

# Prologue

Forty-seven stories above Manhattan, a stiff wind lashed the man in the plaid tan suit. Ahead of him, a ventilation shaft like an aluminum pagoda jutted four feet above the roof of UN headquarters.

Wedged between two of the shaft's horizontal slats hung a slumped gray smear. A man clad in pale blue overalls, with a tool belt on his hip and a UNHQ maintenance department patch on his chest, accompanied the suited man. The maintenance worker said, "I was about this far away when I saw the thing. Thought it was a plastic bag at first. Stuff like that blows up here sometimes, you know?"

A gust rippled the suited man's pants leg and whipped the end of his necktie below a gold tieclasp as he strode on.

The maintenance man kept talking. "Even though plastic bags are regulated. I was going to pull the thing off and hand it to NYPD so they could scan the chip and figure out who dropped the thing instead of throwing it away...."

The man in the plaid tan suit stopped at the ventilation shaft. He kneeled and peered at the object. A translucent gray skin, torn and snagged on a gouge in one of the horizontal slats, covered a palm-sized frame of clear plastic. From the frame's corners rose propellers formed of the same clear plastic and secured within clear plastic rings.

"When I saw the thing was a drone," the maintenance man said, "I figured it was some toy a kid let loose from a balcony on the other

side of First Av.” He waved the back of his hairy hand toward the skyscrapers rising above their heads to the west. “I was just going to toss it—”

“You were going to throw out an item that violated UNHQ airspace?” The suited man had a gravelly voice. “Toy or not.”

The maintenance man blinked repeatedly. He mouthed air before words came in a rush. “I know I’m supposed to report every last little thing that’s out of whack but I’d just be wasting your time with distractions that keep you from what you’re supposed to be doing, am I right?”

“In that case, why didn’t you throw it in the trash?” The suited man cleared his throat. “Why are you wasting my time?”

“No, swear to God, I’m not wasting your time. I was going to toss it, but when I got as close to it as we are now, I saw a flash. Lit up the inside of the shaft like a strobe. White so light it looked blue. I’ve never seen or heard of a kid’s toy drone that would do that. And then it put out a burned electrical smell. A spy drone would self-destruct like that, am I right?”

“A spy drone?” The suited man ran a finger along his mustache. He then reached into his suit jacket’s inner pocket. Out came latex gloves and a rolled-up case of brown leatherette.

He slid the gloves over his hands, then set the case on the roof, opened the hook-and-loop closure with a *scritch* momentarily louder than the moaning wind, and unrolled the case. Pockets held tools and evidence bags in straight rows.

The man in the plaid suit slid large tweezers from their pocket. With a pinch of his fingers and a flick of his wrist, a gallon bag unfolded. The bag’s opening gaped.

He moved the tweezers toward the snared drone. “If this is a spy device, we’ll find out.”

# 1

A woman's voice in his head woke him. [It's time.]

The light of an overcast day seeped through the vertical blinds and softened the clinical lines and grayscale palette of Stone Chalmers' bedroom. Instead of rain, Manhattan's incessant background noise sounded on the windows.

Alone on his king mattress, Stone stretched his arms. His knuckles bumped the headboard. [Let me sleep, Caitlyn.] The quantum computers embedded in their skulls on Minerva were too damn invasive.

[There's a lot we need you to do today. Get up.]

*We?* Caitlyn Fredriksen—hazel eyes, long blond hair, an Interstellar Transport Bureau operative with three years of experience in spy-craft, and despite her youth trusted with great responsibility—ran the Minervan conspiracy's operations in New York alone.

Didn't she?

Stone swung his legs over the side of the bed. Clad only in pajama pants, he shuffled toward the bathroom. [Where do you want me to start?]

[The Iron Horse Gym. On 94th between 1st and 2nd. Your retina scan is in their system under the name Galen Heinrichs. Your retina scan will allow you in. It will also open men's locker 19.]

[And then?]

[I'll let you know. Out.]

After taking a leak, he went to the kitchen of his apartment and prepared a pre-workout shake. A soprano's aria trickled to him through the wall from Mr. Leipziger's place. Stone drank bitter greens incompletely masked by the flavor of chocolate.

In the living room, he slid the coffee table on its plastic feet across the hardwood floor, then ran through five Tibetan yoga exercises. He took a step toward the eighty-eight pound kettlebell on the corner rack, then stopped.

If he had to go over thirty blocks north to a gym, why not work out there?

