Chapter 3

[Black Matter facility, main plaza, Chandi, Varuna system, 0447 local]

The repeater died with a sound like a cough, and the O-12 hacker on the far side of the plaza lost her second set of eyes on the eastern stairwell.

"Got it," Nasrin said. "East side's blind. You have six seconds before she routes around me."

"Six is plenty." Emily Handelman was already moving behind the Al'Hawwa, low and fast along the line of dead planters, Knauf's shadow a heavy half-step behind her. Rounds from the Psi-Cop team chewed the plaza's marble into dust. Somewhere above them, a ventilation fan turned with a slow, grinding complaint.

Nasrin kept her back to the pillar and her attention in the spectral overlay, where her personal fight looked like what it was: two small, frantic constellations of signal trying to strangle each other. The Bureau Aegis team had been good from the start. Nine of them, maybe ten, and a Cyberghost who wrote his countermeasures like poetry, every line ending in a trap. Nasrin had already lost one firewall to him and had no intention of losing a second.

She found the O-12 hacker's new route a second before it opened, put her thumb on it, and pressed.

That was when every screen in the plaza came on.

There were dozens of them: wall panels, dead advertising strips, an old directory column by the lift shafts. All of them lit at once, first white, then focusing into a face, Then it bloomed into Nasrin's Geist as well, overriding her overlay, overriding everything, square in the center of her vision where nothing was supposed to be able to reach.

A woman in her late thirties, hair pulled back, a slight crookedness to the left side of her mouth that Nasrin had studied for three hours in a transit pod on the way here.

Kathleen Dussler.

Her Geist ran the biometrics before she could ask it to. *Facial match 99.7 percent. Vocal match pending.*

"Congratulations," said Kathleen Dussler, from every screen and from inside Nasrin's skull. Her voice was warm and unhurried. "You have successfully gained access to the main plaza. Please cease all hostilities. The lower levels are now open to you."

She smiled, and the screens went dark again. Then they came back on, and she said it again, word for word, with the same smile.

Nobody was shooting anymore.

Nasrin realized she had stopped breathing and started again. On the comm, Raoul Spector said something unrepeatable in a dialect she didn't know. Across the plaza, a figure in Aegis gray straightened a few centimeters out of cover, combi rifle still raised, head tilted toward the nearest screen.

"Nasrin." Handelman's voice, flat. "Tell me that's a recording."

"It's a recording." *Vocal match 99.4 percent.* "Probably. The face is hers. Close enough."

"How close is close enough?"

Nasrin watched the loop start a third time. Dussler's eyes moved left to right across a room she could not see, settled on nothing, and stayed there.

"Close enough to fool a Geist," she said.

A new channel request blinked at the edge of her vision: open band, unencrypted, origin across the plaza. Handelman accepted it before Nasrin could advise against it.

"StarCo." A woman's voice, clipped, Concilium vowels. "This is Commander Varga. I believe we were both just invited downstairs."

"Seems that way."

"I don't like being invited."

"Nobody likes being invited," Handelman said. "You want to finish this up here first?"

A long pause. On the far wall, Kathleen Dussler asked them, once again, to cease all hostilities.

"No," said Varga. "Superiors want to see what's down there before anyone else does. And I suspect yours want the same thing."

Behind the lift shafts, a section of wall that every schematic Nasrin had pulled from the facility's carcass listed as load-bearing concrete slid sideways into the floor. A ramp ran down into blue-white light.

Neither team moved first. Then both did, carefully, guns low, keeping the full width of the plaza between them.

[PanOceania High Command, San Pietro, Neoterra, 0510 AM]

Kett had not left the grey room in hours. Somebody had brought coffee at some point, and it had gone cold beside his elbow without him touching it.

The feed from Chandi arrived for the first time in twenty minutes and was exceptionally, inexplicably poor. It arrived in stuttering bursts, a two-second lag on top of the relay delay, and the lieutenant's face froze every few words in an expression of mild surprise. Behind him, emergency lighting turned a concrete corridor the color of old meat.

"Repeat that last part, Lieutenant."

"Sir." Mwangi-Rao wiped something off his cheek with the back of his glove. It left a darker smear. "We breached through the old maintenance spine on the western side, as planned. Contact at the second junction. Next Wave."

