

MINDSPACE



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MINDSPACE

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

MINDSPACE

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MINDSPACE

Chapter One

Jack DiFalco folded his wings in tight and dove. His body was as aerodynamic as a human could become, and the thick atmosphere of Rusus made his plummet feel like diving into a cushion of feathers.

He was in an oxygen-nitrogen pocket, with several hundred kilometers of breathable air on all sides, while ammonia clouds rose like a mountain range on his right and, far below, a great sulfur storm painted the face of the gas giant red-brown. Far above, the pocket of blue sky faded out to mauve, and then to black, and a few of the brightest stars glittered like diamonds.

The ship was ten clicks below, five hundred meters to his right, and he rolled over, spread his limbs to brake, and angled his body to surf on the thick air. He was coming up on the *Andromache* from astern, and he knew the risk. The engines were dormant, she was idling on a minimal repulsion field, but still the sterntubes were sizzling hot with hard radiation. No unarmored human should be anywhere near them.

But Jack was falling rapidly, and he had one shot at this. His lungs spasmed with effort as his muscles overworked to bring him around on target while he could still get his feet onto the ship's upper surfaces. If the engines fired, if those sterntubes lit up, he would be fried. If he fell past the *Andromache* without ever making contact with her, he would be fried and crushed as he dropped into the gas giant's deep atmosphere.

It was the risk he had taken when he bailed out of the tractor, thirty kilometers above. A single armor-piercing round through the bell housing the tractor's primitive AI, and the vehicle was no more than sixteen tonnes of scrap metal. Every system auto-scrammed,

including communications, leaving him stranded, blind, deaf, and out of options.

The *Andromache* wallowed like a great sleeping turtle, drifting gently toward him as he fell. He spread arms and legs again, using the taut-stretched kevlex webs between limbs and body to trim his flight, bring him in on target. He was trying to avoid the sterntubes, aiming for the five-meter, backswept spines of the ship's comm arrays. If he could brake fast enough, hard enough, and catch one of those spines, he stood half a chance of hacking some service hatch, getting into the ship.

If he missed, he could be impaled. If the ship's AI cranked up its comm systems at just the wrong moment, he would be microwaved — flashed like fried chicken. His teeth bared in a humorless grin, and with the down-angle dead right, he closed in his limbs again for aerodynamics, speed. He would fall like a stone, and if those sterntubes remained dark for just a few more seconds, he would be out of their death zone.

He counted those seconds out, counted five more, and then tumbled in the thick air and spread his limbs wide to brake. He was falling feet-first now, and the scarred gray hull of the ship was coming up fast. Too fast — he knew in seconds, he had waited too long to brake. He was going to hit the hull too hard, and there was no more he could do to slow his fall.

Jack swore vividly, shouting curses into the windstream as the *Andromache* rushed up and smacked into his flightsuited body with an impact that shattered both his legs and his pelvis. His spine compressed catastrophically, he felt the pain for a long, sickening moment — it was so real, every nerve he possessed ignited with it, white hot and blistering his flesh.

And then the AI discontinued the feed, and the velvet-black of freefall replaced the millrace of the survival struggle on Rusus. Pain receded, replaced by a familiar numbness. His brain spun as it struggled to process the sudden shift in data. One moment, a life and death situation in a pocket of breathable atmosphere high above the liquid metallic hydrogen core of a gas giant, the next ... this.

Floating in freefall on a repulsion field softer than the softest feather bed, in air two degrees under body temperature, in total

blackness. The isolation tank was womblike. He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. His only contacts with the outside were via the AI who controlled the game sim, and the passive channel in the background, where the cranial implant would trade datastreams with another such implant, if they synchronized.

The only reason he was hearing a murmur from Kieron Charig was that the game AI was interfacing for them. Jack's implant was not synchronized with any other guild implant, anywhere. Kieron might be able to tap into the master nets which controlled the city's air traffic, the spaceport, the constant feed of news, weather, even gossip from across the Deep Sky, but Jack was not so lucky.

His implant was unlicensed, and if the patrons at Phantastyx were less lax about their security, they would have asked for his papers. Only the legit spacers had such papers; and Jack DiFalco had not been legit in a long time.

Kieron Charig, however, was one of the best. He was a navigator, overqualified to fly the biggest and fastest ships in space. And he was chuckling in smug amusement as he eavesdropped on the game. His voice murmured in the back of Jack's mind, almost as if Jack were thinking the thoughts himself.

"You wiped out again, didn't you?"

"Got a hell of a lot further through this time," Jack said pragmatically. "Made it onto the hull. I'll crack a hatch one of these days. I dove too fast, that's all. Next time I'll get it."

"If you don't get busted first," Kieron scoffed.

"Get off my case, Ron," Jack told him. "It's only a game."

"A game played with illegal bloody hardware," the navigator added. "You shouldn't even be here, and since you are here, you should be playing this stupid game in VR, idiot, not the full mind-space rig."

"Stupid game?" Jack stretched, felt out his arms and legs in the hot darkness. "Sonja, I'm done, lemme out. Unhook."

Sonja was the Phantastyx AI. Without a word, it cracked open the iso tank and took the repulsion field down so gently, Jack got his feet under him without a jolt. He was naked, and comparatively chill air rushed around him as the tank opened. Kieron Charig was sitting in one of the seats opposite, watching the CityNet news feed.

"Stupid game," Kieron repeated. "One of these days, Jack,

you're going to get arrested, and for what? Beating a bloody damned game!"

He made a good point, and Jack did not argue that you did not, *could* not, 'beat the game.' There was no end to it, no final level. You *played* the game, simply to be *playing* it — you had no desire to reach the end of it. An end would ruin it. He clambered out of the tank and stretched again, head to foot, before he reached for his clothes. They were exactly where he had left them, hanging over the back of the chair by the tank.

"There's easier ways to get a few thrills," Kieron added as he abandoned CityNet and watched Jack dress with an attractive, lopsided smile. "A know a few clubs where you could give yourself several major heart attacks, and do it legally."

The soft old denims hugged Jack's thighs; the shirt slid on like a second skin, molding to a torso that was hard worked. "Not on the bucks left in my pocket," he told Kieron. "You know I'm not working."

The navigator frowned at him. "Still? I thought you were flying with — what's his name, the big, fat character with the tattoos?"

"Artie Wahad," Jack supplied. "I quit."

The boots had seen better days; the jacket was scuffed and mended. Kieron handed them to him, one by one, without an audible comment. He did not need to say a word. For himself, he was dressed in the black pants and dark green tunic of the guildsman. The discreet, elegant uniform made a potent statement. At last he said quietly, "Jack, you can't afford to quit a job."

"I can," Jack muttered, "when the price of keeping it is my ass! You think I'm going to get down on my knees for Artie Wahad's engineer? Think again."

