewing coolant and raw fuel, but the goutts of sizzling, corrosive vapor were now jetting away from the ruined hull. One of the drones spun about and applied itself to decontamination of the blasted

cavity. The effort was futile, but it bought Jarrat and Stone a few minutes, and Stone did not intend to waste them.

He was moving as Jarrat shouted over the comm. “Stoney, get back here! Move!”

“Moving,” he said against the mic. “Where are you?”

“Forget about the pods,” Jarrat told him. “I just pulled out the deck plates, and take a look what I found.”

A shape was mobile before him in the bloody murk, and Stone headed toward it just as Jarrat stooped and turned on a pair of feeble worklights in the under-deck lockers.

“There’s not a lot of power in the cells,” he warned. “Whoever stored this kit didn’t bother to recharge it ... which makes sense, when you look at the rest of this crap. You’d clean it down before you bothered to put it on charge. Thing is, nobody’s gotten around to either job yet.”

In the recess at his feet was a mass of kevlex plates, spattered and gouged, and Stone’s nose wrinkled on the reeks of a dozen chemicals, some of them borderline hazardous. He recognized armor at once, and a moment later he made out two helmets, two pairs of gauntlets. The suits were well-used, dirty, battered. None of which mattered to Stone, so long as they were sound, and the packs showed useful levels of gas and power.

“Tug 757 to NARC-*Athena*,” Jarrat repeated for the twentieth time. “Respond, please.” Nothing. He gave Stone a hard look, and the weird shadows hollowed his face. “We’re out of options.”

“The thrusters came online,” Stone said tersely as he reached for the gauntlets, picked them up with his fingertips and worked both hands into them before he touched anything else. “The drones are plugging the leaks and hosing us down with borex, but the truth is, we’re probably starting to sizzle right now. We don’t have long.”

“And we’re not transmitting,” Jarrat added as he wriggled his own hands into the other pair of gauntlets and reached back for the armor’s breastplate. “I’m guessing, the aerials are in bad shape.”

“They could be gone,” Stone speculated. “We could have a better chance if we’re out. Run the suit broadcast to maximum, maybe call the *Stardust*, get them to bounce a signal to the carrier.”

Jarrat’s teeth bared in a grin that was closer to grimace. “We’re on the same page,” he muttered as he dumped down the breastplate and called up the pack’s display. It lit, flickered, stabilized, and he gave a low whistle. “There’s about twenty minutes left in this, if I’m lucky.”

“Which is about twenty minutes longer than we’ve got if we stay aboard,” Stone said grimly. He was peering at the other suit, and as the display steadied he read off, “Fifteen minutes dead. And I do mean, dead.”

“Give me that suit,” Jarrat said quietly. “Come on, Stoney, it makes sense. I don’t have your body mass, not by fifteen kilos. Gives me an extra few minutes at the end ... which is all it takes, and you know I’m right.”

For a split second, Stone knew, Kevin was back in an alley in the

spaceport city of Chell. Though the empathic shields were still up, he felt a rush of dread, white-hot pain, the primal fear of a man who recognized the face of death when he looked into it. Then Jarrat was in command again, the memories were locked down tight, and he was hauling out boots, helmets, backplates. Only Stone would ever be aware of the moment's flash of post trauma syndrome.

And Kevin was right — they had no time to waste, especially not in fretting over scenes that were long past. Stone did not even squander the time and breath it took to curse. In the back of his mind was a chrono, counting down, and by any calculations they were out of time already.

The suit was crude by comparison with riot armor, but it was sturdy. The joints were smart-sealed, like the riot armor, but the plates were much thicker, the helmet, gauntlets and boots comparatively clumsy, and every part of every surface was corroded, burned, pitted. This armor was probably as old as Jarrat and Stone were themselves, and it was not well cared for.

The seals self-formed around Stone's knees, hips, waist, elbows, and the display in the helmet blinked green each time, telling him he was secure. Jarrat hung the too-heavy shoulder plates for him, and the suit auto-pressurized with a serpent hiss of inert system gases.

With the helmet in his hands, Stone waited for Jarrat to finish suiting, and he breathed for the first time in a minute when he heard the same hiss, telling them the second suit was also secure. "Fifteen minutes," he warned.

"Maybe twenty," Jarrat argued. "You know you can never measure down to the last bar in a tank ... and like I said, I don't have the same body mass. You shove Gil Cronin into this suit and, damnit, he wouldn't last *twelve*." He tucked the oversized helmet under his arm. "Time we got out." He paused then, frowning at the engineers' suits. "These things might stop enough of the spill, keep us safe long enough for a pickup, if we stay aboard."

"Then again," Stone growled, "they might be as dodgy as they look. Given the choice, I wouldn't trust them."

"So we bug out," Jarrat agreed.

"And get a call through to the *Stardust*," Stone added. "God knows, there's enough Tactical squads in the air, standing by her."

They were moving even then, and as Stone had guessed, the airlock right behind the cockpit was the only one still operating. The mid-body 'locks had shut down when every power system in the tug fried itself, and the aft 'locks were behind the pressure doors, in the ruptured compartments. Stone had the helmet on, visor up, as they stepped into the last airlock, and his eyes skimmed swiftly over the instruments.

"Suit radio's okay," he mused, "I just don't have much power to boost it. They'll either hear or ... not."

