

MEL KEEGAN

NARC 1



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NARC #1

DEATHS HEAD

MEL KEEGAN

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

DEATH'S HEAD Complete and Unabridged
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This book is a work of fiction. Any similarity between
real persons or other characters, alive or dead, is
strictly coincidental.

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This edition printed and bound in the United States

in memory of
Richard Dipple,
who was the start of everything

CHAPTER ONE

One of the big rimrunners was on prelaunch procedures. The acrid stink of the freighter's exhaust, the din of its engines, rolled about the docking bays. As the drive began to run up to peak thrust the noise reached a painful crescendo. In the thick darkness behind the trashpack, Kevin Jarrat pushed his knuckles into his ears and waited for the punishing shockwave of launch, but after almost a minute on test the engines shut back to just above idling.

The alley was lit only by reflected light, a confusion of red and green, reaching weakly about the curvature of Dock Row. Smog from the lifter's exhaust thickened the air to chemical soup. It was hard to see, difficult to breathe, and the acid smog made a man's lungs burn. Jarrat took his hands from his ears as the rimrunner's engines shut back and slid the Colt AP-60 out of the holster he wore concealed beneath his jacket.

The weapon had warmed in contact with his body. Its familiar, even reassuring weight filled his right fist while his belly churned with what he would always think of as 'stage fright.' No matter how often he found himself in situations like this, it was the same. Training, simulation and hard, real-world experience honed the skills, sharpened the reflexes, but the inescapable fact was, he could die in this alley between the docking bays. His life expectancy might be measured in minutes.

He swallowed hard on a dry throat and pulled back the charger that ran along the top of the black steel barrel. Primed, the Colt would fire ten hollow-nosed, teflon-coated rounds per second. Those rounds could pierce two centimeters of steel plate at a hundred meters range. At the kind of range in this alley on Dock Row they would fragment an unarmored civilian vehicle. The knowledge made Jarrat's heart beat a little easier.

Behind the trashpack, he stood with both shoulders pressed against the brickwork. At his left was a smaller man who clutched a big handgun in both fists. Roon leaned flat against the plastex side of the dumpster and, as Jarrat watched, he moved out to peer up the alley into the murk. He ducked back again fast.

"You see them, Roon?" Jarrat hissed. His voice just rose above the muted roar of the rimrunner's idling engines.

"Can't see nothing," Roon yelled over the noise, and hunched over to cough on the smog. "Too goddamned dark, isn't it?"

"There's no shoot hole up there," Jarrat mused. "Nowhere to hide." He

knew the warren of city bottom around the spaceport well after eight weeks of living and working on the streets of Chell.

"But some stupid bugger's left a Skyvan parked at the end. The shooters have to be tucked in behind." Roon gave Jarrat's dim form one glance. "Why don't you use that cannon of yours and burn it?"

"Why don't I? Suits me fine." Jarrat took a shallow breath of the toxic, soupy air. He wanted only to get the job done and get out. Throwing his life away in an alley off Dock Row would be the ultimate waste in what had long been a precarious existence. He took the big weapon in a vice-like grip, only his trigger finger loose. The Colt kicked like a young hustler when it was locked on full-auto. Spent gasses were exhausted through a port in the bottom of the single chamber, propelling the weapon upward. It could be a task to hold on target, and it was not a novice's gun.

He sucked in a breath of the stinking draft from the docking bays and brought the Colt up to chest height before he stepped out from the cover of the trashpack. The trigger depressed just a fraction of a centimeter under his finger and the gun bucked in his hands as if it were alive. He held it level with the ease of long use while every nerve along his spine crawled. Its bright muzzle flash made an inviting target of him in the near-darkness, and his quarry was armed, though with what, Jarrat did not yet know.

At the other end of the alley, fifty meters from the bulk of the dumpster, was a blue Skyvan, the kind of underpowered, overrated civvy joy-toy purchased by well-lubricated suburban families. It had a sensor pod inside the blunt nose, a ride capsule, transparent gullwings, four rear mounted engines in racks of two, and solid undergear struts which would pull up when the repulsion kicked in. He hoped the owner was well insured.

He knew exactly where to shoot to burn it. The Colt punched forty rounds into it, dead on target, and the whole electrical system shorted out in a miniature firestorm. Magnesium-bright flares spattered about, the gullwings turned to putty and collapsed into the ride capsule, and black smoke billowed upward in a poisonous greasy pall.

Then Jarrat waited, eyes screwed shut against the sudden glare. The two men had run this way, they had no way out and they could not have got into the 'van. No one in his right mind left expensive vehicles unlocked on the street in city bottom. "Where the hell are they?" Jarrat muttered, hoarse under the continuing din of engine noise from the launch bay. He had begun to wonder if stray rounds had dropped his quarry when a rattling volley of return fire leapt out of the smoke at him.

Shots smacked into the trashpack. A surge of raw adrenaline began to pound through Jarrat's head, and he heard Roon yelp sharply. In his peripheral vision he saw the smaller man sag back against the wall and slide down, clutching his left arm and wailing every profanity he could remember. If the shells had gone through the tough plastex hopper, they were almost certainly armor-piercers. Taking cover was pointless.

Jarrat knuckled his smarting eyes and swore. The Colt had a hundred rounds left in the magazine. The red LED counter had not yet begun to blink a 'low ammo' warning, and when it did, he had a pocketful of reloads. He held down the trigger to snap off twenty with the machine pistol aimed loosely into the smoke. He did not see the man go down but heard a stifled cry, the muffled sound of a body falling, a curse. Then silence. Which one was it — the shooter or the money man Jarrat had been sent here to find?

He cleared his throat of its furring of smog and played a hunch. "Vazell!" It was a safe bet the shooter would have been in the open, trying for a kill shot, while Deek Vazell would have been on his hands and knees behind what was left of the 'van. Was Vazell armed also? The man was ruthless, feared and grudgingly respected in the city bottoms of two continents. Jarrat had learned his name even before he came groundside on this god-forsaken colony world, and his belly clenched like a fist. "Vazell, get out here! I swear, I'll rip the rest of this mag and scrape you off the walls later!" Intimidation was a weapon in itself.

Again, silence, and then Jarrat heard scuffling sounds. The wreck was burning fiercely enough to light the alley. Weird, grotesque shadows danced on the walls, half-seen through the murk. The image was confusing but he could make out the figure staggering toward him through the smoke. It could only be Vazell — stout, as broad as he was tall, with a spraddle-legged gait. There was no mistaking the blocky figure though he wore a smog mask, the molded transparent facescreen and respirator many people were wearing since the air around the spaceport had turned into toxic soup.

Mask or no, Vazell coughed violently as he shuffled forward, and he held his hands well clear of his sides. He was armed, but the weapon, an Edson automatic, hung loosely in a useless right hand. Blood gushed from a wound at the juncture of arm and shoulder: an artery had been nicked. Not even Deek Vazell, who had earned the reputation of a trickster as well as a killer without conscience, could fake that. Jarrat's heart slowed again. He paced down the alley toward the fat man, and with his left hand lifted the mask from Vazell's flaccid face. A pudgy left hand covered Vazell's nose and mouth and swabbed at his streaming eyes.