"Oh." Kieron's protests subsided. "Malik Redman's reputation precedes him ... and they say the dong's about yea long —" holding up his hands, wide apart "—and hasn't seen the light of day for years ... always being up the rear end of some poor sod, you know."

"Yeah, I do know." Jack stamped his feet to comfort in the boots. "And it wasn't going to be me! Damn it, Ron ... me and Redman? Bad medicine, old son, from day one. He looked me up and down like I was so much fresh meat. I almost broke his nose before I said good morning. We were still on the preflight routine, I

was working on the bitch of a forward console, and the man walks up behind me and — well, let's just say he was ready to ride."

Kieron snorted with ribald laughter. "You were bare-assed, bent over the console before you knew what was happening, and you flounced off in a huff."

"Not before I dislocated the man's shoulder," Jack growled. He gave Kieron a glare. "I'm flat broke, Ron, and it's not easy to get a berth when you don't have papers, but I am not — repeat *not!* — a quick fuck!"

The humor seemed to slide off Kieron's face. "Hey, man, I never said you were. You'll get something. You, uh, strapped for eating money?"

A smidgeon of pride rose inside Jack, but he smothered it. "Thanks for the thought. No, I'll manage for a few weeks. Scuttlebutt is, Connie Chan's headed in. She pulled a major run over to Shast a few days ago, so it's a safe bet she'll be on the rink here in another week. She owes me a favor or two."

She might not want a pilot, Jack admitted, but she would certainly conjure a job of some sort out of the air. And there was no one like Artie Wahad on any of her ships. Her master pilot was a nice guy, Mark Pardew — handsome, soft spoken, with gentle hands and a nice line in bedside manner. If Mark wanted to play skingames, he would smile at Jack, lift one eyebrow in invitation, hold out one of those hands, and Jack would take the invitation without hesitation.

"You want to go somewhere?" Kieron asked as they stepped out of the game chamber where four tanks stood along the walls, two of them still occupied.

He slung one big arm across Jack's shoulders. He was taller than Jack, broader, heavier, with the dark brown hair and eyes, and the easy humor of an old friend. Old colleague. There was a time when they might have shipped out together, pilot and navigator. Jack passed the palm of his right hand over the back of his skull, feeling the place where the tiny implant lay nested under the bone.

In the early years of the technology — around the time Jack DiFalco and Kieron Charig were born — biocyber implants were solely the privilege of the military.

Twenty years later, it was part of the duty of the merchant guild spacer to own one. Only professional spacers used them legally, until the technology filtered down to street level, and there, they became chic. An expensive luxury flaunted by people too wealthy to have any real use for them.

In a matter of months, the ganglion-sized inter-cranial implants became a status symbol among the gamers who drove the cutting-edge VR games to new heights, new levels of play and complexity. And it was the games that wreaked the havoc which brought about the banning of live implants, online in civilian skulls, because the games addicted ... the games killed.

There was *Imperator*, a game of power and politics, vice and vengeance, in which each new level took the player higher through the ranks of the controlling caucus of a regime that was shaped and designed by the gamers themselves. Few were benevolent.

There was *BloodClaw*, where gamers chose an animal hunter inside which to come alive in the mindscape, and hunted humans in an alternate reality where animals were intelligent and humans were savage, senseless.

And *Windsong*, where only the first levels of the game were played in the sphere of the living; the higher levels were spun and woven in the realms of the dead, where one seduced, and was seduced by, ancient gods to whom the riddles of the cosmos were like jewels to be bestowed for favors, some sensual, some cruel, all dangerous. Zeus, Apollo, Osiris, Ra, Li Jing, Feng Bo ... the AI took its inspiration from the inclination of the player, and molded the mindscape accordingly.

The games were addictive even when they were played against an AI which controlled them like a puppetmaster, with its god's eye view of the playing field. But the military and merchant *astra* technology which found its way down to street level was infinitely more powerful, more complex, than the armed forces had enjoyed when the first rudimentary implants were fused into the skulls of combat soldiers.

The new implant technology had a potential for morphing the upper levels of the games into impossible fantasies which were so real, many players became lost in worlds of their own making. Their reality was the game; the reality of the city where they lived, the streets where they walked, looked hollow, dull, mind-numbing in its tedium.

Everything had changed by the time Jack was twenty years old. The first time Jack came online in the mindspace, the gamers were already playing each other; the AIs were reduced to mere projectors, hosts for the incredible virtual worlds written, designed, mapped, articulated, by writers and artists who had become unspeakably rich overnight, before their bubble deflated.

Because the games became *so* addictive, *so* destructive, once the gamers began to play against one another, they were swiftly regulated by government, and just as swiftly declared illegal.

As the best gamers swiftly maxed out the pre-designed levels, the game matrixes — semi-aware AIs in their own right — were configured to weave more and more complex levels, filled with challenges, hazards, traps, far beyond the original game concepts. The virtual worlds mutated into scenarios never imagined by their own designers.

The best players became so immersed in the gamespace, and so good, they turned professional. A few of these were already so immersed, they could no longer disconnect. A decade later, their bodies were still alive somewhere, institutionalized and wasting slowly on life support as their minds soared through cosmic levels of games where heroes became gods, and gods made sport with galaxies.

Few players were ever so gifted, but all hungered for the higher levels ... the rebirth as the demigod, the higher form of life, in whom beauty, brilliance, strength and skill combined to lift them into realms on which the lower levels could only eavesdrop, over CityNet.

Many gamers tried for months and years to transcend the pre-designed levels, and repeated failure inspired them to tortured efforts, always pushing back the limits of what they would do to win. They pitted themselves against gamers much better than themselves, experienced scenes — grotesque, bloody, erotic, impossible

— that broke weaker minds long before they could get through to the next level. Soon, the games began to score casualties among the living.

The toll read in dozens at first, and then in thousands. Suicides were the most common deaths. Gamers unable to live with what they had seen, done, and suffered in their virtual worlds took their own lives. Game memories were as vivid as real memories, and as difficult to set aside. Other players — rivals in the mindspace — brought the contest out into reality. Murders became almost as commonplace as suicides, when gamers who were being blocked by better players simply removed their flesh and blood rivals, in a daily welter of bloodshed which headlined on CityNet.

In five years, mindspacing became the greatest plague in the three centuries since the infamous drug known as Angel tore the early human colonies to shreds. And five years after Jack and Kieron graduated from the guild academy, all civilian implants were forcibly deactivated.

Jack was twenty-five on the day the device in his skull became street-illegal, but he only raised a brow at the news story, and passed on. His own implant was licensed. In those days he carried the papers of a master pilot, and the little blue guild tattoo behind his right ear, and the chip deep under the skin of his right shoulder which spoke to CityNet scanners as he passed by.

But even then Jack was hiding a secret. Not even Kieron knew the truth. Jack was game-addicted, he had been addicted since they were both just out of flight school.