"They'll hear," Jarrat said shortly. He was clipping a handful of cargo tie-downs to the tool bracket on his left thigh plate. "Gene knows which tug we were on, and they'll know she was hit. Have a little faith. Set our mass to twenty kilos?" Stone nodded, already configuring his own suit. Jarrat locked

the helmet down, and watched Stone drop his own visor. “Good to go?” His voice whispered over the helmet comm, and again Stone nodded. Jarrat held out his left hand; his right hovered over the ‘purge’ switch, and as Stone’s gauntleted right hand clenched onto his armored forearm, he hit the control.

Blue spinners kicked on overhead, a siren wailed, but in seconds the ‘lock was purged and any sound became vacuum silent. They poised on the lip of the airlock and, in tandem, kicked off hard and ramped the repulsion into overboost. The tug fell away beneath them, and Stone craned his neck, hunting for orientation while Jarrat secured the suits together at the ankle with the tiedowns.

Two meters of loose cable between them allowed them to maneuver individually, but they could not drift apart, and Stone approved. He had just looked at the fuel situation for his jets, and the story told by the gauges was as sorry as the rest of his suit. He and Kevin had no fuel, power or time to spare, chasing each other as they drifted.

Overhead, as he hunted for orientation, and as their attitude stabilized, was the bright surface of Darwin’s World, cloud-flecked, blue and green. At a glance he could pick out the coastline where Venice sprawled along the Neptune Gulf. Harry Del’s house was there, in the Fairview sector, with a view of the same water. Off Stone’s left hand was the distant yet still massive half-tocamac of the civilian facility, the Mawson Docks, where the *Stardust* should have been berthed. Instead, the protest fleet swarmed like army ants, enraged into hyperactivity. Beneath his boots was a cluster of lights, bright though they were far-off, and he knew he was looking at the starclipper herself, surrounded by a squadron of Tactical flyers assigned to shield her from the protest fleet. Above the civvy dock and away to his right was the rods-and-cylinders structure of the NARC docks, and if they had been a little closer, they might have glimpsed the *Athena*.

The carrier was berthed, shut down and idle, in the middle of major maintenance work. She was vulnerable, Stone thought fleetingly as he watched the protest fleet mill about in dangerous confusion. Several collisions had already confused the area with hotspots of sizzling shrapnel and drifting wreckage. The demise of the tug was only one accident; surveying the carnage between the wreck and the dock, Stone saw at least four others, and one of them involved a Tactical squad.

He and Jarrat were drifting gently toward the *Stardust*, out of the corrosive and radiotoxic debris, and he was reading the helmet instruments when Jarrat said, “We’re not too hot ... suit integrity’s decent. Forgive me if I don’t talk too much. Trying to conserve my breathing mix.”

“Copy *that*,” Stone said acidly. “Don’t talk at all, Kevin. At our rate of drift, we’re never going to get near the clipper before we’ve sucked these tanks dry. I’m going to put some power behind a transmission, see if I can raise the *Stardust*.”

Jarrat’s only response was a wry feeling which rippled through the empathic link between them as Stone let the shield fall by a fraction. And then

Stone felt a crackle of something that was not quite dread, and he did not need to be telepathic to know what Jarrat was thinking. They could die here — as surely as they could have died in the inferno on a gantry on the Bartusiak cargo field, south of Eldorado, two weeks ago.

They were pushing their luck, and they knew it. With a grimace Jarrat could easily feel, Stone turned his attention to the suit's grudging power cells. He bled off what he thought he could spare and fed it into the comm system. As he did, he heard the chaos of the civilian frequencies, and quickly switched up to the high bands to get away from the furious chatter.

As he switched up to Channel 77, the NARC security band, he heard a thready film of sound on the very edge of his hearing, and he cranked the gain to maximum. "*Athena, Athena*, this is Raven 7.1, receiving you strength two. Can you boost your signal? I don't have a lot of power."

In moments the audio doubled its strength and Mischa Petrov's voice barked, "Jesus God, where are you? You're not on the tug!"

"We jumped," Stone said dryly. "She's a wreck, Petrov, hot as hell, and she'll take us down with her. Get a fix on this position."

"I've got you." Petrov paused to listen to another channel, and then was back. "You're not safe, 7.1, it's gone to crap out there. Where's 9.4?"

"About two meters away, at the end of a tether cable," Stone told him. "You're probably reading the both of us as one object. Listen, we need a pickup, and it better be fast. The bug-out pods were a no-go. We found a couple of engineers' rigs, but these suits are pretty beat-up, and they weren't serviced before they were stowed. We're looking at twenty minutes, tops, then it's all academic."

"Shit," Petrov whispered. "Blue Raven is on launch procedures, but I'm liaising with Tactical, if you can believe this crap. They've had me swear up and down I won't launch a damn' eggcup, because there's so many civvies in the air, the bastards are beating crap out of each other by accident." His voice was sour. "I'm just the humble XO on this ship, fuckitall. I don't have the authority to launch. You want me to call Tac, organize you a squad?"

"No," Stone said sharply. He had been watching the protest fleet and the Tactical squadron, and his eyes had narrowed on the firefly tail flares. "It's about to get a lot nastier out here. Scan the protest fleet, Petrov. We're close enough to see the pilots' eyeballs, and I'm watching a bunch of these bozos lining up to make a move on the clipper."

"You're shitting me," Petrov muttered. And then, "You're not. There's a flight of seven aircraft, headed for the *Cygnus Stardust*."