By the time Stone changed into workout clothes, packed an outfit to change into after a shower, and descended the elevator, his coupe waited for him at the curb. The coupe's black finish and faceted angles alternatively absorbed and reflected the sickly light of an autumn day. A far cry from the curved lines of the cars the Minervans had given to the UN motor pool. The two-door in which he'd ridden with Caitlyn to the pine forest two nights before the wormhole placement. The sedan carrying two corpses out of the UN tower—

Stone pinched the bridge of his nose. If the plot he'd joined with her succeeded, in ten years, all his crimes would be revealed.

If the plot failed, he would be dead.

His black coupe popped open its curb-side door. He climbed in.

The car's nav computer decided that the FDR would be quicker than 3rd Avenue. He soon traveled north along the East River. Choppy gray water like the scales of a rotting trout lay between him and Roosevelt Island. Behind him, teeming skyscrapers blocked the view of UN headquarters a mile to the south.

In the neighborhoods around UN headquarters, a million people worked for official agencies and affiliated international non-profits. A million people imposed the UN's will on Earth's five billion survivors of the Crisis of the Twenty-First Century and the inhabitants of almost fifty colony worlds.

Five Minervans, Caitlyn, and he would somehow depose them.

Stone exhaled. He'd faced long odds when he'd worked to impose the UN's will on others. He'd deal with the long odds now the way he had then: take one action at a time.

His coupe pulled up in front of the gym. Tinted glass covered a three-story building. Stone got out and went to a door under a flat awning while the coupe drove off to the nearest parking garage with an open space. He turned his eye to the retina scanner, pressed his bare forearms together in front of his chest.

A buzz. A green light. He pulled open the door and went in. Across an open space the width of the building, black and cushy interlocking mats covered the floor. The far wall held racks of kettlebells, black cast iron cannonballs with integrated handles. In one corner, an obese man huffed through swings with an eighteen-pound kettlebell. A man whose deep wrinkles and wispy white hair indicated years of missed rejuvenation treatments wobbled on his knees while he pressed a thirty-six-pounder above his head. A woman with frazzled hair and postpartum jowls lunged across the gym, holding in each hand a kettlebell so small Stone couldn't even guess the weight.

Quick glances told Stone these weren't counterintel operatives tipped off to who he was and why he came here.

He followed a sign for *Locker Rooms* and went toward the back. Down open stairs came the whiskings of a stationary bike class. Flashes of color from upstairs suggested a video wall depicted a jungle full of ruined stone temples blurring past the cyclists.

The door to the men's locker room creaked open when he neared. A musty scent and the aroma of a citrus cleaner battled in his nose. The musty scent won. Cobalt blue subway tiles covered the floor. The lockers stood two-high along the sidewall. Silence from the showers and no one else about.

A retina scan lock you could buy at a bodega sealed locker 19. Stone lifted it to his eye. A green LED soon flashed. He tugged the lock open and used it as a handle to swing out the locker door.

An unlabeled memory stick lay in the back corner, as if it had fallen out of someone's hip pocket. A plastic sack, twist tied by its handles, looked—and smelled—like it held last week's socks.

Stone shoved his gym bag in and locked up.

Twenty minutes later, breathing slowly while his straight left arm held eighty-eight pounds of iron above his head, Caitlyn's voice barged into his mind. [What are you doing?]

[Putting legs under my cover story.] Gaze on the black kettlebell above him, he bent his knees and blindly reached for the floor with his right hand.

[You have to be in Turtle Bay in two hours.] She referred to the neighborhood around UN headquarters. [With one stop along the way.]

His right hand flattened on the padded floor. He sat, kettlebell still held straight up. [I'll make it.]

[You're planning to shower after your workout?]

[Yes. Wait, do you have a thing for sweaty man smell?] He lowered his back to the mat, reached his right hand across his chest to set the kettlebell down with two hands. [I didn't realize you were nearby.]

She drew out the word [No.]

[You aren't nearby? You know enough tradecraft to hide your interaction with me. Say, what's the wireless comm range on our embedded quantum computers?] He'd guessed a few miles, but would love to know for certain.

[You don't need to know. Take a shower. But don't shave.]

After rinsing off body wash and leaving a day's stubble on his jaw, Stone changed into a long-sleeved light blue polo, a sweater of darker blue, khakis, and leather sneakers. He tossed the plastic sack and the memory stick on top of his workout clothes in his gym bag. Moments later, the front door of the gym opened for him. A gust off the river swirled around him. His black coupe waited at the curb and opened its door. Stone threw his gym bag onto the seat and climbed into comfortable warmth.

[Where's my stop before Turtle Bay?]