"Don't shoot, man, all right?" he wheezed. "What use am I going to be to you dead?"

"Ask Hal Mavvik," Jarrat said acidly. "He sent me to get his money."

"His what? I don't have it on me, for chrissakes," Vazell panted.

"Surprising." Jarrat lifted the Colt. Mavvik's orders were specific: bring the money or frag Vazell ... burn one of city bottom's notorious celebrities, win powerful points where they mattered. Jarrat was merely weary of the whole charade and longed to leave it behind.

As the hot barrel touched his temple Vazell came to life. "I can get it," he rasped. "You think I carry it on me? What kind of shit-for-brains do you take me for? But I can take you to it." His voice was weakening.

"Where?" Jarrat demanded. "Let's have it, right now, Deek. All I want is to get the man's cash and get the hell out of this muck you people call air, so don't push your luck. Where is it?"

"I'll take you to it."

"You'll tell me where it is." Jarrat shifted the gun ominously. His lungs were burning, his head swam in the outfall of fumes both from the wreck and the freighter which continued to roar in a bay, too close on Dock Row.

Vazell gulped and waved his hands animatedly. "There's a warehouse over on Windrigger — Jeez, you're an asshole, Jarrat — the warehouse where they stored the old mass driver in bits, you know the one?" At Jarrat's nod he went on, "The basement under the warehouse. We got a safehouse there. Midge and the others are sitting on the whole stash, everything Mavvik's expecting. They've got your shitty money."

Jarrat lifted the gun away. "If you've lied to me, Deek, I'll be back and fry you alive, and that's a promise." *Or Mavvik will fry my balls, and better his than mine*, Jarrat thought ruefully as he stepped back from the fat little money man who had scored more lethal hits than many a contract shooter.

"S' the truth," Vazell protested weakly, glaring up at Jarrat out of wide, glassy eyes. "Would I lie to you, when I'm standing here with my fuckin' *life* leaking out of me? Christ! You gonna help me now, or what?"

Turning back toward the trashpack, Jarrat saw Roon sitting on the concrete, moaning inarticulately. He had walked a half-dozen steps when he felt the sudden stab of pain in his left shoulder. It raced through his nervous system like an electric shock and cold sweat broke from every pore as his vision blurred for an instant. He sucked in a breath as dread rushed through him in the wake of the pain — it could only be a quilldart.

They were stealth weapons, devious, with no iota of the city bottom warrior's perverse sense of honor: they were for murder, and most often poisoned or drugged. He should have expected it of Vazell. Jarrat knew all this and froze, feeling for his extremities, blinking hard as his senses first spun in shock and then stabilized into surreal, icy calm. Automatics kicked in, the instincts of a decade of training, simulations and experience.

Nothing. So Vazell kept a pocketful of darts, and tipped them with drug or poison when he needed them. But he could not do it one-handed, and this one was 'bare,' flung out of desperation, spite or fury. It had been aimed for the back of his neck, Jarrat knew. Maimed as he was, prone in the half-dark, Vazell was no more than a hand's span off-target.

Seconds passed and Jarrat's head was still clear. He was in complete command of his senses when he spun back toward Vazell, for the moment ignoring the little barbed blade which had embedded in his muscles.

The dart was surely intended to kill. Lodged in Jarrat's neck at the base of his skull, it would have. Vazell's eyes were bulging, insectoidal in the nasty, pasty face. The obese jowls quivered now in genuine terror. Jarrat raised the Colt again. Pain spurred him to anger, and for a moment he aimed squarely

into the man's belly. Only then did he begin to think, and he twitched the Colt aside, aimed just as precisely but for a different target.

The single round took the flesh right off Vazell's upper arm, spun him about and flung him to the ground. Blood fanned about, black on the stained concrete, but he was not dead. Jarrat spared the twitching body one glance before he returned to Roon.

"D'ye kill the bastard?" Roon grunted.

"Blew him the hell out of there," Jarrat lied through gritted teeth. His shoulder was alight, now the tide of anger had calmed and he was feeling once more. Fury was the best painkiller he knew, but it did not last.

"Oh, Mavvik is going to just love this. What about his money?"

"Vazell told me where the stash is." Jarrat had pushed the hot Colt back into its holster. He gave his right hand to Roon, who still sat on the ground with his back against the dumpster. "Get up on your feet, damnit! You think I'm going to carry you?"

"Ah — careful." Roon hoisted himself up, stood swaying and rubbing his sweating face. "You believe 'im? Vazell could have fed you a whole bunch of horseshit, we'd never know the difference till we got there and saw a big empty place where the money ought to be." He gave Jarrat a leer of delight. "Jarrat, you've got this one coming. Mavvik is going to have you. He's gonna eat your liver, pretty boy." He spoke as if he had waited almost two months in the hopes of watching.

"Mavvik won't screw with me," Jarrat muttered. He worked the shoulder around carefully, and wished he had not. "He isn't stupid."

"But what about the warehouse where they keep the old 'driver? We better fix this mess, Jarrat, before word gets back to Midge and the buggers that Vazell and his shooter are dogmeat."

Jarrat's senses had begun to wander, whether with the dart or the chemical stew he was breathing. "So why don't you shove off back to the car, Roon, get on your little radio and call it in? I'll dump the bodies in the trash-pack and meet you out there. Move, damnit!"

Roon hurried away. As they separated he glanced back at Jarrat and swore. "You do know there's a quilldart in your shoulder, don't you?"

"I know," Jarrat grunted. "It wasn't poisoned. The bastard was aiming for the back of my neck, top of the spine. It must've hit a rib — these useless little things are good for nothing. Get out of here, Roon."

As the other man left the alley Jarrat allowed himself to relax a little. He reached gingerly for the dart, found its flighted butt and pulled experimentally. Pain seared through him at once but the blade did not move. He pulled harder, against the barbs, and it shifted a fraction. Blood gushed warmly down the inside of his shirt and he gasped as the dizziness swamped him. It was better to leave the dart where it was, until it could be cut out. He did not want to lose any more blood than he must.

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Roon was gone. The alley was

empty but for himself, Vazell and the smoke-belching wreck. Fire Control would be here as soon as the spaceport's sensors could tell the Skyvan fire from the heavy, toxic outfall of the rimrunner, which was still idling in the docking bay not a hundred meters away. Engine trouble was keeping the freighter on the ground, Jarrat guessed, and the pilot had already contravened a dozen pollution-control regulations.

With a curse, he went to one knee beside the fat man and peered into his face. Against the odds, Vazell was awake, clinging to consciousness with surprising tenacity, and Jarrat made an expression of distaste as he doubled his fist. Its knuckles smacked into the thickly-padded jaw and Vazell was out cold. The jolt of the blow rushed painfully through Jarrat, and he whooped for air. As he came to his feet he drew his sleeve across his face. Sweat stung his eyes and his lungs spasmed in the smoke.

With his good hand he reached into his inside pocket to bring out a small but extremely powerful microtransmitter. It was housed in the case of a gold cigarette lighter, but when Jarrat flipped up the top and extended the aerial wire it became a highband transceiver of great range.