"Let Tactical earn their money," Jarrat rasped across the loop. "Log us in, Mischa. Inform all units, Raven Leaders are in the field. And launch the damned gunship!"

"Thank Christ for that," the Russian breathed. "Blue Raven, launch. Pilot Lang, lock onto 7.1's signal and bring Raven Leaders aboard. Acknowledge."

"Blue Raven is away," Evelyn Lang's voice said crisply into the loop. "Target acquisition is go. We have them, *Athena*. I'm going to loop way up

above the civvy traffic, come back in under the clipper for a clean pickup. Tac's going to go ballistic, but tell them we're cool."

"Tell them," Stone added, "to look after their own business. How long, Eve? We're running on empty here."

Some edge in his voice must have alerted her. All trace of banter was gone as she said, "Twelve minutes, Stoney — *Cap*. Blue Raven 6 and 7 are suited up and in the jump bay. We'll just reel you in, fish on the line. You know the drill ... chill, now. You gotta spread your consumables as thin as they'll go."

It was the medevac pilot talking now. Stone heard it in her voice. For how many, like himself and Jarrat at this moment, had survival been pinned to that voice? Eve Lang was the best in a difficult business. She was still talking softly, though not to him, and he listened as she murmured, "Blue Raven gunship to *Athena*. Infirmary, standby. 7.1 and 9.4 are coming in hot. Blue Raven medics to the jump bay, asap."

To Stone's surprise, Kip Reardon answered. "Infirmary, online. What goes on, Eve? You said 7.1 and 9.4 —?"

"They were caught in the dogfight out here, Doc," she said evenly. "I'm tracking them to the last meter, but you know the situation. It's a little crazy. We're flying high and wide of this goddamned regatta ... and lucky to be in the air at all. Tac didn't want to see us here."

"Captain's prerogative, Kip," Stone said into the loop. "Sorry if I don't chat. Not enough molecules left in these tanks to yawn."

It was scant exaggeration. The gauges already registered perilously close to zero and his power cells had drained much faster than he had hoped. The suit was very cold. He opened a slender channel in the empathic shield and felt Jarrat's gathering chill, and the beginnings of dizziness.

"Still with me, kiddo?" he whispered.

"Still," Jarrat rasped. "Like she said, chill. Save it, mate."

"Eight minutes ... I'm cutting a tighter flightpath," Lang said into the loop. Behind her voice, Stone could hear the Blue Ravens crosstalking in the jump bay. The medics were setting up, Cronin and Ramos were suited, the bay was already purged. And Lang was shaving her flightpath much closer than she had intended.

It was Gill Cronin — as always monitoring the gunship's flight systems — who said acerbically, "Tac's going to go apeshit."

"Screw Tac," Lang said in succinct tones. "They're out of jurisdiction, and they bloody know it. What do you think the *R* in NARC stands for? And if this ain't a riot, I've never seen one."

She made a good point. Stone felt the tickle of Jarrat's chuckle, heard it whisper over the comm, but Kevin was deliberately barely breathing. He was cold, his gauges were flatlining, but enough remained in the tanks for him to be breathing something, and it would last so long as he deliberately slowed his rate of respiration, heartbeat, everything. Stone had opened the empathic link and could feel him slipping into the early stages of hibernation.

"You all right, Kevin?" he murmured to the comm. Jarrat answered only with a waft of warmth through the bond.

The technique was ancient. It would have been familiar to warriors and adepts centuries before the advent of the steam engine, and Stone knew exactly what Jarrat was doing. Even Tactical rookies were taught the rudiments of biofeedback, and the NARC recruit would become a master before he or she was assigned to field work. Stone had fallen back on these tricks many times, and he left Jarrat to work undisturbed. Concentration, focus, was the key.

"Blue Raven," he whispered into the highband pickup.

"Six minutes," Lang told him. "I can't cut it any closer unless I drive right through the traffic lanes. Give me the authorization, and I'll do it ... but you answer to Dupre!"

The decision was Jarrat's, and though Stone was reluctant to intrude on his concentration he murmured, "Six minutes, Kevin?" His answer was a waft of warmth, almost a color, some swirled, half-blended shade of blue, green and gold. "Six minutes will do," Stone told Lang, and he was looking at his own gauges. He also was beginning to flatline, and he took one last deep breath before he resigned himself to the same discipline. His power levels were too low to permit an acquisition beam, but he left the highband comm open, transmitting a bare whisper of carrier wave.

The visor was scratched, gouged, and he seemed to be looking at the panorama of Darwin's World, the docks, the civilian fleet, through a wicked tangle of graffiti. He could see the wrecked tug high above, lit glaringly by the face of the planet, and from this angle the damage was shocking. He might have wondered how the tug had held itself together so long.

And then he glimpsed another ship, and the languor into which he had deliberately been drifting was gone in an instant. Full consciousness snapped back on, as if he had hit a switch. His voice was a bark.

"Blue Raven, scan the wreck of the tug!"

Cronin was on the air at once. He recognized the edge in Stone's voice. "I'm looking at it, Cap. Problem?"

"There's another ship tucked in behind it," Stone said tersely, "using it for cover."

"I don't see no second ship," Cronin mused.

"Like the man said," Joe Ramos said into the loop, "the bastard's using the wreckage for cover. What'cha seein' Cap?"