The room went quiet. On the wall speakers, Ochoa made a small noise that might have been a word.

"You're certain," said Kett.

"Hard to get wrong sir. Kind of a dinosaur in a China shop situation." A pause while the feed caught up with itself. "We lost Sergeant Obi. We took two of theirs."

"What were they doing?"

"That's what bothers me, General." The Kamau lieutenant looked off-screen, toward something in the corridor, then back. "They weren't searching for anything. No hackers on the terminals, no one sweeping the rooms. They were holding the junction. Like they were making sure nobody went through it before a certain time."

"And then?"

“Then that woman – the reporter – came on every screen in the facility and told us all to stop. And they stopped. Pulled back in good order and went down the ramp ahead of us.” He hesitated. “They didn’t look around once, sir. Felt to me like they knew the way.”

Kett noticed Hoffman look at him and did not look back.

“Where are you now?”

“Exiting towards the lower level. I’ll turn the camera.”

The image swung, smeared, and settled.

It was a hall. That was the only word for it, though it was bigger than any hall had a right to be beneath a moon that small. The ceiling was lost in shadow. The floor was poured stone, flat and clean, and the far walls were a long way off. Light came from two points near the center: two waist-high cradles, matte black, each with a slow pulse of white heat breathing behind narrow slits in its casing.

At the edges of the hall, there were doorways. Kett counted five, then six, certainly more that he couldn’t make out in the sub-par feed. In each, figures stood just inside the threshold and did not come further. On the left, blue-gold Aegis armor. Farther on, the hodgepodge patchwork of a mercenary detachment with the silly bunny ears of a Bakunin Riot Grrl sticking out – so StarCo, he thought with an inner scoff. Directly opposite the Kamau, a squad in the mottled jade of the Imperial Service. And in a shadowed arch to the right, motionless, a fireteam that was certainly Japanese, though Kett couldn’t make out which detachment they were from.

Nobody was firing.

“There are some structures next to each entrance, sir,” Mwangi-Rao said. The camera tilted to a tall, slender mast just inside the Kamau’s own doorway: brushed metal, a crown of ribbed emitters at the top. “There’s one by every doorway. Our engineer says they look like decon emitters, but somehow that’s not what they are.”

“What does she think they are then?”

“She doesn’t know yet.”

At the far end of the hall, one of the Yu Jing soldiers took a single step forward into the open. Every other doorway shifted in response, a ripple of raised weapons, and the soldier stepped back. The stillness returned.

“They’re all here,” Ochoa said quietly from the speakers.

“Not everyone,” Belekov said. “Look at the right side again. Some of them are not even ours.”

Kett leaned forward. On the screen, the Next Wave fireteam appeared in the closest doorway that had stood empty until just now, watching the cradles, not the other teams. As if they did not concern them.

“Lieutenant,” he said. “Hold your position. Do not touch anything until I tell you.”

“Understood, sir.”

The feed froze again, on a shot of the two black cradles breathing white light into the dark.

[Black Matter facility, sub-level 3, 0516 local]

The cradles were not containers. Nasrin understood that the moment she let her Geist touch the nearer one.

She had crossed the open floor alone, hands visible, a gesture for the other doorways that said *specialist, not soldier*. Luckily, nobody had shot her. Yet. Somewhere behind her, Handelman was counting the seconds out loud on the team channel, which Nasrin found she appreciated.

Up close, the cradle was the size of a stasis coffin, sealed seamlessly, warm through her gloves. Inside, behind the narrow slits, she could see cores. Half a dozen at least, each the size of a fist, each glowing white like coal that had been blown on.

"Talk to me," said Handelman.

"Hyperthermal storage." Nasrin kept her voice level. "Old Hexahedron tech, or someone who stole it. The data isn't written on anything. It's *held* in the heat. A lattice of phase states in a superheated plasma, bottled in a magnetic field. It's about as dense as storage gets, and it won't hold still for anyone without the key."

"So we shoot it."

"We absolutely do not shoot it." She was already reading the anti-tamper layer. It was not subtle and wasn't meant to be. "Break the bottle and the lattice doesn't die, it *dumps*. Everything it holds goes out in one burst to the nearest relay. Breaking it is the same as publishing it."

Knauf, on the channel – probably watching her through the scope on his sniper rifle: "Then what's the play?"