[Go to a parking garage on 58th between 5th and Madison,] Caitlyn said. [Open the plastic sack after you park.]

Stone spoke his destination aloud. The car pulled away from the curb and he asked, [What's in the sack?]

[We'll get to that. On the way, I'll tell you what's on the encrypted stick.]

[I'm listening.]

The coupe slid into the lane to turn left onto 1st.

[It contains intel you gathered about the Minervan exotic matter

factory and fleet of warpdrive ships being prepared for a mission against Earth.]

Stone squinted at the tower on the Queens side of the Triborough Bridge a mile across the East River. [I'm feeding someone false intel. —It is false, right?]

[Of course it's false,] she said. He couldn't tell if she lied. The coupe turned north on 1st. But she must have lied. When they towed one end of a wormhole to Minerva, the crew of *Yassir Arafat* would have turned their cameras toward the rest of Minerva's solar system. Judging from the tens of thousands of square kilometers of photovoltaic panels visible on his approach to the UN's exotic matter and wormhole factory at Hawking Station, an exotic matter factory would be impossible to hide. The rumor mill would have spread news of a Minervan exotic matter factory to every UN employee on the ship before *Yassir Arafat* entered orbit.

The coupe turned left onto 95th. [Who are we lying to? Why?]

[Your assignment is to make contact with a woman named Nina Irani.] Caitlyn sent a dossier to his mind that felt like a large pill stuck in his throat. [She's a senior security affairs advisor for Secretary-General Sayyid. When you have achieved rapport, give her the false intel.]

[How did I get this intel? Why aren't I letting it reach her through the usual channels?]

[Tell a partial truth: you're an operative sent out on one of the first missions to Minerva. Don't say who you work for. And as for the usual channels, hint to her that they're compromised.]

[Don't say who I work for? No, I have to.]

[Why?]

He shook his head. It should be obvious, even to an Interstellar Transport Bureau operative, a keyhole kop. [I'll have a lot more credibility if I drop an agency name. And if the usual channels are compromised, she'll know not to inquire about me to my superior.]

After a pause, she said, [Good call.] Her tone of voice matched her relative inexperience in tradecraft.

[I know.]

At 2nd, the coupe turned left through a break in the flow of pedes-

trians through the crosswalk. The car accelerated south toward Midtown. [You haven't told me about our objective.]

[Our objective is straightforward. We want Secretary-General Sayyid to call for military action against Minerva.]

[You've lost me.]

[Good.]

He drove downtown with silence in his head. The clotted flow of traffic gave him time to skim the dossier and form an impression of Nina Irani. A summertime video shot through a telephoto lens was a study in earth tones: deep brown hair coiled at the back. Large amber sunglasses. Olive skin. A low, wide mouth with lush lips painted ochre. A lightweight blazer of oak-brown linen over a pastel yellow silk top and soft trim curves.

If he could see her eyes, he would know how to play her. He would just have to improvise in person.

He skimmed her biography. Born in Mumbai, the largest and richest city remaining in the Republic of India after the secessions and civil wars of the twenty-first century. Irani graduated *summa cum laude* from the Nehru School of Public Administration in New Delhi, and had worked for the UN ever since. Fifteen years in New York. Married two years back in her late twenties, divorced. Childless.

A strategy seeded itself in his mind. Still, he would have to meet her in person before committing to that angle of attack.

The coupe turned left on 57th to loop back to the garage on one-way 58th. Stone closed the dossier and opened the false intel report. The mythical Minervan exotic matter factory supposedly shared the colony world's nearly circular orbit, half a revolution behind Minerva and hence hidden by Minerva's sun. Schematics showed a gigantic cyclotron, a vast array of solar cells to power it, and a comparably vast set of radiators to dump waste heat toward interstellar space. A schedule purported to show how the exotic matter factory avoided detection by the UN wormhole tug: selectively turning off scattered solar cells, to send reflections matching the starfield behind the power array to the UN ship. Crew lists and resupply ship manifests rounded out the story.

But exotic matter alone failed to threaten Earth. The airdocks for



assembling the battlefleet masqueraded as mining facilities on a rocky moon of a gas giant a billion miles from Minerva. The ships matched the typical design of warpdrive ships throughout the settled galaxy, with fore and aft warp rings at the ends of a long, skinny cylindrical hull. The battlefleet's crews trained—Stone chuckled—in the basements of Centers for Alignment with the Universe.

The false intel implicated not only Minerva's government, but also the colony world's official pseudo-church in preparing for war with Earth.