At that moment Stone was watching the high engines and porcupine spines of aials pop up over the side of the ruined tug. "Looks like a civvy transport," he said slowly. "Heavy ... probably hyper enabled. And I'm seeing gun ports. She's armed. Damn it, Gil, we're sitting ducks out here!"

"Pilot!" Cronin roared.

"Your call, Cap," Lang said sharply. "I've got an eighty-second intercept solution, if we're cleared to cross the civilian lanes."

"Do it." Stone's voice rasped. "Carrier!"

“Right here,” Petrov assured him, “getting every word. Leave Tac to me, Stoney. I’m also briefing Central.”

“I’m tracking two ships now,” Cronin shouted across the loop. “The bastard’s maneuvering, coming around. Stoney!”

The empathic link was wide open and Jarrat could hardly be oblivious. With the Blue Raven gunship driving directly through the civilian traffic routes, he had time and breathing gas to spare, and Stone felt the drum of his pulse as he stirred.

“*Move your asses!*” Cronin’s voice barked. “Seventy seconds, Cap, but I can jockey a shot in twenty, *if* you buggers get the hell out of my line of fire!”

The suit’s maneuvering jets were close to exhausted, and Stone swore vividly as he set the pitch and hit the triggers for the shortest burst he could manage. It would send him and Jarrat drifting back into the grudging cover of the tug — but if it would get them there fast enough was another question.

A muscle in Stone’s jaw cramped as his teeth ground. As he felt the drag of Jarrat’s mass, he hit the igniters again. “How’re we doing, Gil?”

“You’re still in the fuckin’ firing line,” Cronin growled. “You got the juice left for another shot out of your jets?”

“Maybe.” Stone was uncomfortably aware of the sweat prickling across his face and around his ribs. His lungs were working hard, but a lot less oxygen was reaching his brain than he might have hoped for. He hit the igniters a third time and felt another kick from the jets before the system quit. “That’s it, Gil. Good enough?”

“Maybe,” Cronin muttered. “Sixty seconds. We know where you are, Cap. Shut everything down, go dark, and *stay put.*”

He meant, if Eve Lang could acquire on passive carrier wave, so could the pilot who had been hiding behind the wrecked tug. Stone killed the highband and murmured to Jarrat, “You heard him.” Then he clicked off the suit-to-suit local comm.

Now he was listening to his own breathing, a steady rasp in his ears, growing increasingly labored in the seconds as he and Jarrat drifted into the lee of the wreckage, and the armed civvy transport came up overhead. They were under the nose of the tug, the least contaminated part of the ship, and even there they were receiving high doses of several substances and wavelengths which were normally the prerogative of drones.

The transport’s pilot was looking for them, and before Stone could even begin to wonder if he was offering a pickup, he saw the weapons pods peel open, and the cannons within powered up with a weird, dim glow of red enunciators deep in the housings. Stone held his breath as he and Jarrat contacted the hull, and both his hands closed about the stub of one of the comm arrays. Jarrat was still tethered on, and still conscious. He hauled himself up and grabbed on, two meters from Stone’s position.

They had drifted into the dark side of the wreck, into uterine blackness where the naked human eye could pick up nothing, and where instruments were confused by the sizzling contamination of the wreck, and now they could

only wait. They might be picked up visually if the pilot kicked on his floodlights, but Stone was gambling he would not. The floods would pinpoint the ship's position as surely as a beacon, making it an easy, inviting target.

The chrono in his head was counting again, but the lance of tracer still jumped him out of his skin as it scythed by the hulk, blinding him with corneal afterimages. He felt the hot-cold, prickling rush of Jarrat's adrenaline, the echo of his own shock, and they crammed together into the scant cover afforded by the tug's nose before Gil Cronin could fire again.

He was locked onto the civvy vessel now, but the range was so extreme, he was firing guided rounds to prevent wildfires, overshoots, and the resulting civilian casualties. The problem was, the hulk was so hot, so noisy in the very bands in which the guided shells were scanning, they could easily lose their target lock in the half-second before impact.

And the civilian pilot was not about to surrender without a fight. Stone knew he had locked onto Cronin's position the instant Gil triggered a round, and a pair of modest cannons mounted on the back of the transport had tracked around. They fired now, belching four rounds which were obviously not guided.

The shells were massively wide of the gunship's position, and as the overshoots went 'wild' Stone gave a thought to the civilian traffic in their path. With a curse, he cut back into the loop. "Cap Stone!" Cronin was bellowing into the comm clutter, "you okay? That was shit-kicking close!"

"Close enough to scorch," Stone rasped. "Get those bloody rounds, if you can, before they hit somebody!"

"Doing it now," Cronin growled. "One ... two ... got 'em. Quit worrying." "Who said I was worried?" Stone demanded. He was intent on the transport, watching the guns tracking back into their 'lock' position, preparatory to flight, and intuition sped his pulse. "Heads up, Gil. I think you might just have scared him off."

The transport was maneuvering now, spinning around inside its own length, and from the engine ports mounted high across the stern, Stone saw a dull mauve glow brightening with intermittent blue-white crackles.

"He's going to light up the engines," Jarrat warned in a hoarse whisper. "Gil, he's showing you his tailpipes, for chrissakes. Take a shot."

"You're too close," Cronin fumed.

"Take a goddamned shot!" From somewhere, Jarrat found the breath to roar.