Nasrin turned slowly and looked back at the doorway they had come through, at the slender mast just inside it with its crown of emitters.

"That," she said. "Those aren't decon units. They're field projectors. They throw a counter-phase field. Carry a core into it, and the field reads its key, matches it, and collapses the lattice from the inside. It doesn't dump anything. It just… stops existing. Like it never held anything at all."

She let that sit for a moment.

"So someone built a vault full of blackmail," Handelman said, "and then put an eraser at every door."

"Yes."

"That's generous."

"Very," said Nasrin, and did not like it any more than Handelman did.

The cradle's locking layer was a puzzle box, and it had been built by someone who enjoyed building puzzle boxes. Her Geist translated its structure into something she could hold: nested handshakes, each answering only to a question the previous one had deemed sufficiently answered.

She had seen code like that once before, in a classified briefing on Paradiso that she had not been cleared to keep.

She set that thought aside and opened the outermost handshake.

The cradle released one core into a slot at its base with a soft, final click. Its surface carried a cipher now, lit from within: a Nomad mark, the old tri-star on black and red.

Their dirt, then. The people who had paid StarCo to be here.

"I have one," she said. "One of ours. Picking it up."

She closed her hand around it.

The heat didn't touch her skin. It hit her nerves. A white bloom flared through the base of her skull, her Geist screamed and blacked out, and for one long second she was alone inside her own head with a sound like the sea. Then her overlay rebooted, the hall came back, and she was on one knee with the core cradled against her chest.

“Nasrin!”

“Fine. I’m fine.” She was not entirely fine. Her cube was reporting an integrity warning she decided to ignore. “It bleeds. Electromagnetically. Anyone who picks one of these up without a decent bee-tee shield is going to have a bad day.”

She stood. Across the hall, the O-12 hacker had reached the second cradle and was crouched over it. The Bureau Aegis team was spreading out behind her.

Nasrin watched the Aegis hacker’s hands, and so she nearly missed it: off to her right, by the Imperial Service doorway, a Yu Jing soldier was already walking back toward their own mast, something burning white in the crook of his arm.

He stepped into the field, and the mast’s crown lit.

A low hum went through the floor and into Nasrin’s feet. The core in the soldier’s arm dimmed to grey, then to black, then to a dull, dead glass, and he let it fall. It bounced once on the stone.

At the same moment, in the spectral layer, where only Nasrin and perhaps half a dozen other people in the hall were looking, the Yu Jing mast sent something *out*.

Not a lot. A single packet, tightly compressed, hard-encrypted, aimed upward through the rock toward whatever relay waited above.

Nasrin stared at it.

An eraser does not need a transmitter.

“Handelman,” she said. “Something’s wrong with the masts.”

“Wrong how?”

[Polaris Wire newsroom, Concilium Prime, 2219 local]

Severin Haljorsen had been a night editor for nineteen years, and he had learned to tell the sound of a real alert from all the others the way a parent learns to tell one baby’s cry from another. This one was real.

It was the tip queue: the public drop on Maya, where anyone with a grudge and a pseudonym could leave them a present. Ninety-nine of a hundred were noise. He opened it anyway, the way he always did.

A single file – no message, sender handle a string of characters that meant nothing.

The file’s header, however, meant a great deal.

He read the first page twice before he understood what he was looking at, and then he sat very still in his chair while the rest of the newsroom kept humming around him.

It was an operational order. Bureau Noir letterhead, the real kind, with authentication layers he could not have faked in a month. It authorized an external contractor, unnamed, designated only by a reference code beginning with the letters *BC*, to “resolve the labor situation at the Halcyon orbital docks by whatever means the contractor deems appropriate.” Concilium Prime. Two months ago. Attached: payment records, transit logs, three photographs he closed after the first one.

He knew those docks. He knew that story. He had spent an afternoon telling Kathleen Dussler it was too dangerous to chase, then she had smiled at him with the left side of her mouth and chased it anyway.

A second chime, from a different machine.

Halvorsen kept an Arachne terminal at the far end of his desk, off the Polaris network, unregistered, illegal in eleven systems. Nomad sources didn't trust Maya, and he didn't blame them. The Arachne drop was almost always empty.

It wasn't empty now. Same file. Same sender string. Same timestamp, to the millisecond.