His game was Azure Flight, and he was still playing it — even now, even here. Ten years into the game he was mindspacing it, while angry civilians had gone back to the VR hookups, which fed them only the pre-designed, state-approved scenarios. Jack was riding level forty. He was far beyond any point reached by the ordinary player, and the only places gamers like himself could play were illegal dens where the iso tanks were hidden behind the VR facilities, and the datastreams sizzling through the sub-conduits of CityNet were as encrypted as the streams from banks and Fleet and government.

The game never stopped, night or day, even for a heartbeat. The higher the player climbed through its levels, the more levels

evolved before him, and the best gamers, long-ago turned pro, were always online.

It was Azure Flight for which Jack's name was struck from the active register of the merchant *astra*. Kieron knew this much. The game had been rendered as illegal as a live implant in a civilian skull, and Jack was playing it when the citybottom den, way back in the city of Westminster on Jagreth, was busted.

Fifteen rogue gamers were arrested that night but only one of their number was a guildsman, a merchant *astra* veteran. Having the papers and the subcutaneous chip to prove his implant was fully legal, licensed, kept Jack out of prison.

In accordance with their own rules, the merchant service terminated his contract automatically; the Jagrethean authorities deactivated his implant a few hours later and released him onto the street.

It was like being blind and deaf. Like being locked permanently in an iso tank but cut off from the datastream, even while he walked the city like a dead man, peering out of hollow eyes and seeing many people who looked at him with overt scorn — and just as many others whose faces were full of sympathy. Disconnected gamers were everywhere. Rehabilitation was available, if a player could handle being brainwashed back into reality.

If Jack DiFalco had chosen to be a lounge steward at the spaceport, a barkeeper in Sark, walk a beat with the hustlers in Venice, or put on a Tactical uniform and read the riot act to misbehaving motorists, he might have pulled his life back together. But boredom drove him out into Freespace, days beyond a frontier that never ceased to expand; sheer serendipity found him in a place called Raja's, where the last of the free rogue gamers gathered.

Beyond the frontier, one left behind every vestige of the law. Each human vice and sin flourished like blooms in a crop of weeds on worlds which had not won colony status, and might never win it. Most governments in the Deep Sky refused to acknowledge the Freespacers, which was a cruel judgment. Not all Freespacers were garbage. But many were, and their worlds were often pits where the muck of humanity gathered.

Raja's trod a fine line between exotica and iniquity. It belonged to a diva who called herself Ruby Wu, and she held the establishment in a choking grip. It was a rare outpost of decency, and the

honest, honorable Freespaceers were drawn to it. The girls and boys working in Raja's as Companions were *not* underage, nor were they full of Angelino or Buran, or any of the more recent synthetics which rotted so many kids in the Deep Sky homeworlds. The gaming tables were *not* rigged, the booze was *not* watered, and house security actually protected those guests who were too drunk or too stupid to safeguard themselves, their valuables — even their way back to civilization.

But there, Ruby Wu drew the line. Smugglers used the caverns under Raja's as their warehouses, and paid a generous 'tip' for the service. Mercenaries recruited in the bars and casinos, and were happy to pay the same tip. Spirits were brewed in Ruby Wu's basements which were illegal across most of the Deep Sky. And to the rogue gamers, Raja's was home.

Inevitably, Jack drifted into Ruby Wu's domain less than a month after his implant was deactivated. Out of work, he was 'shifting,' as the hobos called it. Living 'the traveling life,' which meant scoring some trivial job on any ship headed in the right direction. He signed on a legit merchant *astra* vessel when he could, but such jobs were rare. Guild captains were understandably cautious.

More often, he would get work on a Freespaceer ship, because the legit captains demanded to see legit papers. Some would hire casuals, day labor, without guild papers, because they could pay casuals a tenth of the guild rates and get away with it.

Like Arthur Wahad. And here was the intense irony. Artie was licensed, his three freighters were merchant *astra* hulls, he was careful never to hire on the shady side of the law. But he hired day labor for pennies ... and sometimes the casuals he took on without papers were pilots, navigators, engineers.

Like Jack. If Jack were legit, the bastard XO, Malik Redman, would never have manhandled him, because a whisper of it to the guild would have had Redman up before a tribunal. But then, if Jack DiFalco were legit, Artie would not have hired him, because Artie Wahad was cutting corners on payroll, fitting refurbished machinery and provisioning with whatever rubbish was cheapest. He was close to broke, though it was a well-kept secret.

Soon enough, Freespaceer crews were the only rides Jack could

get, but still he was choosy. Some captains were so far on the wrong side of the law, it was dangerous even to be seen in their company. Others were decent, with their own rule book, their own codes of ethics. Like Ruby Wu, who had been a guild-licensed freighter captain in her day, before she bankrupted as surely as Artie was bankrupting. She fled to Freespace hours ahead of the authorities who would have taken her ship and every nut and bolt she possessed.

Raja's was a kilometer-wide dome set on the surface of a small world with light gravity and just enough oxygen to make the outside breathable so long as a man did not exert himself. The skies were high, impossibly blue; the mountains were dark, gray, charcoal, brown, capped with snow year-round. With just a little altitude it was cold, and the indigenous life forms had not developed much beyond lichens and moss which were slowly, slowly raising the oxygen levels at the low altitudes. Ruby had planted Jupiter spruce, dwarf hemlock, alpine grasses. They did not thrive in the poor soil and harsh climate, but they lived. She liked to walk in the free air, dressed for a winter's afternoon, with a rebreather in her pocket to get her back to the 'lock before she fainted at last from oxygen starvation.

The world had no formal name, just a catalog number in a survey performed decades before Jack was born. It was identified only from its single settlement, the big dome of Raja's. Beneath the transparent panels and solar collectors, a ramshackle city had given birth to itself, and it was the most welcome Jack had seen since Westminster.

The dome was salvage, taken from a mining exploration vessel that had perished in the crackling accretion disk of the blackhole, Hachiman. The salvage crew who pulled off the humans and their AI went back and at great risk towed out the ruined hulk. They returned the ship and machinery to the underwriter, and swore Number 7 Hold had been ripped right out off the ship, eaten by Hachiman. The holds were containers the size of planetoids; it could have happened. The underwriters were satisfied.

But Number 7 Hold made its way to a nameless world beyond the frontier, and its contents — a kilometer-wide dome — now stretched between two granite outcrops, a glaring field of sheet ice,

and a plane of fist-sized boulders which stretched beyond the horizon.

And beneath it, Raja's never stopped in its revels, nor paused for breath, or to consider what might be deemed right or wrong back in the Deep Sky. Three days' transspace travel from the last world which subscribed to civilization, Ruby Wu's domain was rich with a wildness Jack DiFalco embraced with both arms.