"Then get your bloody fool heads down," Cronin barked. "Twenty-five seconds to intercept. Be ready for a tractor-tow. Sweet Christ —"

And then Stone was blinded again by a lance of tracer that seemed to shrivel the eyes in his head. He and Jarrat pressed into the slight curvature of the hull, putting the nose of the tug between them and the transport, and before either of them could see again, Cronin was shouting into the loop.

"She's a cripple ... I put one in her somewhere."

But the transport was still maneuvering, and Stone guessed the pilot was

trying to make his run on one engine. And as priceless seconds limped by, the Blue Raven gunship was closing distance fast.

“You want prisoners?” Cronin asked acidly.

“Keep a fix on the bastard,” Jarrat croaked. “Crippled as he is, he’s not going anywhere in a hurry. Come get us, will you, Gil? I’m starting to see bloody double!”

Breathing was an exercise in patience and persistence. Stone felt as if he were struggling to capture every molecule of oxygen as he watched the civilian ship lumber away, injured, lame, but even now capable of turning its blunt nose toward the outer system and beating stubbornly out of orbit.

His vision had begun to wander dangerously when he saw the gunship’s running lights, bright against the blue-black mass of the hull. He shook his head to clear his mind, forced himself awake, and reached through the empathic bond for Jarrat. Still tethered on, Kevin was cold to the bone and drifting in the dreamy state on the borderline where consciousness ebbed into darkness.

He did not register the odd, falling sensation as the tractors caught hold of them, but Stone was awake enough to grunt in reaction. His eyelids had closed, and the illusion of falling was curious, delirious with the images of an old fantasy he had never quite forgotten.

It was an Angel fantasy, and he knew it. The clouds were like silver fleece, soft, even warm; the sky was vast and he thrilled to the sensation of living flight, with no armor and engines between him and the rush of the air. And then ... then, there was Kevin Jarrat, his skin emerald green, his eyes gold, the powerful downdraft of his living wings holding them in the blue-green vast, tumbling through the cloudscape, locked together in a ritual of mating as old as mankind —

The deck hit him in the back with a thud, and as the helmet seals cracked open his lungs spasmed, dragging in the ice-cold medical air. The mask formed itself around his mouth and nose. For long moments he just breathed, feeding his oxygen-starved brain cells. His eyes were closed against the searing fluoros recessed into the jump bay’s ceiling, but he reached out through the empathic link and touched Jarrat with an immaterial caress. He felt the same stinging cold in Kevin’s lungs, the same chill in every extremity, and the weird, double-vision focus of his thoughts.

At last Stone opened his eyes. He waved the mask away, and read the names stenciled on the several armored, helmeted figures which hovered over him and Jarrat. The unit’s chief medic, Jon Semler, Blue Raven 24, was suited up, right to the helmet, as if he had half expected to make a jump and treat the casualties *in situ*. In the vacuum. His partner was Ed Munro, Blue Raven 25. The unit’s second medic was similarly suited and kneeling beside Jarrat. Both men were taking readings off the engineers’ suits, and Stone was not surprised to see Bill Parish, Blue Raven 21, the unit’s hazmat specialist. Parish stood behind them with both hands full of scanners. A greasy, foamy mess of decontaminants had puddled on the deck around the borrowed suits,

and when Stone squinted at Jarrat, he saw an odd, bubble-gum pink film on the battered old armor.

"They're clear," Parish was saying, metallicized by the helmet speaker. "Rad levels are normalizing ... corrosives are close enough to neutral ... they'll do." He shut off the scanners and stepped back to let the medics work. Behind them all, Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos had already taken off the helmets, but from the look on Cronin's angular face, they expected trouble. The fluoros glittered in the diamond in his left ear, and his eyes were hard, while the more laconic Ramos seemed amused.

Jarrat waved off the medic and forced his way to his feet, though his lungs were raw, his voice no more than a rasp. "I'm all right, Eddie, thanks. What's the story, Gil?"

"The story," Blue Raven 6 said cynically, "is, the bastard's trying his damndest to do a runner, but I put a shot in one of his engines. He's a lame duck, Cap, and he has to know it unless he has a steaming pile where his brains ought to be. The pilots are keeping him just inside of tractor range. Trying not to spook him, in case you want to see where he's running to."

"I'd rather grab him," Stone said tiredly, "and beat it out of him."

"Oh, yeah." With the sharp, jerky movements of anger, Jarrat was unlocking the greasy armor segments and dumping them unceremoniously into the puddle of decontaminant gels. "Flight deck, you hearing this?"

"Grab him and beat it out of him." Lang sounded as amused as Ramos. "You got it, Cap. I've got a lieutenant from Venice Tactical on hold, on behalf of his colonel wanting to know, and I quote, what in the name of God we're doing out here. Will I hand it to the Russian?"

"Do that," Stone agreed, and cracked the neck seals on his own armor. "Gil, you and Joe want to drag the bastard out of his crate?" He lifted a brow at Cronin and Ramos, who had clearly been hoping for a little physical action.

Blue Raven 7 snorted a ribald chuckle. "Since we shipped out of Thule, it's been one goddamn' sim after another. Gimme something real, just once in a while."

"Try not to break the man," Jarrat said darkly. "Feel free to bounce him around. He took a shot at you, he's got it coming ... and if he had anything to do with putting a hole in the tug, he's going up for murdering our pilot ... as well as about two billion of my brain cells." He paused to rub his temples, where Stone could feel the steady, deep throb. "Getting anoxia isn't too high on my day's agenda."