Somebody had posted the same story on both networks at once, on Maya, where ALEPH watched, and on Arachne, where ALEPH couldn't. He checked the public spread counter on the Maya copy. It was already climbing. Somebody else had received it too, somebody without his scruples, and the first mirror had gone up on a Mayacast channel out of Bakunin.

He ran a trace out of habit. The routing bounced across a dozen relays and ended at a buoy he had to look up: an old military relay on the Paradiso approach, in a sector where nobody had kept a human crew since the Third Offensive.

Halvorsen looked at the photograph of Kathleen pinned above his monitor, the one from the awards dinner. Then he reached for his comlog.

[Black Matter facility, sub-level 3, 0521 local]

The hall wasn't quiet anymore. The truce that had held since the plaza was thinning the way the ice thinned on Terra in the 2100s – much too fast. Weapons had drifted up. Teams had edged out from their doorways in short, wary advances. Two more specialists had crossed to the cradles. Nobody had fired a shot, yet.

Nasrin knelt beside StarCo's mast with the Nomad core in her lap, its heat soaking through her armor, and worked.

She had the first packet half open now. Not its contents; those were sealed behind something she had no hope of cracking here. But the envelope, the routing, the size. It had gone up through the rock to a relay on the surface, and from the relay into the deep network. Into Maya. And somewhere else, somewhere she couldn't follow.

The size bothered her. A receipt was a few hundred bytes. This had been much heavier.

"Nasrin," said a voice in her ear that was not Handelman's. It was their contract liaison, Brask, patched through from the Nomad ship in orbit of moon very far away from this one, and he sounded like a man who had just stood up very quickly. "Nasrin, are you near Handelman?"

"Twenty meters. What—"

"Something just dropped on Maya. A file. It's ours. A Black Hand operation on Svalarheima, four years back. Names. Dates. Payments to a contractor." A breath. "It's everywhere, Nasrin. Mirrored on Arachne too. Somebody posted our own dirt on our own network."

Nasrin looked up.

Across the hall, on the PanOceanian side, a Zulu-Cobra hacker was just stepping out of the counter-phase field by his doorway. At his feet, a dead grey core rolled to a stop on the stone.

She checked the timestamp of the Kamau mast's outbound burst. She checked the timestamp Brask gave her.

The same second.

She went back to the first one, the Yu Jing core. Its burst had gone out at 0516 and forty seconds. She asked Brask to check the public drops for that minute. He came back after a pause she spent counting her own heartbeats.

"O-12," he said. "A Bureau Noir file. Concilium Prime. It went up at—"

"0516 and forty," said Nasrin.

Silence on the line.

She thought it through once, slowly, because she wanted to be wrong. The masts weren't erasers. Or they were, but not only. Every time a core died in one of those fields, the system kept its promise. That core was gone, truly gone, and whoever owned it was safe. And then it took something else, from someone else, and it sent it into the Sphere.

Yu Jing had burned its own core, and O-12 had paid for it. PanOceania had burned one of theirs, and the Nomads had paid for that.

She stood up, too fast; her vision swam from the core's bleed, and she walked to Handelman through the gray haze until she found her.

Handelman was crouched behind a fallen section of ceiling with Knauf, watching the Aegis team at the second cradle. Hasrin looked for Raoul, but he had vanished once more. Handleman saw Nasrin's face and stopped talking mid-word.

"It's a trade," Nasrin said. "Every core someone wipes, the masts publish a different one. Somebody else's. That's what the bursts are."

Handelman's eyes went to the core in Nasrin's arms.

"Ours just went public," Nasrin said. "Not because of anything we did. Because the Zulu-Cobra wiped *theirs*."

She watched Handelman work it out: not the tech, which didn't interest her, but what it meant. Every team in this hall was holding someone else's gun to someone else's head. Without knowing who would be next. And therefore, with none of them able to put it down first.

"How many cores are left?" Handelman said.

"I don't know. A lot. Not all of them are ours." Nasrin swallowed. "But every one that someone else burns is one more chance it's us that gets compromised."

"And every one we burn," said Handelman, "is a chance it's someone else."

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

Across the hall, the Next Wave fireteam still hadn't moved from their arch. Nasrin realized, distantly, that they were the only ones in the room who hadn't sent anyone toward the cradles.

Then she realized that they didn't need to.