He knew he was in denial, rebelling against the forfeiture of his job, his qualifications, everything he had wanted since childhood. He had only ever wanted to fly the big ships and the fast ships, either the world-sized juggernauts that carried the Deep Sky freight, or the couriers which skipped through espace — or transited espace entirely and slid through into the super-fast rapids of transspace — easily outpacing subspace communications. This was his thrill. This, and a delicious sin called Azure Flight.

He came into Raja's on a freighter loaded with contraband, and six hours later he was in a chaotic little office behind a bar, laying down a handful of blue Velcastran dollars. Minutes later he was face down and strapped to a bench, fists clenched, eyes squeezed shut, teeth grinding as he braced himself to have the implant reactivated.

Pain tore through him, white hot, like a drill taking his skull to pieces, but through the haze of agony he felt the implant come back online and pain receded, forgotten. At once he heard the murmur of CityNet. Even here, far from the Deep Sky, Raja's was alive and crackling with the datastream as a hundred AIs traded information. It was a mere whisper by comparison with the CityNet torrents back on the major worlds, but just to hear it again after a month of silence and blindness was bliss.

Bliss or not, the endless chatter of CityNet was not what Jack wanted. He had soon learned to live without the datastream, to winkle information out of the system with a keypad under his hand and a combug in his ear. But he was parched and starved for the *game*, and as his implant came alive he followed the shimmering siren song which hummed through the Net. He traced it to a deep basement, so far under the casinos and bars of Raja's that Ruby Wu might never have walked there.

She knew it existed. The house AI ran surveillance everywhere,

every moment. Nothing escaped Ruby Wu. As likely as not, she watched as a young Freespace wanderer in from the street — tall, become a little thin lately, with long bones and big joints that gave him a coltish look, red-brown hair grown shaggy across his brow and shoulders, and haunted gray-green eyes.

He wanted to *play*. The money left in his pocket would not go far, but it did not have to. Jack was *good*, and the best players were celebrated, invited, rewarded. His game was always Azure Flight. Before the raid on the rogue gamers' den in Westminster, he had played his way to Level 22. He could have been a professional player, if governments back as far as Darwin's World had not balked at the plague of game dependency among their people — the rash of murders and suicides — and pulled the plug.

Centuries ago, it was Angel which inspired the cold sweat of dread, and it was almost always young people who paid a terrible price for addiction. The Angel War remained infamous in colonial history as a time of violence outdone only by the Zunshu War itself.

Was mindspacing worse than either? Governments swore it was, and Jack admitted to himself, he did not know. Mindspacing was at least as addictive as the drug, and equally as many older people as kids blundered into the dependency. The game took over every corner of the player's life. Even when he or she was out of the iso tank, physically disconnected from the AI controller and not actually playing, the gamer was likely to wander in an apparent daze, blank-eyed, slack-mouthed.

They were eavesdropping in realtime on their game mates, their allies and rivals who were still playing. Exploits, tricks of play, twists of drama — the dangerous, the erotic, the exotic and impossible — all were carried in the datastream. And Jack knew the truth. The deeper into the game one was drawn, the more real it became.

As his implant came alive again, that day in Raja's, he basked in the torrent of information. It was easy to ignore the cascades of data from the ships docked in orbit high above the dome; at once he was intent on the game, only the game, letting Azure Flight permeate his cells, saturate his tissues, possess his brain.

Six gamers were in the iso tanks as Jack came back online. He knew only one of them, and he smiled as he realized Bobby Quincannon was at Raja's. Bobby was almost as good as Jack. He would

give Jack a workout, make him sharpen up his skills, give him the opportunity to show the locals just how good he was. Then the rest of it would soon follow, the invitations, the challenges and rewards, the fame.

Blind and deaf to the reality of the ragtag Freespacer gypsy crowd and Raja's cold, dusty streets, he followed the shimmering feed. It called to him as if it were aware of him, wanted him with the ardor of a lover. Through the implant he watched, listened, as Bobby and the others formed up into a sextet of allies and rivals, got the measure of each other, cemented alliances, and made enemies.

To the eavesdropper, the game seemed to be played at break-neck speed. When great players were in the tanks, all of them connected, with three or more of them driving a powerful AI, the speed of action and reaction could be astonishing. Mindspacing was like this — a rush of white-hot adrenaline, a high Jack had never been able to describe.

Gamers understood. It was the power of being free, strong, wild, the intense thrill of being in command of one's fate, with the ability to gather skills from level to level, and use them to play longer, higher, wilder.

Each level was a test, sometimes of endurance, or of existing skill, or perhaps of cunning. The player entered the game's lowest level with what he or she knew of the real world, and developed from there, according to their native ability, tenacity, intelligence, courage.

No two players developed the same way, because the game was real enough for injury to hurt, for love to be catastrophic, sex to be addictive; and the giving and taking of life became the supreme test of the gamer.

Mercy, courage, brutality, cowardice, all these were badges worn by the players, not because they were awarded by some AI controller, but because the player soon showed himself for what he was, in terrible detail. Hiding was impossible. Allies and enemies alike knew exactly what any individual gamer was capable of, how far he or she would go, where his limits currently lay ... how far they might be pushed.

As Jack came back online, Bobby Quincannon was buying his way to the next level. The surest route from Level 18 to Level 19 was

sex. He had taken a job at a citybottom club, where the Companions were uniformly gorgeous and the clients were so rich, such wealth should have been illegal. Bobby was desperate to get to 19. He was ready to do things he would not have done three months before.

Back in Westminster's rogue gaming dens, he had tried bribing his way to the information. Tried gambling for it. Enlisting in the private army which guarded it. Now, he was ready to fuck for it — and just as Jack found his way back online, Sonny was howling in reaction to the jackhammer pounding he was taking. Jack caught his breath and stopped, not seeing even a hint of the street before him, astounded, appalled, intrigued, repelled, by the scene on which he was eavesdropping.

If he had been a few hours earlier, it could have been himself pounding Bobby till he howled like a wolf, doing things to him which Bobby Quincannon did not even seem to have known existed. Jack had the keys to 19, and could gift them, sell or trade them. He was playing far beyond, and was surprised Bobby had taken so long to catch up. Perhaps Bobby did not have what it took to get much further, and was starting to acknowledge that he was running short of options. Working in this sexshop was the price of the information he wanted, and Jack realized at once, Bobby did not have the brains or the tenacity to get to 19 any other way.

For himself, Jack had slithered through in the ranks of a corporate army fighting a war over mining rights. Within the realm of the game, his legs were biocyber prostheses now, and they ached. They often malfunctioned. He was still waiting for cloned limbs to grow, and to earn their high price he was working as a bodyguard for an industrial prince whose perversions were cyanide sweet.

The soldier's profession had shocked him. Nothing in the merchant *astra* service had prepared him for what he would see in the ranks. All the blood, pain, slaughter, bereavement, and the company commendation at the end of it, were fused into a dark part of his life which was frighteningly real. Only another gamer would understand.