The riot troops had stepped out of the jump bay, headed for the technicians' deck, and the medics were repacking their gear. The bay was comparatively cold, and both Jarrat and Stone were sweat-soaked. The chill got into a man's bones at once, and before Munro and Semler were satisfied, Jarrat walked away from their bioscanners, in search of coffee and a hot a/c vent. Semler muttered beneath his breath, the kind of language that was frequently applied to senior officers, though not usually in their hearing.

"He's all right, Jon," Stone assured the man. Semler had been a med

student, on his way to becoming a doctor, the summer his elder brother became an Angel statistic. He had idolized his brother, and watching him go down into Angeldeath turned Jon Semler's head around. Med school seemed a waste of his time. He had to be *out*, working with what he had, *now*, not in five years, after college and internship. He was one of an incredible minority of NARC personnel who were recruited directly into the department, rather than 'coming across' from one of the other services. He was arguably the best field medic in the business, and he had the stature to qualify for the descant troops. Three years of college aeroball left him fit enough to romp the NARC training, and he put on riot armor for the first time a scant few months before Stone joined the *Athena*.

He looked down skeptically at Stone, now, from a height Stone might have envied. "I guess you'd know how your other half's doing better than anyone," he said resignedly, referring to the empathic link.

"I would," Stone agreed, "and I do." He kicked out of the greasy armored boots and did not have to feign a shudder as the sweat-sodden shirt clung to his back in the icy draft from the open inner hatches. The draft was generated as pressures elsewhere in the gunship equalized, which told him the tech's bay had closed up and cracked its inner seals. The civilian transport was aboard, and he took a step after Jarrat. "You want to prescribe something useful, Jon? Get me a coffee. In fact, get two!"

The medics were probably cursing again as he left the bay, but it was healthy. They took their work seriously. Stone only chuckled as he followed the empathic trace, not surprised to find Jarrat with a fresh mug in either hand and a vent shunted to maximum heat. He was warming his back, where he had a view through the open pressure door, into the technicians' bay. Without a word, he handed Stone the second mug and gestured into the open bay.

Cronin and Ramos had locked down their helmets and leveled a pair of rotary cannons on the side hatch of a twenty-meter hyper transport. The craft was a smaller, sleeker cousin of the Rand Arial they had flown from Sheckley to Rethan; and this one was badly damaged. With enough Gatling fire concentrated on the same target, Cronin and Ramos would eventually cut through the hull, and the pilot had to know it. The Blue Ravens gave him a full half minute to comply, and he took almost all of it. The cannons were primed, in firing mode, when the hatch cracked with a hiss of compressed gas, and a voice yelled out,

"All right, Jesus Christ, all right! I'm coming out, don't — don't shoot."

The accent was not local, Stone decided. The shooter was not from Darwin's. "What is that? Rethan, the outdistricts, the islands?"

"Avalon," Jarrat guessed. "Sounds like the wrong side of Elysium. Now, what the hell is this character doing on Darwin's?"

"Besides trying to shoot up a gunship, in the middle of a riot," Stone added. "And what the hell is the whole riot thing about?"

"We're way out of touch." With his mug, Jarrat gestured in the general direction of Darwin's. "It has to be local politics." He paused to watch as the

shooter clambered out. Cronin had swiped off his helmet, and he dropped one massive gauntleted hand on the man's shoulder. He was average height, slender save for a paunch, in expensive denims — somewhere in his twenties or early thirties, with the thin face of a rodent and a profound command of profanity.

The tirade of invective continued until Cronin simply tightened his hold on the man's shoulder, degree by degree, until the cursing became a scream. "Watch your mouth," he told the shooter, and gave him shove which sent him stumbling out of the tech bay. "You can talk your way straight to the Infirmary."

"He can also talk his way straight to a labor penitentiary." Stone stepped aside to let the shooter and the Blue Ravens go by. The shooter backed up against the nearest wall and tried to summon a glare. The effort failed miserably. "How do you want to be filed?" Stone asked tersely. Brown eyes blinked at him. "Name," Stone prompted.

"I ... deKoven." The shooter pressed back into the wall.

"You want to talk?" Stone offered.

"Of course he doesn't." Jarrat drained the mug to the dregs. "He's a hard-ass. He's going to tough it out, hold his tongue, till half the riot squad's busted their knuckles on him, and we pump him full of something still on the classified list." He turned his back on deKoven and said to Cronin, "Tie him down somewhere till we get back to the carrier. Let Central have him."

He and Stone were three strides away when deKoven began to squeal. "Deal. I want to make a deal."

Stone lifted a brow at Jarrat, saw the glitter of amusement in the gray eyes, and they turned back. "Well, now," Stone said slowly, "it all depends what you've got to deal with, doesn't it?" The shooter was panicked, and he was a rank amateur. Stone saw nothing of the professional about him. "You took a crack at a NARC gunship. You probably blew away the tug. You won't see daylight this side of your fiftieth birthday."

Color drained out of deKoven's thin face. His voice seemed smothered. "I said I want to deal."

"Deals," Jarrat told him levelly, "get made on our side of the table. You lay down your cards, deKoven, we'll tell you what they're worth." He glanced up over the shooter's head at the Blue Ravens. "Later. Lock him up. We'll get around to him when we know what the hell is going on here."

"The riot at the dock?" Cronin guessed as he closed one steel glove on deKoven's bruised shoulder and easily manhandled him away. He gave Stone a wry look. "You guys got some heavy duty catching up to do."