"Raven 9.4 to Raven Leader," he said tersely. Static answered him, cutting, rhythmic blasts of white noise from the nearby spaceport radars. "Raven 9.4 to Raven Leader. Stoney, where the hell are you!"

As he spoke the name, Jerry Stone's voice came on the air. Powerful transmission gear on the ship cut through the background interference from the 'port's tracking arrays. "Jesus Christ, Kevin, it's been more than forty hours since you called in. Where the hell have you been?"

The sound of his friend's voice was like balm on Jarrat's raw nerves and he smiled tiredly. "Been busy. I couldn't get out of the palace, and I've got enough brains left not to try calling from inside!"

"Where are you now?" Stone's old-world London accent thickened, betraying concern. His voice was baritone, rich, even over a tiny speaker.

"I'm on Dock Row, in the alley between Bays 4 and 5," Jarrat told him. "Mavvik sent me to lean on Deek Vazell. They think I've killed him but he'll survive and he's all yours. I've told them I'll get rid of the body — just wait till I get out of here and send a squad to retrieve him. You should be able to patch him up and pump him for what he knows."

"Bay 4 and Bay 5," Stone repeated. His next words were directed not at his partner but at the intercom, and the crew on the standby gunship. "Blue Raven 6, Blue Raven 7, get your gear on, launch in five." Then he returned to Jarrat. "Time you got out of there, Kev. If you can get to the extraction point the Blue Ravens can pull you out in twenty minutes."

The offer of safety was powerfully seductive. He could be back on the carrier in an hour, filing the report and trying to forget the ridiculous jeopardy he had lived with for over seven weeks. Back on the carrier: Irish coffee, late-night paperwork, tall stories, the sound of Stoney's husky laughter. But a bug was still gnawing at him, and on a shrewd hunch Jarrat set aside his more

personal desires and said, "Not yet — not that I'm staying for the fun of it, mind you. There's a man I want. The mule. If I stick around a couple more days he's going to be here in Chell —"

"And you could be in a hole in the ground!" Stone snapped.

Jarrat smiled at the sharp edge in his partner's voice. Stone always snarled when he was worried. Jarrat had known him long enough to read him like a book. "Relax, Stoney. Mavvik won't screw with me, I'm costing him way too much." He spoke glibly, but in fact Stone was right, and Jarrat knew it. The job was getting dangerous. Not that any aspect of this assignment had ever been safe. "When you pay a fortune to buy yourself a king shooter," he added tersely, "you tend to respect the kid."

"But you just killed the Chell money man," Stone argued.

"Self-defense, Stoney," Jarrat told him, not quite offhandedly. "I've got the quilldart in my back to prove it."

Stone was silent for a moment and then came back quickly. Jarrat heard a half-smothered curse, and then, "Drugged? Poisoned?"

"No," Jarrat said quickly, "just as they come ... and if he'd been dead on-target I'd still be flat on my face. Luckily, his aim was wide."

"That's it," Stone barked, "I'm pulling you out. Enough's enough. The Ravens can pick you up out of the alley, bugged the extraction point."

"I want the mule!" Jarrat repeated, louder. "I'm okay, Stoney, really. You do your job, leave me to do mine."

Anger sharpened Stone's voice. "It's your neck, I suppose, if you want to go out and get it busted ... Blue Raven units report standing by to launch, Kevin. Get the hell out of there while you can."

"I will," Jarrat told him. "Oh, Stoney, there's something you can do for me." He gave Vazell's limp, beached-whale body a glare. "When you get this bastard aboard, shoot him with something, I don't particularly care what. He said there's a safehouse under the old mass driver on Windrigger. Find out if he lied. It could be my hide if he's telling me stories."

"Will do," Stone said resignedly. His voice was sharp, with a ragged edge. "For Christ's sake look out for yourself, Kevin. Raven Leader out."

"I'll do that," Jarrat said to the dead transceiver before he folded it on itself, slipped it back into his inside pocket and stooped to pick up Vazell's discarded smog mask. He could imagine the expression on Stone's handsome face at this moment. Exasperated, annoyed, concerned, that wide mouth compressed, the dark blue eyes glittering. "Soon, Stoney," Jarrat muttered as he tightened the straps of the smog mask, clasped its molded plastic shape firmly over his face and walked deliberately into the greasy, poisonous smoke that still billowed out of the blazing wreck.

The heat was fierce enough to parch his eyeballs through the mask. It was like walking into a blast furnace, and he was working blind. He found the body in moments, and he knew the face, half of which had survived intact. So this was Vazell's shooter. Just a cheap cityside assassin who went by the name

of Kenichi. Otherwise, the Colt had mauled the body badly. Blood and entrails made an aromatic sludge underfoot and he bent over the mess to go through its pockets in search of the shooter's ID.

He had no real need to dump the remains into the trashpack, but the ID would tell Chell Tactical too much. He would score no points by giving them gifts of information at this stage, and Tactical involvement could make his position dangerous. The ultimate irony would be to find himself in a standup fight with Tac, and be a statistic of 'friendly fire.'

Jarrat palmed the greasy card and walked out of the smoke. Halfway up the alley, he tore off the smog mask and paused briefly to check Vazell. The man was still out cold and the men from Blue Raven unit would arrive in minutes. *To collect the garbage*, he thought acidly. Stoney would turn the toad inside out, as he had pumped seven others for every shred of information they had during the two months the NARC carrier *Athena* had ridden in geosynchronous orbit, high over this troubled city. But one berry was not yet plucked, and Jarrat was determined to have it.

The mule. He did not yet know the man's name, but he would be in the city of Chell in two, three days. No one in the palace had any reason to be suspicious of Jarrat. The only minor problem was Vazell's 'death' and even Hal Mavvik himself would be slow to argue with the killing when his king shooter came home with a quilldart in his back. It would cost Mavvik more to replace Jarrat than he would lose if Vazell's steer did turn out to be the bullshit Roon speculated. But Stone would get the truth before long. Jarrat was as yet unconcerned.

He paced stiffly back to the car, which lay parked under the fluoros outside the office that processed data for Bays 4 and 5. One of the fluoros was faulty, fluttering hysterically. Roon sat in the car, watching its antics. The vehicle belonged to Mavvik's private garage. It was big, powerful, blue but looking purple under the lights. The aeroshell was backswept, graceful, its gullwings locked in the 'up' position as Roon waited for the boss's shooter to return. In the tail were two small jet engines, and Jarrat knew they were rated at just a little over four hundred horses each. It rode on a repulsion field, anchored to the spot by brake tractors.

The car rocked on the repulsion cushion as Jarrat fell into the left-hand seat. Roon was driving. He clutched painfully at his left arm, but with the dart in him Jarrat could not lean squarely into the seat to drive. Roon wrinkled his nose as the gullwings whined down and locked.

"You stink, Jarrat. What you been wading in?"

"Vazell's guts, and his shooter's," Jarrat growled. "Move it, will you? This dart's giving me hell."

"Not half as much hell as Mavvik's going to give you." Roon grinned and with an angry thrust, jammed the key into the ignition.