Did Bobby have the tenacity to tough it out, get through it? Eavesdropping, Jack was breathless, wishing he were tanked right then, able to give Bobby what help he could to get through the assault on his body. Bobby had not lasted through the hitch in the

corporate army. He deserted when the after-hours barracks high jinx became too much to be borne, fled into the backstreets of the city and spent months as a fugitive, evading the capture that would have preceded the flogging and the dishonorable discharge. The discharge would have set him back three or four levels in the game, and still he would have arrived back at this point, needing the keys to 19.

In the end, still stalled on 18, he took a job on a Freespace barge headed into rough, dirty work and short rations, to get out of the scenario. Jack was hungry to know what twists and turns of the game he had missed in the weeks he had been offline — how Bobby had found his way to a sexshop in the old city of Hydralis, on Omaru, being pounded senseless by a man who had promised him what he needed.

If he made it to 19, Bobby Quincannon would fly with the best of the Fleet pilots. His skills would expand by a dimension, and when he interfaced with the AI of a cutting-edge military fighter, the cosmos would open up before him. He wanted this badly. Sonny had never been able to get into the service. The psyche profilers recognized an addictive personality, and both Fleet and the merchant *astra* declined his application.

He would not have made a good soldier, but Jack believed he would make a good pilot, and if he could hold up under the physical battering, the client would give him what he needed. It was the chip of a Fleet master pilot, containing the ID, the qualifications, the clearances of a veteran. The chip would take him right into any corporate defense force without the need to go through Fleet first. It would put him in the cockpit of a Scimitar, and Sonny would live the dream of flying with the best, against the best.

A handful more dollars bought Jack an iso tank, and he sank into the womb-dark silence. The repulsion field came up ... he was adrift in freefall when his implant interfaced smoothly with the game matrix.

He was standing on the blue-green grass of a mountainside high above the city of Tharsis. Carpets of tiny white flowers stirred at his feet in a morning wind, and high above him, he heard the call of the sprites. This world did not exist in the Deep Sky. A gamer had imagined it somewhere, somewhen, and the AI took the threads of

imagination, used them to spin a place and a time where Jack now roamed across someone else's dreamscape.

The sky was deep, burnished blue. Fleece clouds wafted across the face of Lyra, the third moon of Sheleel — almost as big as the mother world itself. The sprites flocked in the morning sun, great white wings holding them easily aloft in gravity that was so light, Jack could have jumped over a house without breaking a sweat. Everything on Sheleel was gossamer and thistledown, so light, flying was a way of life.

But Jack was human, with the greater body weight, the stronger muscles, and an inconvenient lack of wings. Technology picked up the gauntlet evolution had thrown down. The sprites could laugh all they wanted, but all Jack had to do was punch the repulsion pack into negative numbers, and he wafted up among them.

He spread his arms and legs, twisted his body to catch the breeze in the kevlex webs between his limbs, and watched the hillside fall away beneath his bare feet.

"Hey, Jack ... where you been?" The voice belonged to Danno, the golden-haired sprite whose wings were two shades paler than the mane of his hair, and whose long bare limbs were honey-brown and gleaming in the sun. "Hey Jack, why you not come these skies so long?" His voice was a light tenor, curious, teasing. His face was nut brown, so lovely.

"They stopped me playing," Jack told him as he swooped in among the sprites with his own white kevlex wings.

Danno's brow creased. "Who stop you? That was bad."

"Very bad." Jack folded the kevlex and drifted on repulsion as Danno offered an embrace of welcome and sympathy. His lips were warm, soft, sweet. Jack kissed him hungrily, only now realizing how long it had been, how much he had missed this.

"Now you back," Danno said in the sweet, singsong accent of the sprites. "You stay?"

"As long as I can," Jack told him.

Already he was looking around for the challenge. This was 25, and complex, subtle. The game would not easily reveal the challenge to him, and if he were careless he could fall prey to it before he knew it was there, and what it was.

To prove how good he was, he must find the test, meet it,

defeat it. And this was 25 — whatever the challenge was, it would be as major as the prize he would win by beating it.

The prize would be his ticket to 26. He knew this even as he took Danno into his arms, tumbling over and over in a tangle of white-gold wings, and gloried in the game. *This* was mindspacing. This was why the players came back over and over, until they could not stop, could not even disconnect.

In minutes he had utterly forgotten that he was in the game matrix. Danno's lovemaking was *real* ... the skies of Sheleel were his world. The ability to soar upward until he felt he could reach out and touch the face of Lyra was so glorious, the paltry existence of the street-bound human had nothing to offer him, nothing to call him back.

The prize. What was the prize? What would take him to 26?

At that moment Jack did not realize it, but the game AI was waiting for him to specify what he wanted. When Jack had decided for himself what was worth laying down his life or his sanity, to win, the game would accommodate him.

For the moment it was enough to lie in the arms of a lover he had missed for long, blind weeks, and let the game flow around him, welcoming him back. He would hunt down the test tomorrow.

Chapter Two

"I said, do you want to go somewhere?" Kieron Charig repeated for the third time. He gave Jack a little shake. "Hey, you okay? You were pretty deep in. That stupid game's not getting into you, is it?"

He shook himself hard. "Of course not." It was a lie, but Kieron did not know it. Must never know it. "Yeah, why don't we get a drink? I'm hungry. You want to eat?"

"My treat," Kieron offered.

"I can pay."

"Bullshit," Kieron said bluffly. "You're not working, not even some crummy ride on a barge where a bastard like Malik Redman's so far up your ass, you could spit him out. Keep your bucks in your back pocket, Jack. My treat."

"Whatever." Jack stretched the aches from his limbs. The game was hard work. He might be drifting in freefall, his physical body might be cushioned on the most gentle repulsion field, but every sinew and fiber had just worked without respite, and the mistake he had made at the end — stupid mistake! Danno would have laughed at him for it — had hurt.

He had killed himself. The fall into the hull of the *Andromache* had smashed his body beyond repair, even if a medcrew was handy, which it was not. The mistake would cost him two levels in the game, and he shivered a little as he remembered the struggle to get through last time. Still, the memories, experiences and skills he had gathered along the way would get him through faster, easier next time. Then, perhaps he could keep the tractor out of the way of the mercenary ship's guns. Or, if he had to bail out as good as naked into the atmosphere of the gas giant, he would make damned sure he braked earlier and got his boots onto the hull of the *Andromache* with his legs intact.

He must. The need to be there, do this, preoccupied him as he followed Kieron out front, into the legal part of the gamers' den. He must get back there, get it right, because Danno and a half dozen other sprites were in holding cells aboard the *Andromache*, and if the bastard mercenary crew could jury-rig a few repairs to get around the minor damage Jack had done with the tractor — if they could get out of the Rusus system with the sprites aboard, Jack knew he would find Danno in some sexshop, in some mining town so far beyond the frontier —

"Jack!" Kieron waved a hand in front of his face. "This is Senior Navigator K. M. Charig calling dumb-ass dropout Jack DiFalco, is anybody home?"