"Oh, joy," Jarrat breathed. "We picked the perfect time to get home."

'Home' was an odd choice of word, Stone thought. Kevin might have meant Darwin's World, which was certainly the carrier's home base, or he could have meant the *Athena* herself, which had been their own territory for more than two and a half years now. Before he could ask, Evelyn Lang's voice said quietly from the flight deck,

"Blue Raven on approach. All bays, secure for docking."

"Now," Jarrat said acidly, "maybe Petrov can tell us what this is about."

CHAPTER TWO

“That,” Stone mused as he took a second latte and rubbed thoughtfully at hair that was still streaming, “is a protest on its way to becoming an airborne riot. And unless I miss my guess, they’re protesting *us*.” He was watching file footage, the vidfeed from GlobalNet. The CRT’s audio track was turned low, but the voice of one of the Venice news anchors droned without pause.

“Protesting the *Athena* specifically, or NARC in general?” Jarrat was still toweling down.

The common door between their cabins was open and both compartments were humid. Like Stone, he had set the shower hot enough to almost take off his skin, and his back was still ‘sunburn rose’ over its deep copper hue. He relished the heat as he sketched the towel around his legs, and caught sight of himself in Stone’s dressing mirror. He was dusky after a week naked on Tarataga, and another week close to naked on the sundecks aboard the *Cygnus Stardust*. The tropics suited him, he decided. His hair was nearer blond than brown, and he thought his eyes looked oddly pale against the tan. He gave himself a slightly obscene gesture as Stone said,

“According to GlobalNet, they’re protesting both NARC and Tactical.” They were not yet officially returned to duty, and Stone was allowing himself the luxury of dividing his attention between his partner and the datastream.

The moment they were on assignment they would be ‘on,’ every moment, every day, for as long as it took; this small lull was like a gift. Stone was listening to the file’s audio loop as he leaned over and drew his lips across Jarrat’s hot shoulders, and down, along the curve of his spine.

“Tac had over forty squaddies out there,” he said against the silk of Jarrat’s skin, “and they always knew it could get real ugly, real fast.” He was low enough to sink his teeth lightly into the curve of Jarrat’s right buttock, making him take a quick breath. The sensation cut clearly through the bond and it was Stone who groaned. “We picked the key moment to blunder in,” he said against Jarrat’s back, “and we got caught.” His hands molded around the sharp angles of Kevin’s hip bones and pulled him back into an embrace.

Without protest, Kevin turned into Stone’s arms, threw away the towel, and hunted for his mouth. Tarataga had suited them both, and the seven-day haul back to Darwin’s World on the *Stardust* would have been perfect, if it had concluded with a routine docking. Stone looked more relaxed than Jarrat could remember since before the Death’s Head deep cover job. He was tanned and lean, his hair growing a little long, inviting the fingers.

Part of Jarrat was ready for reassignment; another part of him lingered behind, relishing the freedom where the ocean whispered in the night and the keenest reality he knew was Stone's body, hot and hard against him, pale in the light of two of Rethan's moons and sweated with desire. Being back on the *Athena* was a pleasure in itself, but Stone's tongue was in his mouth, Stone's hands played idly across his buttocks, and neither encouraged much commitment to the job. Jarrat was almost inclined to call the dock riot Tactical's business, and leave them to deal with it. Only the presence of deKoven, a shooter who had deliberately singled out NARC targets, spurred him to dig deeper.

The bed was firm and cool against his back as he went down, and Stone settled on him, a familiar, welcome burden. Their legs tangled, and with the empathic shields abandoned, the link between them sang with shared sensations. Pleasure was a soul-deep throb, almost a pain, permeating every cell. Jarrat swam in it, like drowning in ecstatic, blood-hot anguish. But there was more, crackling through the bond with the colors of rose and gold, and even a scent that might have been woodsmoke and wine.

It was belonging. Jarrat had no word for it, and instead he let it echo back through the empathic link, and heard Stone catch his breath. The dark head lifted and the blue eyes studied him searchingly, until Jarrat clenched both hands into Stone's hair to pull him down again. The comm buzzed, but for the moment they could afford to ignore it. The adrenaline was still pumping after the 757 incident, not quite a rush, but enough to keep a man's blood racing. Jarrat groaned as he came up hard against Stone's belly, more than anything wanting Stone in him — and Stone knew, almost before he realized what he wanted himself.

No need to wrestle, nor whisper what he needed in raw, crude, loving words. Stone lifted, let him turn, took it slowly, and Jarrat's hands clenched into the quilt. It might have been raw, even rough, but Stone was in no such mood. Instead, his loving was fierce, consuming. Jarrat was sure he had no secret left, no part of body or mind belonged to himself — and the empathic shields were down. Stone felt the sublime submission just as clearly. The zone between the possessed and the possessor blurred to nothing.

A long time later the smell of fresh coffee reached some part of Jarrat's brain which was stirring, and he swung his legs off the side of the bed. He did not recall falling asleep, but his dreams had been a tangle of tropical lagoons and riot troops, white beaches and hazmat cleanup crews. Stone was yawning as if he also was not long awake, still unconcernedly naked, with a mug in either hand. But the CRT was chattering, and he had backed up the file to the point where they had been distracted, and set it to run again.