Why?

The coupe turned left into the parking garage on 58th. It avoided the lane for *contract parking only* and climbed the ramp to a gate and a payment kiosk of blobby blue plastic. *Use same card at exit* and who still used bits of plastic to charge things? *\$4,000 per 15 minutes. All day \$100,000.*

[Pay for all day,] Caitlyn said.

Twenty-five blocks to UN headquarters under blustery weather. [You want me to walk to meet Nina Irani?]

[No. Pay for all day anyway.]

Stone subvoked to the computer implanted under a flap of skin on his chest—old Earth tech that felt obsolete compared to the quantum computer embedded in his skull on Minerva—and his implantable relayed his instructions to the kiosk.

"All day parking on levels 15-19," announced a synthesized feminine voice. The gate lifted.

[Level 18. Back corner,] said Caitlyn.

[Why?]

[You'll see.]

The coupe spiraled up a concrete corkscrew. The ramp reminded him of the long descent in Ulrich's secret tunnel from the inhabited plateau to the lowland launch site on Trinity. Headlights snapped on against the dark passageway. Faintly queasy, he shut his eyes. Ears aching, he pinched shut his nose and tried to exhale.

When his car straightened and leveled its path, Stone opened his eyes. A giant *18* in an ugly decades-old typeface slipped past his headlights. He rode past a knot of cars near the elevator bank. Empty park-

ing spaces lay on both sides of the drive lane. Ahead stood a nondescript sedan, four doors, tinted windows, metallic blue paint on a thin aluminum skin faceted like an old-time stealth aircraft. One of ten thousand clones plying the streets of New York. [There,] Caitlyn said.

[Thanks for the tip.] His coupe parked next to the sedan. [Now what?]

[Switch cars. It will unlock for you.]

Stone slung his gym bag over his shoulder and climbed out of his coupe. He grabbed the handle of the sedan's nearest door. It hesitated, then opened. Cloth seats and a chill interior, the sedan had waited hours for him. He sat and rubbed his hands together. He inhaled new car smell. [You bought this for me?]

[Use this car from now on when you meet Irani or do other things we might ask of you. It has a transponder for the contract parking entrance to this garage so payments won't be charged to any account in your name. For all your other expenses, look in the envelope tucked in the pocket behind your lower legs.]

Stone pulled out the envelope. Two credit cards in different names and a sheaf of US dollars in small denominations, \$5000s and \$20,000s. He slid the credit cards and about a quarter-million in 20Gs into his wallet. He buried the envelope with the rest of the cash under rustling plastic deep in his gym bag.

With a hunch forming, he fished the plastic sack from the locker out of his bag. [And this—?]

[You've figured it out, I think,] Caitlyn said. [Your disguise.]

## 2

Stone untied the handles, reached in. Pulled out a fake beard the same dirty blond as his hair except for a few grays along the sideburns.

He flipped it over. Frowned. For all the skill at tradecraft Caitlyn and the Minervans had shown, they thought this amateurish nonsense would fool anyone?

[Just when I think you aren't the usual keyhole kop, you hand me this? This beard doesn't even have adhesive on the back.]

[It doesn't need it.]

[Like hell—]

[You didn't shave at the gym, right? Press it against your face.]

Stone raised it toward his jaw.

[Stop! Flip down the visor and use the makeup mirror!]

He rolled his eyes but lowered the beard. He crouched, took a step, flipped down the visor, then flipped up the flap over the makeup mirror. LED strips flanking the mirror illuminated his face with strong white light. When had he gotten those fine wrinkles around his eyes?

Stone set that thought aside. Carefully he lined up the beard, then starting next to his left ear he pressed it three inches at a time to his face.

A sensation like tiny insects crawled from left to right over his jaw. The urge to jerk his head away from the fake beard struck him, but he resisted. His head stayed still as he pressed the last portions of the

fake beard to his face.

[The artificial beard tied itself to individual facial hairs,] Caitlyn said.

When the crawling insect feeling went away, Stone pinched the end of the beard between his fingertips and gently tugged. The fake beard held. He tugged harder. The fake beard held and he winced.

He checked his appearance from three angles, then snapped the visor back against the headliner. [A good disguise, as far as it goes. But it won't fool anyone who knows me.]

[Yes. But we have more for you. Look in the sack.]

Stone looked and pulled out an object. A clear plastic zippered sandwich bag held a yellowish folded item and a smaller clear zippered bag. The smaller bag held eight dollops of a thick gray material sandwiched between sheets of transparent plastic.