"Hey, I'm okay," Jack growled.

"The hell you are. This is what you call being okay?" Kieron demanded. "Jesus, Jack, one of these days you're going to let the game get into your head, and then — you know what?"

Jack gave him a glare. "Tell me."

"You'll be addicted," Kieron said flatly.

Too late for me. Jack took a deep breath and pasted on a brash grin. He was already working out the how and the when of his next session as he gave Kieron a push. The behavior was uncomfortably typical of any addict, he thought darkly: planning for the next fix while the last one was still frothing among the brain cells.

It was always like this for an hour or three after disconnecting and climbing out of the tank. Reality seemed too pathetic to be borne. All he wanted to do was go right back in, and only long experience told him to keep walking, tough it out, and hang on tight to his grip on reality.

The real world might be mundane, tawdry and dull beyond description, but it *was* real, and the longer he could keep away from the iso tank, the more he realized how much danger he was in. Terminal game dependency was a dreadful prospect, and a bizarre death, as the physical body slowly perished, literally rotting where it lay, while the mind soared through flights so impossible, it had taken a decade of the combined imaginations of millions of the greatest gamers to create them.

With an intense effort, Jack forced himself back to the present. He and Kieron were standing in the foyer of the gamers' den. The carpets were deep purple, the doors ahead were glass and wide, the walls to left and right bright with demo clips of the legal VR games offered by the establishment. Azure Flight was one of them, but only up to Level 12, and only via the VR hookup which was a pale imitation of the mindspacer's version.

"Okay, so feed me," Jack suggested. "I could use a drink."

"And a bed for the night," Kieron added. "And a good, long, solid shag, to remind you of what's real and why the sane people like it." He cast a bleak glance over his shoulder, back into the nether regions of the gamers' den. "Mindspacing, for godsakes. I'd say there ought to be a law against it — but, there is! Not," he added sharply, "that it seems to slow you down much!"

If Jack could get a ride off this damned rock, he could work his way back out to Raja's. They would be glad to have him there. Ruby Wu had said she was leaving the offer on the table — he might easily be the house master player, against whom all the casuals and

drifters pitted their skills. He was the best they had seen in months, and sometimes, when the game was thick in his mind and reality weighed down his limbs, he thought leaving Raja's had been a mistake.

This was one of those times, and he was foggy about the reason he had left. He hunted for it among neural pathways that were a growing confusion of two life very different lives. There was the mundane, in which he was usually hungry and tired, and the *other*. The game. The realm in which he was faster, smarter, more beautiful and far more skilled than any normal mortal. He had glimpsed the secrets guarded and hidden by the sprites, the secret of their world. Somewhere in the deep caverns was a jewel that had a regenerative power, some alchemy that could take a human, a mortal, and twist his genes into —

He wrenched himself away from the gamespace as he and Kieron stepped out through the glass doors into Karoda Mall, and fell into step with the foot-traffic. Why had he left Raja's? There had been a reason, a good one.

And then he had it. He had left when Ruby told him to get the hell out, for his own safety. Her security monitors had picked up a face they knew. Jai Singh was a gamer in the same levels as Jack, but Jai Singh was one of the rank, rotten crazies. Not content with defeating his rivals in the game matrix, he would just as happily slide a knife between their ribs, if he could find them unguarded.

Predictably, hours after arriving in Raja's, Jai came online as the captain of the smuggler crew, commander of the *Andromache*. Jack was not surprised he had taken that line when the game AI offered it. Dealing in slaves was about Jai's speed. Such dealers were known as *skinners*, traders in human skin.

The game had not corrupted Jai; the potential for evil had always festered inside him. The gamespace just gave the evil a way to express itself, and until or unless another, stronger player could beat him, pitch him back three or four levels, Jai would continue his rampage through any virtual world he chose. And to murder his rivals in the reality which had come to mean so much less to him than the game.

So Jack took a ride out on a Freespacer ship, as far as Borushek, and slid quietly back into the game in a den so low in citybottom,

Tactical did not even know it existed. The local competition was not enough to challenge him, but the den only operated two nights in the week, when Tactical was at full-stretch covering the aeroball stadium. And the den only used a trickle of bandwidth, which strictly limited the eavesdropping one could do.

As much as Jack chafed at the conditions, he knew it was a good thing. It was weaning him off, back to levels which were sane. The desperate *need* to be back in the game faded after a day or so, and the street, the city, the spaceport, began to look more real. The Freespacer crews which came through the rink — low profile and careful with their docking permits — began to look more inviting.

A proper job, he told himself often. What he needed was the time and space to get his head out of the game and make something of his life while he still had one. It began with a ride out of here, to *anywhere* except Raja's, because in Ruby Wu's domain he would sink back into the game, drown in it, and eventually, inevitably, become the same kind of loon as Jai Singh.

His salvation all started with a ride out, because Borushek was guild controlled. The merchant *astra* had such a grip on the local trade, without papers, and with a name that was as good as mud, Jack DiFalco could not expect to get a *proper* job on a *proper* ship.

As he physically shook the game out of his thoughts, drove the memories back into their place, the mall seemed to gain substance. The lights grew brighter; human faces looked less like kabuki masks; he began to see nuance, texture and tone. Kieron had blue eyes, and the jangle of music issuing from shop doorways was not a song but a commercial pitch. The young man approaching was very blond, and looking at him with dark, hungry eyes.

He was a player, Jack knew at once. Not a very good one, and Jack had been on Borushek for long enough for the local wannabe rogue gamers to recognize him. It had happened several times, and he was uncomfortably aware of the recognition.

Real danger was everywhere. Even if rivals were not crazy enough to resort to murder, like Jai Singh, an anonymous tipoff called in to Tactical could have Jack arrested, and at once a scan would show that his implant had been reactivated. Rehabilitation would take place in prison, and Jack knew he would be looking at the wrong side of the bars for two years.

A shiver took him unawares just as Kieron turned right into the rich aromas of a noodle bar called Wanchai Wok. The smell of food assaulted him, reminding him of how long it was since he had eaten. Kieron gave him a sidelong look, shook his head in exasperation, and shoved him into a booth just inside the doorway.

"So anyway, Connie Chan's coming in?" he prompted as a waiter dropped a couple of menus onto the table between them. "You know Connie, don't you?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Jack's eyes skimmed the menu. "A Number 6, and a Number 10. And a beer. Thanks."

Kieron did not even glance at the menu. "Plum pork, fried noodles and a pot of green tea," he told the waiter, and as the boy drifted away he leaned closer to Jack. "Then you know Connie's smuggling these days."

"Is she?" Jack asked warily.