The jets exploded into life with a raucous howl before Roon put the shift into reverse. The car took off like a missile, screaming up the access road and

into the twelve-laner, the Chell Spaceport Clearway. Jarrat gritted his teeth as the pressure of the seat tried to push the quilldart into him. He twisted in the harness to ease it and looked up the road. Ahead, the city glittered, a carnival in the night. Darkness and neon masked squalor and poverty. Any city looked beautiful at night.

It was too bad, he thought, that the sun had to come up and show the truth. Chell was old, raddled, about a century past its prime, clawing to hang onto its youth and vitality like an old woman painting over her sags and bags and calling the deception regeneration. On the surface the city was bright. The paint was new, the weeds poisoned off, the glass polished.

But beneath the brash veneer Chell was no different from many other cities in the colonies which straggled back from the frontier to the old world. She was diseased, rancid — and happy. Chell was happy to the point of mania. Waves of ecstasy rolled over her like breakers on a beach. In the dead of night one could physically feel it, wafting up out of both the poor quarters of city bottom and the rich men's mansions which perched above the smogline. The phenomenon was quite common. Happiness was for sale. Joy retailed for forty credits a pop, it was not even expensive.

They called it *Angel*.

Searchlights speared down out of the sky like quadruple laser lances and heavy lifters pounded into the concrete. Sirens wailed across the docking bays, sending civilians scurrying for cover. Those with helmets stood with lowered visors to watch the gunship drop in over Dock Row. The hull was almost invisible in the glare and massive repulsion motors kicked up a hurricane of dust and debris, shrouding the heavy lifter.

Hatches in the belly of the craft slammed open. Those who watched from below could not quite make out the drop bay. It seemed to them that two figures jumped right out of the lights, riding down in the wash of the floodlights like locusts, an impression reinforced by the exoskeletal design of their armor.

They were suits of riot armor and literally indestructible. The surface of the kevlex-titanium was featureless, black, mirror-glossy. The helmet was full-visor, sealed. Umbilici sprouted like twin tusks from the chin contour. Twin whip antennae arced up from the back-mounted powerpacks. Across the front of the helmet was the legend, NARC-*Athena*, and above the letters, the decal of a raven in blue and the operative number.

These were Blue Raven 6 and Blue Raven 7.

Deek Vazell had woken moments before. Blinded by the dust, deafened by the noise, he lay on his back, gasping on the alley floor where Jarrat had dropped him, and saw the locust shapes of the NARC troopers jump. They could see him before they cleared the hatch. As he watched they feathered

down to land on either side of him. Vazell's mouth dried out to parchment. He struggled to get up but his left arm was useless, dead weight, and his head swam dizzily. He felt like a stranded porpoise.

The locust-like forms stooped toward him. Steel hands closed about his arms and legs. He screamed, half in pain, half in fright, as they lifted him without effort. Then their repulsion began to bluster. He felt the kick in the back of upward acceleration, and they rose fast into the halo of light. At the last moment Vazell made out the shape of the gunship, before blue-white light swallowed him whole.

The watching civilians began to breathe again as engines ran up and floodlights doused. It was over. NARC was gone and they were alive, at liberty and uninjured. Just as frequently, the appearance of a NARC gunship meant the dopers were at war again, fighting it out in the street for their 'Angel rights'. Vigilantes fought back and blood was let. Trapped in the crossfire, Tactical called for NARC, and the battle was on.

The hatch slammed shut. Vazell's vision was distorted by the green blotches of corneal afterimages. As he began to see again he focused on the men who hurried toward him with a gurney. Two orderlies and a medical officer. All wore white, with NARC emblems on the shoulders and unit badges on the collars. One read 'Raven'. Another read *Athena*.

And with a blinding flash of realization Deek Vazell knew where he was. He also knew it was too late to panic but still fear tightened under his heart and his pulse hammered. He felt the gurney roll in under him as he was held suspended by the two riot-armored troopers. He yelped again at the sharp jab of a needle low in his neck, and his vision cut out once more.

Twenty minutes later the Blue Raven medics rolled Vazell into the carrier's Infirmary, two decks above the docking bay in the *Athena's* belly. The gunship had touched down minutes before, and Captain Jerry Stone stood at the workstation just inside the Infirmary, appending his authorization to the pickup order.

Blue Raven 6 had followed the gurney up. He had removed his helmet, tucked it under his arm, and watched the Captain authorize the minor action. One big hand, gloved in a mesh of kevlex-titanium, ran over his smooth-shaven head. His name was stenciled in white on the black breastplate: Sgt. G. Cronin. He was taller than Stone by half a head and much, much heavier, but this was regulation. Stone was an officer with a NARC license; Gil Cronin served with the descant force. Both were soldiers in a paramilitary that functioned autonomously with government sanction.

Stone was tall enough. His hair was black and worn short, his eyes were smoldering blue and he was built like an athlete, with long limbs and broad shoulders. NARC demanded a high level of athletic proficiency from its officers. The physicals came up six monthly, three days of exhaustive testing designed to weed the active from the passengers. Stone was two years past his thirtieth birthday but looked younger. He wore plain clothes, the privilege

of rank, a cream shirt and blue slacks tucked into the uniform boots which were common issue to Tactical on a dozen colony worlds.

His eyes followed the gurney as the medics wheeled Vazell into the OR. So this was the Chell money man. NARC knew him well by reputation, but it was the first time Stone had physically set eyes on him. Vazell was a grotesque parody of a human being, whose ugly exterior concealed a pitiless, dangerous personality. The impression was about to become more pronounced when the medics were done. Vazell would lose the arm. Jarrat had aimed just a finger's span too far left ...

Jarrat had a quilldart in him. Anger tightened Stone's face. He had lean, strong features, good bones, and many would have called him handsome. But now his wide mouth had tugged into an expression of distaste and exasperation. Kevin Jarrat was notoriously stubborn. He was also the best. Stone had never worked with another field agent who could claim Jarrat's repertoire of skills — or his luck. And the decision to come out of deep cover was his to make, leaving Stone resigned, annoyed. *Frustrated*, he added, mocking himself a little.

Gil Cronin had seen the press of his mouth and raised a curious brow at him. "That's a mean looking bastard we just brought up. What do we want him for?"

Stone stirred, coming awake as he was jolted from the reverie. "He's the money man. The distributor, if you like. The money goes home to Mavvik, but Mavvik doesn't get involved with the boot-end of the business — the street. He has money men everywhere, hundreds, maybe thousands of them in towns like Foster and Pentecost. Vazell is just one, and in any case the dealers are the least of our worries. We want the investor."

"Hal Mavvik himself," Cronin said dryly. He cast a sidelong glance at Stone. "Cap Jarrat's been in there a hulluva long time."

"You're not wrong," Stone agreed. In fact, Jarrat had been buried in the assignment for two and three times as long as was normal. The longer an assignment ran, the more hazard multiplied, like fungus. Past a certain point, the only thing that made any sense was to get out with a whole skin and what data you had. And a week ago Stone would have said Jarrat was way past that point. He took a deep breath and turned toward Cronin, who towered beside him, massive in the mirror-polished armor. "The toad you just picked up put a dart in Kevin."

"A quilldart? Shit," Cronin breathed. "That's getting close."