[Put on the gloves first,] Caitlyn said, [or you'll get elf fingers.]

The yellowish folded item was a pair of latex gloves, he saw now. [Elf fingers? Sounds serious. Can I cure it with an antibiotic?]

His attempted joke made no impact. [Don't even open the inner bag until the gloves are on.]

[Understood.] He slid on the latex gloves, then withdrew the inner bag. [What now?]

[You remember Matthew Thomas?]

Through the reputation blockchain, shared by every adult on Minerva, and recently including Caitlyn and Stone, a public profile came to Stone's mind. Matthew Thomas, medical nanotechnologist of South Asian ancestry and high ratings for skill and safety.

The High Emprise conspiracy's private blockchain, shared only by Caitlyn and a handful of Minervans—and recently, and unwantedly, by Stone—confirmed that Matthew Thomas had purchased ten sets of osteomorphic nanomachines for topical application from a Minervan company with excellent ratings for quality, safety, and value.

[How could I forget?]

[How a convoked person's embedded quantum computer interfaces between the blockchain and the person's brain can vary between individuals,] Caitlyn said.

More information rushed into Stone's mind. Simon Bale, the Min-

ervan government's highest security official, had placed the osteomorphic nanomachines in the diplomatic pouch sent through the new wormhole to Minerva's mission to the UN.

Osteomorphic... topical application....

[Thomas selected some nanogoop that will penetrate my skin and change bone?]

[Exactly. Facial recognition software running on a public camera feed would see through your beard in seconds. The software looks for distances and angles of brow ridge, cheekbones, jawline, and chin. This will fool it. You'll need the makeup mirror in the visor again.]

Stone's muscles tensed to cross the cabin. Headlights washed over the concrete wall in front of him. A tiny car, a two-seater box on wheels, parked three spots away. Stone dropped his gloved hands below the windows and blanked his face like someone reviewing text or video projected to their optic nerves by Earth's standard tech, transcranial magnetic stim. He in fact watched video, live feeds from cameras mounted on the sides and rear corner of the sedan.

A scrawny beanpole of a man emerged from the tiny car like a jack springing from a box. He peered at a fitness monitor strapped to his wrist and headed for the stairwell instead of the elevator, ignoring the sedan and Stone inside. A man trying to reach his 10,000 steps early in the day. The stairwell door clanged shut behind him.

Stone sat on his knees on the seat in front of the visor and opened the makeup mirror. He pulled the sandwiched dollops of nanomachines out of their bag. The transparent plastic sheets flexed slightly in his hands. His fingers hesitated at a corner of the upper sheet of transparent plastic.

[It will hurt some, if that's what you're worried about.]

[I can handle pain. How will it know to stop in time?]

[I used a programming unit that received a 3d picture of your face and simulated randomized settings until the output fooled a panel of facial recognition software. Put the *nanogoop* in about the right spots on your face and it will know what to do.]

Stone nodded and yanked free the top sheet of plastic. His gloved fingers pulled one of the gray dollops off the backing. Warmth trickled into his fingers. [Where?]

[The outer end of one of your eyebrows. Close your eye until the material fully absorbs. Press hard.]

He shut his left eye and squeezed the material in place. Warmth flashed into heat. His skin reddened as the gray material permeated it, crawling into it with a feeling like insect larvae burrowing into a host's flesh. Pain throbbed along the upper rim of his eye socket. Stone breathed raggedly through gritted teeth. *Some?* he thought, but didn't bother sending the word to CAitlyn.

The gray material completely entered his skin. The pain spread in waves like a rising tide, around the eye socket, toward his temple, up his forehead. At least its intensity remained constant. He opened his eye. Pulled up the second glob of material. Raised it toward the outer end of his right eyebrow—

He glanced at his left eyebrow in the makeup mirror. His stomach suddenly turned queasy. The bone under his left eyebrow flowed like putty, stretching and slackening his skin.

Stone shut both eyes and inhaled three slow breaths. He opened his left eye and focused on the spot where the next dollop would go.

Twenty minutes later, a hot feeling faded from the sides of his chin. He looked into the makeup mirror and saw a stranger. Sunken eyes in wider sockets; a face more oval; a jutting lower jaw and thicker chin. If people who knew him by sight happened to pass him on the street, they might double-take but would end up walking away.

He gave the face in the mirror an overall look. Less handsome than he really was, not that it mattered. His confident demeanor remained. Persuading Nina Irani that he had real intelligence and she should take it would pose no challenge.