"Don't play dumb with me," Kieron scoffed. "Every man and his uncle knows she's halfway retired, and that son of hers is setting up three quarters of the jobs they fly. Con either doesn't know or doesn't care about the smuggling, and I'm not saying they shouldn't do it! Tariffs have been going ballistic lately, it's an open invitation to smuggling ... what I am saying," he added with a sigh, "is, don't *you* get suckered into Tony Chan's escapades, because if you get busted — with a live implant in your skull — you'll be gray and wrinkly before you see daylight again."

He had never been one to mince words, and Jack ouches. "I hear you. I'll be careful. I have to get the hell off Borushek in any case." He gestured over his shoulder at the departing blond kid. "They're starting to know me."

The navigator frowned deeply at him. "What, other gamers? Like that boy in the mall? I *thought* he knew you." He shook his head slowly. "You play too much."

"No. I play too *well*," Jack corrected.

"Same difference. You can only get good by doing it too much, and doing it at all is illegal." Kieron's blue eyes were gimlet sharp for another moment, and then softened. He leaned over the table and took one of Jack's hands. "What happened to you, babe? You were the best pilot I knew."

Jack took a long deep breath. "I still am," he said with a little

self-mocking humor, "if only they'd let me fly."

"If only." Kieron's fingertips touched his cheek, traced the contours of his nose and mouth. "Look, let me talk to my boss. I'm on the *Pleiades* now, you know her?"

"One of the big ones."

"One of the *mu*y big ones." Kieron lifted Jack's hand and kissed it lightly. "Big enough to run a human crew of over forty, which means there's always a ride for one more ... if you're not too picky about the work."

No way in the cosmos would he be hired on as a pilot, and Jack did not even ask about it. "Okay, I guess I can swab decks and flip burgers."

"Monitor systems and wrangle drones," Kieron amended. "Would it be so bad? You'd be out of here, away from the players who've started to know your face, earning decent money." He paused. "And you'd be out of the game, babe, for long *enough*. You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean." Jack looked away, and saw the waiter returning with their food. He was silent until the boy was gone again, and then ate ravenously. "It shows?"

"You mean, does it show that you're addicted?" Kieron's wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Maybe. I've started to see it, because I know you so well. You were the warm body snoring beside me at guild school, and the quick hump in the showers when we could sneak it. I'm probably the only one who'd recognize the signs, but ..." He sighed. "I'm not stupid, Jack, or blind." He paused between forkloads of noodles. "Time you got out."

"Time." Jack looked up into the wide blue eyes and saw the truth in them. "There's one thing I have to do, Ron, back in the game."

"Oh, for godsakes —"

"No, I mean it. There's one thing I have to do. Some friends of mine are depending on me. I swore I'd get them out of the jam they're in. Just let me —"

"Jack, they're not real," Kieron remonstrated. "They're just a bundle of synaptic responses to a bunch of bullshit fiction fed to your brain by some AI controller. And they're going to get you into a steaming pile so deep, you won't be able to climb back out."

"Yes I will," Jack said stubbornly. "One more thing I have to do, Ron, and then — yeah, okay. I'm out. I'll ship out on the *Pleiades*, wrangle your drones, if your captain'll have me."

"I'll ask," Kieron sighed. "It could be a month before we get back here. Can you wait that long?"

The question was, would the other gamers who knew Jack on sight now let him wait, and Jack had no easy answer. "I'll try," he said quietly. "If I have to get out fast, Connie owes me a favor or two, and I'll call you. You know where I'll be ... some silly little job on the *Lobo* ... and I won't let Tony sucker me into any of his harebrained schemes."

The pledge seemed to satisfy Kieron for the moment, and he returned to his food. "Soon as I get the chance, I'll put it to Captain Patel. I can't make absolutely promises, but I know Billy Patel better than I know most people. He won't have dope and games on his ship, so if you get the ride, babe, you gotta come aboard clean. Understand?" Jack nodded mutely. "But I know Billy well enough to ask for this and get it," Kieron added, "because I'll tell him you're desperate to beat the habit, get the hell out of the game, before you get in too deep."

"Or before some player puts a bullet in me." Jack gave him a bleak look. "You know why I left Ruby Wu's?"

Kieron gave him a hard look. "I can imagine. Some bozo showed up, one of the terminal crazies, loaded with cash, so Ruby can't afford to toss him out, but she knew his ugly face as soon as she saw it?"

"You're psychic," Jack said bitterly.

"Nope. But I do watch the newsvids sometimes, when I'm on my downshift," Kieron retorted.

Done eating, Jack sat back and cradled his beer. "I hear what you're saying, Ron. Time."

"Time," the navigator agreed. "Let me help you. I'm not saying you can get your guild pilot's license back, but you could work your way up to a decent job, maybe buy yourself a halfway decent ship. You could get a civvy license. At least you'd be flying again. I mean, in reality, not ... not that."

Not the game. Jack knew what he meant. Not for the first time, he wished he could share even a tenth part of the wonders and

glories of the game with one who was not a natural player. Kieron had tried it once or twice, but the lower levels were little more than an amusement, and at the time his own life was so busy, so fulfilling, he had no need for diversion. So Kieron escaped the trap and Jack blundered into it, through a twist of fortune that sent Kieron out on the *Greenway Explorer* and left Jack kicking his heels for months, waiting for a job.

"Oh, what the hell?" Kieron said abruptly, halfway to his feet. "Let me find us a room, and then — you know what you want?"

"A good, long, solid shag?" Jack hazarded. "I think that's what you said."

"Damned right," Kieron snorted. "And I'm just the buck to give it to you." He pulled a wad of red and green bills from his wallet and weighted them with the empty teapot. "I know a place, not far from here. Citybottom, but a nice house, if you'll trust me."

Jack gave him a faint smile. "Don't I always?"

"Yeah," Kieron said quietly, and took a moment to reflect on the truth of it. "Yeah, as a matter of fact, you do." He slung one long arm over Jack's shoulders once more. "It's this way."

'This way' was back along Karoda Mall as far as the junction with the crosstown express line, and then down three levels into the underworld beneath the city of Sark, and a loop around through a dozen basement arcades.

Even after months spent roaming the city at whim, Jack was soon lost. Some of these basements were two centuries old, dating from the days of the terraformer fleet which modified the planet for human habitation in the decades before the first colonists arrived. Perhaps they should have been protected by an antique preservation order, but instead they were the hunting grounds of a different kind of gamer.

Down here, the sexshops and dreamshops were wild; the word 'game' had another meaning. Anything was available — in the reality, not the fantasy of the gamespace. As he watched the hustlers work their beats, Jack wondered which was more dangerous, the iso tank and the game feed piped into the brain by the AI controller, or this world, where youth and beauty were commodities, and where hunter and prey were sometimes impossible to tell apart.

The Companions down here were more fantastic than the

natural-borns who worked the clubs and mansions of uptown Sark. Not one of these creatures had not been re-engineered, and the forms they had taken seemed to have stepped out of the imaginations of untold artists. Jack had seen them occasionally on CityNet, but rarely in the flesh...