"Too close," Stone agreed. You drew the graveyard shift, Gil?"

Cronin nodded. "Ain't that the truth."

"Yeah, well stay on your rocking horse. I reckon Jarrat might have his hands full with the boss. If the water gets too hot he'll yell to come out."

"If," Cronin added darkly, "he's in any position to yell."

"Are you kidding?" Stone demanded, constructing a flint-hard façade of bravado. "Him? He's got the luck of the devil, he always did have. He'll be

back in the palace, three-parts stoned, hip-deep in some luscious number on Mavvik's private payroll. You know Kevin Jarrat."

The sergeant who commanded the Blue Raven descant unit grinned widely. "I ought to know him. After two years of bumming around with you two loons ...? Damned officers, they always get all the perks."

"So try out for officer selection," Stone suggested glibly.

"Don't have the qualifications," Cronin said with a resigned shrug of his enormous, armored shoulders.

"And I didn't grow big enough to get into a descant unit," Stone retorted. "You want a coffee and a smoke, Gil?"

Cronin stirred, passing the helmet from hand to hand. "Rain check, Cap. Indian Joe's got next week's pay off me in IOUs and I want it back before the cards cool off." He gave the younger, smaller man, who was by far his superior officer, a vague salute and ambled away toward the elevator which would return him to the Blue Ravens' ready room.

Alone, Stone paced to the wide observation window and glared moodily into the brightly-lit cavern of the OR. Surgeon Captain Reardon was already working on Vazell, flanked by the usual team of three. He was a neurosurgeon, and a good one, but he was also a *combat* surgeon with experience on several warships, Army carriers, before he transferred over to NARC. Stone valued him more in this area. He watched with grim curiosity as the surgical team took Vazell's ruined arm off at the shoulder.

The bastard had put a quilldart into Jarrat, and Stone could find no pity for the man. Bravado aside, Kevin was more likely to be hip-deep in *trouble* than one of Mavvik's expensive hustlers, and Stone was on edge. Jarrat's survival might depend on how honest Vazell had been under duress, bargaining for his life with the only thing he had left — information. If he had been scared enough he might have babbled the truth before his mind was working fast enough for him to fabricate a story. Certainly, Jarrat had forged a hell of a reputation for himself, and the testimony of a king shooter would not be dismissed lightly, even by Hal Mavvik.

Stone lit a cigarette, dragged deeply and waited for his nerves to settle. The scent of kipgrass and jasmine clouded him and he frowned at the red-hot tip of the cigarette. All he wanted was Kevin out of there, safe, right now. But Jarrat was a wayward, stubborn character. Stone watched Reardon's crew close up without really seeing them work. Jarrat had the luck of the devil. But those who lived long enough swore Hal Mavvik *was* the devil. Stone took a last drag on the cigarette and stubbed it out.

If Mavvik was the devil, Jarrat was a NARC, which city bottom lore swore was the next best thing. Stone gave a grim smile to his faintly-seen reflection in the observation window, pondering the perversity of his luck.

Two long years, he thought, and the hunger to have Jarrat was keener than ever. Forbidden fruit always looked sweetest, and it was always just out of reach, taunting, tormenting. Not that Jarrat knew he was taunting, Stone

allowed. Kevin never flaunted himself. Nor had he ever given Stone any reason to think the powerful attraction was mutual. Emotions as old as time, primal, irresistible, jolted through Stone like a static shock whenever Jarrat was near. Often, it was all he could do to keep the mask in place, keep the truth to himself and hold his personal demons on the short leash.

In many ways it was easier when the deep cover assignments separated them. Days would pass without any contact with Jarrat. The wanting would settle back to an old, familiar ache. Sometimes he told himself he was getting over it, until the small voice in the back of his mind whispered how futile it was for a man to lie to himself.

By shiptime it was late when he finished his duty shift and returned to his quarters. The day's business remained on hold, the evening's data waited to be processed. He drank coffee as he ran the file quickly. With his authorization and approval it would be boosted on, back to Sector Central, a week away on Darwin's World, where old men and computers would dissect, digest and grant belated approbation. Or not. Responsibility weighed heavily on Stone's shoulders and he was never unaware of it.

Four people had died in the Angel riot in Hague Plaza, in north Chell. The Corunna sector was uptown, unaccustomed to streetwar. The dopers had come in with a new bill, little more than a pastiche of legal jargonese. The bottom line was another crusade to decriminalize the manufacture, retail and possession of Angel. Then the vigilantes had come in to join them and the shouting began. Those who had lost children, siblings, lovers, to the drug marched out to protest the arguments of dopeheads who wanted to legalize poison for public consumption, and rationalized their approval of suicide and murder with old, worn-out arguments about freedom of choice. All too often the victims of Angel were given no choice. One mistake was all it took. Or one act of wanton revenge, to spite a rival.

The full-scale riot began with shouting and bricks but someone had come armed. Phosphor grenades burst among the trooper squads from Tactical, and the fight erupted with a vengeance. Tac got between the combatants but the civilians on both sides were better armed. Several casualties and two of the dead wore Tac fatigues. NARC had been on standby for twenty minutes when Colonel Stacy called for the Ravens to deploy.

Dealers, pimps and lawyers on one side, and grieving survivors on the other, broke up into a frenzied shambles as the Red Raven gunship appeared out of the dense tropical overcast which blanketed the equatorial spaceport city. Sirens wailed, the Ravens jumped, and the newsvid cameras were rolling as the spectacle unfolded in Corunna's picturesque Hague Plaza. The mirror-black locusts looked odd among ornamental fountains, but ten minutes later the vicious 'packriot' was over. The brief action left four dead, twenty injured.

Angel was an industry. It was a madness, Stone thought as he reviewed the data. The swift, 'surgical intervention' might have saved a hundred lives. Angel would kill twice as many in a single night, perhaps not all in Chell, but

across this colony. Between the frontier and the ‘old world’ — Stone’s home, Earth itself — hundreds perished every night, while the syndicate lawyers who framed each new decriminalization bill would assault NARC in the press again. It was the same after every action, but their shots were cheap, impotent. Both Tactical and NARC shrugged them off.

Satisfied, tired yet still restless, Stone approved the day’s records and closed the file.

CHAPTER TWO

The first brandy had burned the nerve endings out of his gullet; the second was smoother. Jarrat swallowed hard on it as the needle knitted quickly to and fro along the wound where the quilldart had been. Bradley was almost finished. It had slipped out at a touch of a scalpel so sharp he had barely felt the nick. Bradley was a decent cutter, even if he did work for Mavvik. Jarrat lifted his head to look across the softly-lit lounge.

Roon sat on one end of the plush leather sofa, a white bandage about his left arm. He was doped, glassy eyed, watchful. And the man himself stood silently at the other end of the couch, his eyes on the dart that had been sliced out of Jarrat’s back moments before. Hal Mavvik was a man of sixty. He was badger gray but not bald, lined but not seamed, and the scarlet robe he wore concealed a body that was still taut, despite his excesses.