Red splotches on his skin marked where the osteomorphic nanogoop had penetrated. He looked like a victim of a medspa malfunction. [I've got to do something about those red spots.]

[Pull open the storage drawer under the rear seat.]

Stone did. A sealed pouch of insulated plastic held cold, moist cloths. He lay on his side on the back seat, knees curled up to fit, and pressed five cloths to his face, one across his eyes, one to each cheek, and one on each side of his jaw.

[After the mission, we'll use that same 3d image of you to program

the reversal.]

[Generous.] He yawned, then readjusted the cloths on the side facing up. [The osteogoop is off-the-shelf tech on Minerva?]

[Yes.]

[Which means in half an hour a prospective criminal can fool facial recognition software?]

He imagined her smiling when she sent her next words. [A Minervan citizen can only buy the material if they've undergone convocation.]

The reputation blockchain, implemented by quantum computers interfacing directly with human brains, made Minerva a world where no one would become a criminal because their own mind would betray them to everyone else.

Could Caitlyn and her allies truly transform Earth the same way?

Stone turned the question over in his mind. No answer came before she said, [That should be long enough.]

He sat up. Smooth skin with a uniform healthy tan tone covered his strange face. [Looks good.]

[Two more things. Look in the sack.]

Stone pulled out a small bag containing two elongated ovals on a plastic backing, then a dropper bottle the size of his finger. He held the small bag next to his face and looked in the visor mirror. [You matched my skin tone. Do I need to prep these before I put them on?]

[No. Just peel off and press to the front of your ear. Wrap the excess around. It won't rebuild the cartilage inside your ears, but the recontouring will fool—]

[Got it.] Ears were like fingerprints, except that a traffic cop or a customs official could note a difference in ear pattern between a subject and a matching photo ID with the naked eye.

Stone applied the elongate oval stickers. A hundred ants seemed to crawl over each ear. His face scrunched until the ants returned to their nest.

He checked the mirror. His ears looked different but he couldn't put the difference into words. Presumably the difference would fool facial recognition software.

He reached for the dropper. [This will change my eye color?]

[Exactly. It helps that yours are naturally blue. Just three drops per eye.]

[Why three?]

[One drop won't change the color much. Two drops, the volume of each can vary enough that you might get noticeably different colors between your eyes.]

[Three it is.] He opened the bottle. Pulled up his eyelid with one hand. Squeezed out three drops with the other. Repeated on the other side.

Expecting burning or itching, he shut his eyes. Seconds ticked by and he felt nothing. [It isn't working.]

[Look in the mirror.]

He did. Blinked. He could discern himself behind the face of the brown-eyed stranger, but would anyone else be able to?

More to the point, would Gray?

[Enough with the narcissism. It's time to make contact with Nina Irani.]



# 3

The blue sedan pulled up to the curb on 2nd around the corner from his destination. Stone climbed out and assisted the door's closing mechanism with a shove. A faint whiff of rotting garbage from a dumpster in an alley closed in his nose with the smell of impending rain.

Ten steps down the sidewalk, the overcast sky spat raindrops at him. At least they washed away the dumpster odor. The blue sedan melded into traffic heading downtown.

He hunched his shoulders. As he walked, he scanned the pedestrian swarm for anyone who might be tracking him. Sidelong glances at mirrored glass revealed only New Yorkers hurrying against the thickening rain.

At 44th, a panoramic camera bulged like a wart from the bottom of the street sign. The Minervan bone-shifting tech had better work. He turned right. He wound his way through a mass of pedestrians who hurried by holding umbrellas and briefcases overhead. Clouds tumbled above highrises where the logos of UN agencies and national missions adorned flat faces of steel and black glass. One of those agencies was ITB, the Interstellar Transport Bureau. Caitlyn could be watching him from a window even now.

The rain pelted him now. Stone stalked toward his destination. Three Eyes Open stood on the ground floor of a skyscraper. One of a

hundred meditation lounges in Manhattan. The door to the sidewalk opened and Stone slipped in.

A color scheme of pastel yellows, oranges, reds. Four rows of six beanbag chairs crossed the floor, with a horseshoe of padded knee-high wall backing each chair. Above each seat hung a helmet on a flexible arm. Five customers sat with helmets pulled down over their ears and eyes. The helmets lacked visors, reminding him of the one he'd been forced to wear in the basement of the Center for Alignment with the Universe on Minerva.

His implantable computer fed the time 10:58 to his optic nerve. His chest tightened. What if Nina Irani had arrived early today? He checked the customers. Two men. One woman's long blond hair spilled out from under a helmet. The backs of another woman's deep brown hands lay folded on her scrawny ribs. The final woman's chubby form sank deeply into her beanbag chair.