The girls with ribcages several ribs short and waists so tiny, abdomens so flat, one wondered where they kept their vital organs, while their breasts were immense as balloons, their nipples candy-red, candy-hard, and heavy with jewelry.

The boys with the gazelle legs, the too-tiny pelvis and buttocks like perfect bubbles, disproportionate shoulders, overdeveloped pecs and racks, and genitals as improbable as the mammaries adorning the women.

The tattoos, writhing and coiling around bare limbs, luminescent in the shadows, with patterns which animated in response to the rush of hormones, the rise of body heat. The gorgeous jewelry pierced or clamped into tender flesh and shimmering with its own light, swaying with every movement. The eyes which glowed green or gold or silver, like metal orbs set into human skulls; the fingernails like talons of ruby or emerald or sapphire.

Yet these Companions were *real*, living, breathing, and they had morphed themselves to rival the Companions in the gamespace, competing with the game, emulating it, lest their patrons go mindspacing and forget their flesh and blood existed.

Kieron was watching Jack closely, and Jack gave him a mocking grin. "Not my scene," he admitted.

"Cheap thrill," Kieron argued. "Doesn't cost anything to look at the goods and, what the hell, what's the game got to offer that you can't find down here without selling your soul to a den? Look around you, babe ... there's nothing in the game that you can't get for real."

He was so wrong, it was not even worth beginning to tell him how far wide of the goalposts he was shooting. "I don't play the game for sex," Jack began, and then he thought of Danno, and making love in freefall high above the hills, with a sprite who was far more beautiful, more natural and innocent, than any of these cartoon Companions. Yet Danno was just a flutter of synaptic responses. These travesties of human beings were real.

The re-engineering was old, old technology. In the first centuries of human colonization it had been critical. There was only so much the terraformer fleets could do with a target world. A planet was chosen because it was close *enough* to earthlike to make it worth the decades of redesign, in which the atmosphere was adapted sufficiently to support humans and the biosphere subtly changed to weed out dangerous species, flora and fauna, and replace them with selected species which would gradually bring the world closer to the human ideal.

But so long ago, with the limited technology of the times, no amount of terraforming would change the gravity or the planet's orbital inclination. High and low gravity, thin atmosphere, cold climates, or the heat of worlds too close to their parent stars — all this was beyond the terraformer's magic.

Clement worlds were few; the early starships were slow and dangerous. Humans did not enjoy the luxury of picking and choosing which planets would become colonies and which would be passed by. Where the terraformer's craft fell short, the geneticists picked up the gauntlet, and during two centuries of colonization, mankind took on shapes and characteristics which had never been seen before.

Some of the new human designs were better than the old, and they bred so 'true,' they were still common in the cosmos Jack and Kieron knew. The Pakrani and their cousins, the Ulrish, and their hybrid brothers and sisters from Kuchin. The genes of these races had not been tinkered with in three centuries, but they were still strong, still relatively pure — so strong that it took generations to breed out the Pakrani, and even then the occasional great-grandchild was likely to be more than two meters tall, with white blond hair and impossibly blue eyes.

There was little of their gene stock in Kieron, Jack thought. He was tall, but his hair was more the dirty blond color typical of Freespacers, whose home communities were secluded, far beyond the frontier, and whose gene pools were smaller, more predictable. And like Jack, the Freespacers prized the natural beauty of people and creatures who had not just walked out of a lab.

He had never realized Kieron's fancy was for flesh and blood exotica, and surprise made him forget the game as he watched his

old friend feasting his eyes on the prowling Companions. No wonder Kieron knew his way around down here! He divided his attention evenly between the girls and boys, relishing both. Some of them knew him. A girl with the dragon tattoos clothing both massive breasts, tiny hips and bubble-buttocks. A boy with legs so long and genitals so large, it seemed impossible he could be real and alive, until he turned, moved, and waved at Kieron.

"Where are we going?" Jack muttered. "Oh, Christ, you're not headed for some kind of sexshop are you?"

"A hotel," Kieron argued.

"A bloody whorehouse! When you said I needed a good, solid shag you were pretty right, but I didn't mean I wanted to get hammered by something that looks like it ought to be on display!"

"Why not?" Kieron was curious rather than affronted.

"Not my scene, I told you," Jack growled.

"And getting yourself game addicted is, I suppose!"

"Just drop it, will you?" Jack shrugged out from under Kieron's big arm. "I thought it was going to be you and me, like it was back at guild school."

Kieron caught him again, held him deliberately when Jack tried to pull away. "Hey, it's okay. I just thought you might like a thrill, but if it's me you want..." He was looking wistfully at the girl and the boy, both of whom seemed to be waiting for him to beckon. "That's okay too," he said at last. "But it beats hell out of me why you'd want me. I'm so damn' ordinary."

Perhaps this was the very reason *why* Jack wanted Kieron. Because the sound of his voice, the hard touch of his hands, the smell of his cologne, recalled a time when Jack DiFalco had been in control of his life, and when the future seemed limitless. He might have loved Kieron, he thought with vague restlessness, but Kieron was not interested at the time. He had just wanted to fly — the big ships or the couriers, or both, if he could get a ride on them. He was not a pilot, but a navigator, and the work he did took him into realms Jack only dimly understood.

The couriers and fighters were not flown from cockpit controls, not in fifty years. AIs piloted them more often than not, and when a human flightcrew was put aboard, they were tanked and interfaced directly with the ship's systems, as if they were entering the game

matrix. Implants connected them, and the ship became an extension of the mind and body, so that the pilot seemed to fall naked through the vasts between worlds ... and the navigator lived and breathed in a realm where physics and mathematics, time and space, coalesced into physical forms.

Since he was a child, Kieron Charig had possessed the uncanny skill for *seeing* numbers, *feeling* temporal and spatial coordinates. The VR games played by kids still too young to drive a scooter through downtown discovered the children with the potential, and invitations were made. A guild master would call on the parents; the child was taken to visit the academy. He or she rode 'right seat' in the simulators, as an instructor plunged into transspace, where time and space and numbers became liquid. The child either gagged on the sparkling, incandescent fluid, or breathed it in. Those who took it in, lived and breathed it, were entered into the guild academy enrolment lists for a date ten years after their visit. Almost all returned — by then seventeen or eighteen years old, and hungry to get back into the world they had glimpsed so long ago.

It was a lot like gaming, though Kieron would never have been prepared to believe it, and Jack was not about to try convincing him. The difference was, the guild navigators were among the most highly respected professionals in the Deep Sky, and rogue gamers were dismissed as humanity's rubbish.

With a sigh, Jack turned his back on the improbable Companions. He had taken a step to follow Kieron in the direction of some dubious hotel when a shadow moved in an alleyway at his left hand, and his hackles rose in the ancient animal response.