His weaknesses were alcohol, food and women, apparently in no specific order. The palace, high on the slopes of Monte San Angelo — with the city lights of Chell like a sparkling carpet unrolled below — was full of all three. He had been with one of his women when Roon paged him over the house intercom. The sour look on Hal Mavvik’s face had as much to do with the interruption of his private entertainment as with the death of the money man and the possible loss of his cash. He transferred a bleak, hard-eyed gaze to Jarrat as Bradley put the snips through the loose ends of the sutures and pressed an adhesive bandage into place over them.

“All right. You can tell me now.”

Roon looked up petulantly. “But I already —”

“Shut it, Rooney. I want to hear it from the shooter.” Mavvik’s voice was deceptively soft, like a thin veneer of tissue over razor blades.

The man spoke with one of the American accents. Jarrat, who had never visited Earth, was not sure which. Moving the shoulder experimentally, he got to his feet. “It’s like Roon told you. Vazell had a contract shooter of his own. You know the name of Freddie Kenichi?”

“I know it.” Mavvik’s eyes narrowed. “He’s scum. Trash.”

"He's dead trash now," Jarrat added in a rasp as the feeling began to return to the shoulder Bradley had numbed. "Vazell and Kenichi were there early. They must have seen Roon and me park outside the Bay office and ran into the alley, trapped themselves. It's easy to do ... some alleys go right through, some dead-end. Even the rats don't know them all."

"You killed Freddie Kenichi and scared the shit out of the fat man," Mavvik said slowly. "So Vazell put a dart in you. He hadn't primed it. If he had, you'd be dead as Kenichi."

"Just lucky." With a grimace, Jarrat worked the shoulder around. "Luck's a big part of this game. The day it runs out, you either quit or they bury you. Vazell knew the truth of that as well as you do. Tonight? I had the luck. And I blew him away." Jarrat lifted his chin. "When somebody tries to kill me, you want me to blow him kisses?"

Mavvik's mouth drew tight. "You could have dropped him, kept him alive and brought him back here."

"With the Colt? In the dark? What am I, a bloody magician?"

"The wreck was burning," Mavvik said angrily. "You could see."

"Maybe I didn't want to," Jarrat said flatly. Was this what Mavvik wanted to hear? He looked the boss squarely in the eye. "He put a dart in me. Maybe I wanted to frag him."

For a time they looked intently at one another, and Jarrat knew Hal Mavvik would buy that line. He would buy it because in the same situation he would have done the same thing himself. Vengeance, quick, efficient, deadly. At last the badger-gray head nodded deeply. "All right. Vazell had it coming. Death's Head can do without privateers. But I want the money, Jarrat, one way or the other. If the boys come up empty at the warehouse on Windrigger, you get on your bike, you find Vazell's people and you kick ass until you get it. *All* of it. You hear me?"

"I hear you," Jarrat said levelly, folding his arms on his bare chest. "And when they start to kick back?"

"Do what you're paid to do," Mavvik said in a mocking tone. "Grease the kickers till the rest of them quit. And speaking of kickers," he added, giving Roon a hard look, "the next time you have news that just can't wait, you give it to Grenville or Porter, not me." He smoothed the folds of the red silk robe, pulled hastily about him as he rolled out of bed.

On the table beside Bradley's case was the R/T. A hiss of static white noise issued from it as the channel was left open. They were waiting for Grenville's call. He had taken a quartet of the palace guard half an hour before, as Jarrat and Roon made it back. They should already be at the warehouse, Jarrat judged. The call would not be long in coming. Mavvik watched him closely. He pretended not to notice the scrutiny but he was aware he was being appraised, measured up, again.

He was tall, not as tall as Stone but above average height, with the athletic built typical of the NARC field agent. Without his shirt, the breadth of his

shoulders was more obvious. His long legs were clad in tight black denim. His eyes were slate gray, wide and expressive, given to laughter. His hair was a mix of sun blond and brown, wayward and worn long. Kevin Jarrat was thirty-one and took pride in the fact that, if he had to, he could still pass for a kid. Sometimes the job required it.

But Jarrat was not a kid. The boyish good looks were a tool, and occasionally a weapon. He could fool, dupe his way around men and women alike. For two months he had lived in the palace here on Monte San Angelo, playing the part of a king shooter, and they believed implicitly in him. He knew how to harden his face until the boyishness became wicked and even his smile resembled that of a snake.

The pretense took skill and energy. Almost eight weeks of it had drained him until he was weary. When Stoney offered him extraction by the Blue Raven unit every bone in his body said *get out, go!* But he and Stone still needed the final pickup, the mule, or they would forfeit the very data they needed to close down once and for all not only Mavvik's operation on this continent, but the whole Angel trade on the colony world of Rethan. The mule ran for the *manufacturer*, and was their link back to the source.

The R/T gave a blast of static before Grenville's voice bawled, thinned by the little speaker, "Charlie to Home Base. It's here, Hal. You can take the bamboo out of sonny boy's fingernails. He must've put the fear of God into Vazell. The stupid sonofabitch told the truth."

Mavvik picked up the small, black shape of the R/T. "They gave you a fight there, Charlie?"

"Not after we put away the first two," Grenville snickered. "There's an old sod down here who wants to be the money man now. You want to check him out for the job?"

"Later," Mavvik said tersely. "Come on back, Charlie, he'll keep. Home Base out." He tossed the R/T back onto the table with a plastic clatter. "Seems you're off the hook, Jarrat. In fact, I come up owing you one. The truth is, that bastard Vazell's been a thorn in my ass for a year. If you hadn't *itemized* him tonight, rather sooner than later I would have."

"So pay me a nice, fat bonus," Jarrat said brashly.

The older man glared thoughtfully at him. "Death's Head can always use a king shooter, and I like initiative. You're good, I don't deny it. But I'm warning you, kid, and remember this: there's a difference between a shooter who can do as he's told and a trigger-happy bastard who can't or won't take an order. One I can use, the other's going to end up dogmeat sooner or later. You follow me?"

Jarrat smiled that snake smile. "I hear you."

"Which means what?" Mavvik demanded hoarsely. Anger tightened his voice. "You just do as you're told, boy. The day you fuck up a job is the day you get pinned to the wall. Death's Head isn't a bunch of chicken-brained individuals. If it was, NARC would have had us in a hole years ago. You follow

orders, you're in for the run. Make a monkey out of me once, just once, and you go out through the door in a box. You follow me now?"

Jarrat made a patently mock obeisance.

"Fine," Mavvik rumbled. "Then I have some interrupted business to attend to. Good night to you all."

With that he left. The lounge was silent in his wake. Bradley repacked his bag and was on the point of leaving when Roon chuckled. "You're a lucky boy, Jarrat. I thought he was going to chew out your liver."

"Like he said," Jarrat said tiredly, "shut it, Roon. I've had enough out of you for one day ... thanks for the job, Brad. It feels as good as new."

The medic smiled. He was a young man no older than Jarrat himself, very blond with a ruddy complexion and a sunburned, peeling nose. "Not yet, but it will be. I can yank the sutures for you in the morning when you come in for a proper laser job."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Jarrat tried the shoulder and found it hot, stiff. "I heal fast in any case. 'Night, Brad."