Stone's upper body relaxed. As he went to a gleaming, underlit counter, a soft and slow duet of a jangly string instrument and a hand drum trickled from hidden speakers. A man in his twenties with \$250 coins stretching his earlobes waited behind the counter. Three oxygenators jutted from the wall at his back like vegan beer taps.

"What do you want?" the barista asked in a thin voice. A menu icon pulsed at the side of Stone's vision.

He blinked at the icon, skimmed the menu. Uncarbonated mineral waters from fourteen US states and seventeen countries. "What do you recommend?"

"The Redshift Cavern Select, Webster County, Missouri. Bottled from an underground lake. Strong limestone notes. You simply must try it."

The most expensive domestic water on the menu. Stone grinned and sniffed out a breath. "And how much oxygen?"

"Four pulses will maximize the mental boost and complement the acidity of the water." At two thousand dollars per pulse, this drink of cave water would cost him twenty-five grand. No: it would cost Caitlyn and the Minervans.

Stone grinned again. "Make it a double."

The barista reached under the counter and cracked open the cap

of a glass bottle. Stone's gaze rested on the barista's actions without watching. Pouring, pulsing oxygen. The burble of compressed oxygen jetting into the glass almost drowned out an eruption of street noise from the front door.

The barista set a bubbling glass in front of Stone. Stone pulled cash from his wallet while the barista turned to footsteps clacking on the concrete floor. "Nina. Your usual?"

"Yes." The voice sounded melodious, reminding Stone of an opera singer from a fling a decade past.

He turned. Drops of rain dotted Nina Irani's nut-brown suit jacket and trickled down the amber lenses of the sunglasses riding atop her head. Her large brown eyes betokened self-assurance, under narrow, arched eyebrows meant to inform any man he was unworthy.

Stone read right through his first impression. She was a Ms. Lonelyhearts. Whenever she bedded another rising star in UN politics in her climb to power, she dreamed he would love her for who she was for the rest of her life.

Keep dreaming, sister.

His gaze locked on her large brown eyes. "Not quite her usual," he said to the barista. "It's on me."

Her eyebrows arched higher. "No."

Stone smirked and pulled another twenty G from his wallet. Slid it across the counter. To the barista: "Keep the change."

Irani stiffened her shoulders. "I don't know who you are but I know your type. 'Curry fever' you white men call it. You come to a place that plays sitar and tabla jams over the soundsystem—" She flicked her fingers toward the nearest speaker in the ceiling. "—and think any desi girl will fall for you?"

"No. Any woman will fall for me, whether she's South Asian or not. But I'm not here to learn any moves from the *Kama Sutra*. My interest in you is purely professional."

"Is it now?"

"Your employer needs to know something."

Her brown eyes jolted wide. "You know who I am?"

"Oh yes."

Her gaze jabbed at him. "How? Why?"

Stone stared back with a faint smile on his lips. It would be so easy to seduce her. A cocksure attitude, some playful mockery of her position in UN headquarters. An hour from now he could toss her skirt suit to the floor next to his bed.

Yet despite Irani's wide mouth and smooth brown skin, his usual urges remained dormant. Uncertain how a tryst would play out with the mission Caitlyn assigned him. Had to be it.

Gas bubbled nearby. The barista pulsed oxygen into Irani's glass of water as if he hadn't heard their conversation. No, he'd heard, but UN employees probably talked shop across the counter from him a hundred times a day. He set down her glass of oxygenated water with a plastic thump.

Stone shoved his thoughts away. "Come with me."

Without looking back, he led Irani to the corner of the lounge nearest the tinted front windows, where lay the pair of beanbag chairs farthest from the other customers. He and Irani would sit with their backs to the street. Not ideal, but the tinting would keep casual observers from identifying either of them, and the angle would prevent anyone from reading their lips.

He gestured to both chairs in turn. Irani took the one closest to the door. He read her intent despite her effort to hide it behind a cool brown-eyed gaze. She sat there for the best chance to escape if Stone proved dangerous.

Stone dipped his head, then sat in the other beanbag without spilling a drop of overpriced water. He rested his glass in a deep cupholder embedded in the knee-high curved wall. Reached for the helmet, hesitating only a moment when the memory of his consecration on Minerva came back. He pulled the helmet halfway down, then with a glance beckoned her to do the same.

"Don't activate the noise cancelling, the music, or the binaural beats," he muttered.