"You can bet your pension it's about politics." Jarrat took a coffee on his way to the desk, and while Stone watched he punched in a half dozen data retrieval requests. Resigned to work, Jarrat gave his attention to the screen.

In the last twenty-four hours Petrov had assembled a routine data collect, a package which would be modified and magnified by Colonel Bill Dupre's

office in Venice and then bumped on to Earth. The package was an odd, unwieldy collection of GlobalNet stories, Tactical field reports, official press releases from several political bodies, and NARC's own surveillance. Gene Cantrell's signature was on it, along with Petrov's, and Jarrat read the summary with deep cynicism.

The protest was predictable; and this time, he thought, he might even have shared the fury which drove it, though he would hardly have sanctioned an airborne riot. The demonstration was about the new Angel laws, which were being lobbied across the colonies from Rethan to the frontier. The Sorenson bill was a many-faceted document, and for parts of it Jarrat had only support.

Tougher sentencing for street-corner dealers, automatic death penalties for smugglers, and 'awareness' sessions in the classroom — not the senior high classes which had been taught for a decade already, but classes for the junior grades, structured to catch very young kids, before they hit the street. These were strong ideas; NARC was responsible for designing some of them, and a few civilians were offended. Some parents objected to having their children exposed to the *concept* of recreational drugs; others had no problem with 'narcotics awareness,' but objected to *Angel* awareness in kids who were not yet supposed to know what sex was about, much less the party scene and the tough, nasty realm of city bottom.

These were not issues Jarrat cared to dwell on for long; political ethics was a world away from the field where he and Stone worked. But there were other facets to the Sorenson bill, and Jarrat bridled at them. The public outcry was massive, noisy, angry — and predictable. Bram Sorenson was proposing an end to the legal, licensed supply for addicts. If the legislation went through there would be no more Angel, ever — no matter that death would soon follow — for kids like Riki Mitchell, or for victims like Tim Kwei and Stone himself, who had been force-addicted.

Always whispering in the back of the victim's mind was the prayer that a cure would be found inside of the two years he or she had left to live. It was the cushion which broke their fall, eased their way to a death that remained unavoidable. Those two years were only livable with the licensed supply. Bram Sorenson called the therapy a waste of time and resources. His face had been on every GlobalNet headline for the past week, and the bleakest news, from Jarrat's perspective, was that he had powerful support. Politicians right back to the homeworlds were behind him; elder statesmen very like Cassius Brand from colonies as far afield as Calleran and Sheal were promising him votes.

They should have known better, Jarrat thought. He froze the playback at a closeup portrait of the man at the root of the trouble. If Sorenson's new legislation went through, the innocent would be sentenced to death along with the guilty.

And while it was being lobbied, the street would be a mess. He made cynical noises as he recalled Evelyn Lang's remark — *what do you think the*

R in NARC stands for? In the heat of that moment she had seen only as far as the immediate jeopardy, the hazard into which the civilian protest had dumped two NARC officers who were also personal friends. Jarrat had already looked far beyond, at the bigger picture, and he had no liking for what he saw.

The frown Stone wore told him they shared the same thoughts. "If Sorenson gets his way, they're going to use us," Stone said quietly. "Narcotics and *Riot Control*. Turn out the gunships, make war on the public, after you've whipped up the riot yourself. Christ! What are they thinking?"

"They're not thinking." Jarrat's tone was dark. "You see the names on this list of Sorenson's supporters? Ninety percent of the buggers are from the homeworlds, Earth, Mars, the Jupiter system. They've never been out to the colonies, they have no idea what it can be like, why Angel gets in so easily. See it from their angle. They think they've found the answer. Cut off the licensed supply ... no safety net, no 'easy' way out. It makes that first bubble of Angel look like a loaded gun."

Stone gave him an odd, sidelong look. "Now, I *know* you're not agreeing with this crap."

"Me? No way." Jarrat thumbed the remote, let the data scroll again. "But you can see how a bunch of old fogeys in Marsport and Shanghai might think. If Angel is going to be stopped before it claims another generation, well, catching kids young enough, making them savvy early enough to know what Angel means long before they get caught — and making bloody sure they know, there's no licensed supply — might look like a viable strategy."

"Viable strategy," Stone echoed darkly. He looked away. "I'd be dead."

"You, and a boatload of others," Jarrat added. He caught Stone's head, turned it until the blue eyes looked up at him. "The legislation is never going to happen. It's too crazy. It'd take people as far out of touch as this moron, Sorenson, to even suggest it."

"And the rest?" Stone pulled him closer and buried his face in the hollow of Jarrat's chest. "This argument's going to blaze for months before the colonies even get to vote. It'll be packwar on the streets, and at least some of the time the folks out there'll be civvies who have something legit to say, like today. They blockade the docks with a protest fleet, Tactical launches everything it's got when they see something like the *Stardust* sailing into harm's way. Suddenly there's a collision, casualties, everything in the air's going in every direction. It's turned into one kicker of a riot ... but it started out as an Angel demonstration, and we'll be expected to come down on them like a load of bricks."

"Politics," Jarrat said, as if the word burned his tongue, and sifted through Stone's dark hair, massaging his scalp for the sheer sensuality of it.

On cue, the comm intruded again, and this time Stone answered the buzz. Neither of them was surprised to hear the voice of Carrier Operations. Stone selected audio only, stood back from Kevin and passed a hand before his eyes. As usual, Petrov was on a short fuse.

With apologies the sample of this title ends here.
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