Collecting the Colt and its harness from the back of a chair, he left the lounge by the door leading westward into the enormous house which was rightly called a palace. It stood in private parklands on the shoulder of the mountain, comfortably high above the city and the noisy, toxic spaceport. The city lights were blurred, diffused by the smog layer. Swathes of them were obliterated by denser palls. The Rethan colony was more than a century and a half old now, and since heavy industry was its whole reason for being, like virtually every colony, it rushed past its prime and got dirty and crowded fast. Poverty and desperation bred like rats in city bottom, and Angel abuse flourished in that soil.

On his way back to his apartment Jarrat paused to look down from a terrace window onto the smog-shrouded plain stretching away toward the spaceport on the horizon. At this altitude the air was fresh. The palace was senselessly opulent, making a mockery of good taste. At first it had been a novelty to live among the unbelievably rich but the company soon became tiresome. To Jarrat it was a job like any other, with its own inherent perils.

And its perks. The lights were on in his apartment. As he had expected, Lee had stayed up for him. He closed the door quietly, placed the Colt on a chair and glanced once about the boudoir. It was decorated in pale green but the curtains and bedspread were pale blue. The open windows admitted the cool, shifting night wind, a luxury which was unknown down in the city, under a smog blanket through which stars seldom showed.

Lee sprawled on top of the quilted bedspread, a lithe, coffee-brown figure wearing one of Jarrat's own shirts. It looked better on the boy than on himself, Jarrat thought. Lee's hair, black as jet, spilled over both his shoulders and hung to his waist. The legs were pure perfection. The shirt had hitched up and beneath it the curves of buttocks were round and alluring. He had been reading but tossed the tape aside as Jarrat appeared.

"Kevin, thank God — I thought something must have gone wrong," he began as he rolled off the enormous bed.

"Something did," Jarrat told him wryly, opening his arms. "*Something* almost always does. Come here."

The boy stepped into his embrace. Jarrat smelt cedar and musk, some expensive scent that seemed to cling about him, morning and night.

"Fixed?" Lee asked. He sank sharp teeth into Jarrat's shoulder.

"Fixed," he said emphatically. The kid lifted his head, searching for Jarrat's lips. He was nearly as tall as the man he knew as a top contract shooter. They could kiss without Jarrat stooping. Lee's mouth was hot, his tongue demanding, and the kiss was hard. One long leg slid in between Jarrat's, the knee lifting to rub into his crotch, drawing an insistent caress across the black denim.

Jarrat broke free of his lips and gave the boy an amused look. "You know how to get your own way, don't you?" Then again, Lee had been well taught. He came from an uptown den. Mavvik had hired a bevy of such beautiful creatures for a party; one or two had been kept on. Lee tossed his hair back over both shoulders and smiled wickedly. He was breathtaking at eighteen years old. Jarrat caught his raven-maned head in both hands and had his mouth again. "What were you reading? Or do you get the hots just looking at me?"

Lee chuckled. "I get the hots just *thinking* about you, sugar. You're like a breath of fresh air in this place, it's why they hate you. You're the king and they're jealous to death. Roon, and Grenville and Porter. I thought I'd die of boredom before you got here." Lee filled his crotch with a sinewy bare knee again. "King shooter. In more ways than one, right?"

"And I suppose you kiss and tell," Jarrat said as his fingers slipped the shirt's buttons undone. The garment was loose about the boy.

"I don't have to," Lee laughed. "I just look shagged to death all day and they can dream up whatever they like. Christ knows what they think you do to me, but — oh, they hate you." He shrugged out of the shirt and arched his back to thrust ringed nipples into Jarrat's palms. Jarrat rubbed them gently. "Been waiting for you for ages. I thought you'd never come."

"I wouldn't say *never*," Jarrat said dryly. He looked down at the supple young body and resisted the impulse to do just that as Lee wriggled deliciously to rub those ringed nipples on his open palms. The kid wore a thin gold cockring to make the most of nature's endowments. He was not as heavily hung as he would have wished, but Jarrat was more than satisfied. "You're not going to give me a sporting chance, are you?" he asked, tweaking both Lee's beautiful gold nipple ornaments.

"Not this time," Lee affirmed breathlessly. "Maybe later." He hooked his fingers into Jarrat's belt, pulled him toward the vast bed and plunked down on the quilt to watch him pull off his boots. As he sat on the side of the mattress to do so, Lee saw the adhesive dressing on his shoulder. His tone of

teasing, seductive banter changed abruptly to one of genuine concern. "Hey, sugar, what have you done to yourself now?"

"Nothing that won't mend," Jarrat said evasively. "I've had worse."

Lee's fingers knotted into the wayward brown hair to draw Jarrat down onto the bed. As he was straddled, Jarrat began to wish the denim was not so fashionably tight. Lee had the kind of body artists dreamed about, here and there highlighted with jewelry. The lamplight gleamed on the gold at ears, wrists, breast and groin, chains, rings, bangles. He was of hybrid stock, a little African, a little Asian, a little native American — even Lee was not sure. Many young people out in the colonies had begun to forget that their history had begun on Earth, a world they had never visited and perhaps never would.

Time would be the great leveler, Jarrat guessed as he gazed up at Lee with bemused eyes, but for now the 'Companion' was nothing less than incredible. He was still little more than a boy and had been a professional boudoir *artiste* for six years.

With a rasping *churr* of unmeshing metal some of the denim's pressure released. Jarrat raised both knees, rolled him off and undressed quickly. Lee wound arms and legs tightly about him. It was like wrestling a python, and they both loved it. Then Lee knelt up and spread and Jarrat saw the moist glistening of lube on his skin. He slid into the hot depths of the boy's body and paused to regain some measure of control. His balls had their own ideas.

His hands cradled narrow hips as Lee wrenched back to impale himself with a wild little cry of pagan delight and began to heave. For the thousandth time Jarrat wondered fleetingly, foolishly, if Stoney would make that little cry of delight for some lucky lover. It was a ridiculous question. Stupid to even think it, or to imagine the way Stone's face would crease with self-absorption, how his hands would first feather caresses and then grasp, take what he wanted and needed.

Jarrat savored the speculation for just a moment and then deliberately put it from him to concentrate on Lee. Stone was far, far off-limits. And Stoney had better sense than to violate the most basic regulation in the NARC rule book. Officers did not become emotionally involved. Never. There was the start and end of it, for reasons too good to be argued. Jarrat had agreed with them when he transferred over from the Army and signed the NARC contract. He still agreed with them. And Stoney's face still haunted him when he made love, no matter with whom, or where, or how. Two years was a long time to want, with no real hope of having.

Meanwhile Lee was wild, fighting for every second he could make it last. Jarrat punished his quivering muscles as if he were engaged in some ritual bloodsport where the prey was orgasm, slippery, elusive, sadly brief.

It was only later, when the room had righted and he had drifted back to awareness, that he realized his muscles were like rubber and the wound in his back was on fire. The local had worn off and the sutures could have been made of barbed wire. Climbing off Lee as he sprawled in satiated content-

ment, Jarrat flopped belly-down, buried his face in the pillows and groaned. He felt the flutter of soft hands on his back, felt the brush of Lee's luxurious hair and the tickle of kisses, but did not move. "Go away and let me die in peace."