Irani lowered the helmet over her eyes and ears, then he did the same. He shut his eyes and asked with minimal movement of his lips, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes." Her voice carried through the circular pads rimming the earcups. "Who are you?"

"A friend with the UN's best interests at heart."

"I doubt I shall find 'Friend, A' in the UN employee directory."

"I guarantee you won't."

"I need to know who you are," Irani said.

Stone blindly sipped fizzing, limestony water. "James Smith. ITB. Have you heard of Minerva?"

Caitlyn shouted in his mind's ear. [You're giving her my agency?] [Couldn't give her mine. Your boss Holbrook is on your side, isn't he? If she investigates me, he'll know what's going on and confirm James Smith's existence.]

She needed a moment. [Makes sense.]

"—world," said Irani. "Newly acceded to the Dubai Convention. Surprisingly advanced technology."

"You don't know the half of it."

Her glass clunked in its cupholder. "Go on."

"I recently returned from that world." His whisper turned harsh. "Resist the urge to check employer's database about me."

"Why?"

"I'll get to that. While on that world, I collected intel that its technology is a hell of a lot more advanced than my employer has relayed to you."

"How advanced?"

"Think of it as Hawking Station number two."

The sound of Irani's sharp inhalation reached through Stone's helmet. She understood his reference. "Impossible. The Goldberg-Chen Colonial Technological Development Model predicts—"

He flicked his fingers up and she fell silent. "I don't care what some Ivy League profs predict. The proof is in my pocket. And—"

"A Haw—a place like that. What are they doing with its products?" Irani's tone told him she'd already guessed.

"Building vessels. As you'd expect. Proof of that is in my pocket too."

"Your superior never relayed such intel."

"I provided it to him on my return. Yesterday I found out he never provided it to you. Guess why?"

Irani took heavy breaths. "He wants to throw in with that colony

against us? Even more impossible.”

He chuckled out a breath. “Whose poli sci model predicts that power brokers never plot coups?”

More heavy breaths. “True, I know how this town works. But your employer couldn’t keep so great a secret for so long. We would have found out.”

“Would you?”

The front door chimed. Footsteps and the echo of rain on concrete and glass overwhelmed the lounge’s ambient music for a moment. Stone kept his head from jerking up toward the door. Hopefully Irani had the same self-control.

Behind the counter, oxygen jetted into water. Irani said, “You said you have proof.”

“You’ll find it on the beanbag next to your left hand when you end your daily meditation.” Hard leather soles clapped on the concrete floor toward them. “Shh.”

She didn’t reply. Good. Stone listened to the new arrival. The footsteps stopped. The beanbag on the other side of Irani rustled as the new arrival plopped into it. A metallic creak meant the articulation on the helmet over the new arrival’s seat needed maintenance. Give the person thirty seconds to pick a program and start meditating...

Stone pushed the helmet above his eyes and ears. He squinted and looked at Irani. The ends of her brown hair peeked out from her helmet. Her trim figure sank into her beanbag. She breathed slowly and deeply, her lush lips parted.

If she wasn’t entranced by a meditation program, she put on a good act.

Stone forced his legs off his beanbag to the floor like a man not fully returned to Manhattan. He dug into his pockets and found the memory stick with false intel.

And left it in his pocket. He wanted more cover in case someone noticed a memory stick on her beanbag.

He padded toward the barista. On his way, he pulled another twenty G from his wallet. Rested the bill on the counter. “Pen and paper?”

“You have an insight? You’re right, getting it down the old-

fashioned way captures aspects that subvoking and virtual sketching just can't." The barista palmed the money, then peered under the counter. Cabinet doors slid back and forth.

The barista set a sketch pad sheet and a thick black pencil on the counter. "Not a pen, but here you go."

"Namaste." Stone carried the paper and pencil to a standing-height table near the window. With unpracticed hands, he wrote *I'll be here M W F 10-10:30 to answer questions.*

The pencil hesitated over the paper. Add something flirtatious?

No. He rolled his eyes and folded the paper. Once, twice. He then walked back to Irani.

On his way, he glanced sidelong at the new arrival. A man, wearing a loosened tie and a suit flipped back from a paunchy belly. His snores clashed with the sitar and tabla music over the soundsystem.

If he worked as a counterintel agent from the Secretary-General's office, he did a poor job.

Stone halted to Irani's left. He slipped the memory stick from his pocket and sandwiched it between the paper's folds. Gently he tucked the open side of the folded paper under her fingers. Her hand stirred slightly but her eyes and ears remained under the helmet.

Keep dreaming, sister.