"Sugar?" Lee's lips feathered his back, hunting for knotted muscles. "You hurting, Kevin?"

"Yes. Don't worry about it." Jarrat forced his leaden limbs to move, rolled over and took Lee against him. "You were great, kiddo. You're too good to be working in this place."

"The money's right," Lee said shrewdly. He stroked through the pale gold hair dusting Jarrat's hard chest. "Mind you, when you leave all you'd have to do is give me a nod and I'd go with you."

"I couldn't afford you," Jarrat told him honestly. "Even I don't get paid that much." He reached for the supple young buttocks and kneaded them. "And don't say you'd pauper yourself and share my bed for the joy of it, because I don't believe you."

The cascade of raven hair tossed as Lee laughed and took Jarrat's hand to his chest, rubbing it there. The gold cockring kept him half-hard and he was humping slowly at Jarrat's hip. "Still, I'll miss you."

"Go to sleep. It's late," Jarrat said bluffly, tweaking one of the matching ornaments to make the boy arch with sensuous pleasure.

Lee snatched up the quilt and rolled them in it. Jarrat would have been pleased to subside into sleep, but his mind returned willfully to Stone. In two years of serving together they had actually spent only a little more than six months in each other's company. The way a NARC partnership operated, more often than not one officer was on the ship, the other was in deep cover, and frequently weeks would go by while the only contact between them was radio. It was close to two months since he had seen Stone's face.

Absence made the heart grow fonder. Jarrat mocked himself as his mind defied sleep and returned to work. Stone would have Vazell on the rack soon, and in two days, three, the mule would be in Chell. One more pickup and the job would be finished, he would be out of here. Life would be less exhausting without Lee, but no good thing lasted forever. He would return to the bitter-sweet pleasure of sharing duty with Stone, keeping up a pretense for the other man's benefit, until the next job began and it was Stoney's turn to do the ground work, buried in another deep cover assignment while Jarrat monitored the ship and kept up the telemetry transmissions to Sector Central, the NARC facility on Darwin's World.

He smiled, holding Lee against him. When Mavvik was in custody and the whole Death's Head infrastructure came apart at the seams, the kid would be out of a job. But Lee would prosper. He knew half the merchant princes in the palaces above the smogline. He would be in some other rich man's bed before the week was out, pampered and fawned on. Jarrat would miss him, miss the easy, comfortable loving of male and male.

But when Death's Head was gone, when Hal Mavvik was in a deep, unmarked hole in the ground, the trade in Angel would come to a jolting dead stop on this world.

And that was what NARC was about.

CHAPTER THREE

The targets stood a hundred meters away at the other end of the gun range. Jarrat regarded them indifferently, more intent on the gunsights than on them. The old HK .60 caliber was still shooting high and left. He thumbed the adjuster a fraction over, took the automatic in both hands and sighted on the center target again. The handgun had a lot of kick though it was more than a century old. It had been in Mavvik's armory for years, corroding, replaced by newer weapons, laser sighted snipers' tools, and machine pistols like the Colt that was his own usual weapon.

Old and unusual handguns were Jarrat's only real weakness. He had taken the HK from its tomb a week before. Its renovation was absorbing. It was clean and cycling smoothing now, but ammunition for it was hard to come by since it used bullets which had to be primed with a cartridge apiece, archaic technology. The rounds he was shooting on the gun range had been custom made by an associate of Mavvik's, the gunsmith who serviced the Death's Head arsenal. The man was an artist. And he was going down with Mavvik when the time came, Jarrat would see to it.

Nine rounds, heavy caliber, were loaded into the magazine in the butt. It was a weighty piece and he could feel the drag on his forearms and elbows as he ripped off the whole clip.

The HK roared with a louder voice than the Colt. The noise slammed back off the white concrete walls, reverberating as Jarrat removed the empty magazine and reloaded with another. He thumbed the adjuster again and repeated the whole procedure. The gun was still shooting left. He burned off a third clip, made further minor adjustments and reloaded. This time six of the nine rounds punched into the target dead center and he was satisfied. He pulled the concussion pads from his ears and changed clips once more. His pockets were full of reloads. By habit he always carried plenty of spares.

Nine more rounds hammered in on target, pushing the bullseye right out of the steel plate and his ears rang with the unblanketed noise. As the shots echoed into silence they were seconded by applause, a few claps that announced Mavvik's presence. Jarrat turned toward the sound. He had not been aware he was observed. "Thank Christ you're on our team," Mavvik said with

a grin displaying his perfect dental replicas. He held out one hand for the gun and Jarrat passed it over. Grasping it in both fists, Mavvik aimed it levelly between the king shooter's eyes.

"It's loaded," Jarrat said quietly. His spine prickled although he knew Mavvik would never trigger the gun. Looking into the barrel of a weapon was not an experience a man enjoyed.

"Is that a fact, now?" Mavvik's grin widened. "Don't fret. You're way too valuable to Death's Head. I wouldn't burn a hair on your pretty head." He turned away, sighted on the left-hand target and emptied the magazine into it. Jarrat's narrowed eyes shifted focus. He was not surprised to see the rounds had found their mark as accurately as his own. Mavvik nodded his appreciation. "Nice weapon."

"More interplay between the shooter and his gun," Jarrat agreed. "These days the guns do all the hard stuff. It's almost impossible to miss." He grinned brashly at his employer. "There's going to come a day when I'm out of a job. A kid like Lee could do the honors with a cannon in his fist that's more computer than gun." Which also meant NARC would be up against such weapons in the hands of the dopers and vigilantes who were rapidly outclassing Tactical. The thought sickened Jarrat.

"Speaking of work," Mavvik mused, "you're on." He threw a keyring at the younger man and Jarrat plucked it deftly out of the air. "Take the Rand. It's bulletproof."

"Take it where — and who's shooting at me?" Jarrat was already moving. His insides had tightened at once. This had to be it. Showtime.

"Our guest is coming in on the next shuttle," Mavvik told him. "All you have to do is pick him up, deliver him and his baggage, to Armand's."

The mule. "How will I know him?" Jarrat asked. "There'll be a hundred or more passengers getting off that skybus."

In answer Mavvik lifted a photograph from his billfold and passed it into Jarrat's waiting fingers. "His name is Dressler. They're waiting for him at Armand's already. Get your ass into gear, Jarrat, get out of here."

Jarrat left the gun range without a word. He looked once at the picture before slipping it into his hip pocket. It was a candid holosnap of a nondescript little man who was instantly forgettable, a face to be overlooked in any crowd. In fact, *this* face was burned into Jarrat's mind.

He jogged back through the palace's cool, air-conditioned passages to his apartment to collect the Colt and a jacket. Lee was there, in his familiar state of undress. His brown skin shone and steam still billowed out of the bathroom. A pang of regret caught Jarrat in the chest. This was goodbye, but Lee was not to know it.

They had made love in the morning, waking late, breakfasting in the enormous bed and wrestling there until it was a confusion of tangled black silk sheets. Lee had given him everything, much more than would have been required, or even asked, of a professional Companion. Lee gave because he

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