

BREAKAWAY

ALSO BY JOEL SHEPHERD

Crossover: A Cassandra Kresnov Novel

JOEL SHEPHERD
BREAKAWAY
A CASSANDRA KRESNOV NOVEL



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2197

VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 207

FAX: 716-564-2711

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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*For Nathan,
who in many ways
is still taller than me*

CHAPTER



“Look at the size of that,” Ayako breathed, gazing down at the seething mass of people along central Patterson. “Looks like eighty thousand plus.”

“Peanuts,” said Ari with studied disinterest, eyes fixed to the navscreen on the dash, “Patterson’s got half a million and over four hundred thousand stayed at home. It’s an apolitical city, everyone says so. Get us a direct approach, the circuit wastes time.”

Ayako punched keys, uplinking directly to central traffic control through CSA Headquarters. Ari spared the protest a brief glance as it faded behind looming towers, a flood of humanity beneath a white, spotlight glare, air traffic hovering in close attendance, most roads blocked by police vehicles. Everyone hoping the mob stayed quiet this time, no one wanted a repeat of the Velan protest with its two hundred and fifty comatose rioters still filling space in the nearby hospital. But what option did police with no riot gear have but neuralisers

when confronting rioters? Tanusha, the apolitical city, was woefully unprepared for such events.

“. . . no,” Ayako cut into some unheard transmission, “this is Googly, we’re CSA One, I have priority override . . .” and broke off at an interruption, throwing Ari an exasperated look.

“I’ve got it.” Ari pressed the speaker button.

“. . . *live perimeter*,” the voice was saying, “*we have no record of your authorisation, this is an unscheduled incursion . . .*”

“Fuck you, you little piece of shit,” Ari said calmly. “Do you know what CSA One means? Authorise this.” Uplinking mentally he triggered his best attack code. Static burst from the other end as the attack software took control of com frequencies and shoved the CSA Priority ID into the uncooperative guard’s visuals.

“Lot of traffic,” Ayako said nonchalantly into the pause that followed, eyeing the display ahead, and the airborne ID markers that blipped about their inward trajectory. “Going to have to bump someone down a space.”

“Do it, the damn suits can wait for once . . .” Authorisation flashed to green on the navscreen as the local heavies cleared them through. “Thank you,” he told them, loud with sarcasm. And to Ayako, “Jesus Christ, if I have to fight through another fucking turf war in the next thirty minutes I’m going to use my gun.”

“Change that silly codename,” Ayako said mildly. “No one believes CSA One Ops would use that codename.”

“I shall do no such thing.” Scanning at maximum capacity through his scanning linkups, additional airspace data from central filling in the three-dimensional space around the termination point of their flightpath—Kanchipuram Hotel. The whole tactical picture hung clear and tactile in his inner-vision, even as his eyes gazed through the windshield.

“Googly. What on earth is a googly?” Ayako steered the cruiser through a gentle approach bend past the West Patterson towers, the

nighttime cityscape looming up on the left as they banked. Blazing light, towers, traffic filled streets, all blissfully free of protesters.

“Cricket, you poor philistine Asiatic person—it’s a deceptive, spinning delivery . . .” Ari’s scans came up empty. He didn’t trust them. “The cornerstone of all true civilisation—first there was upright bipedal motion, then there was language, then there was cricket.”

“Oh,” said Ayako.

The hotel lay ahead, a broad, neocolonial sprawl of floodlit pillars and arches, seriously retro-Greek architecture and seriously five-star, on the perimeter of a broad park, tree-filled and dark with shadows. The infonetwork showed security everywhere. “Snipers,” said Ayako as she followed the display course, bringing them about and descending.

“No kidding.” Ayako’s vision enhancement was better than his. Ari preferred network capability, Ayako liked her physio-perks.

Another few seconds and he could see them himself, armoured figures crouched on the broad roof above the driveway that passed beneath the front pillars. Limos and vehicles everywhere. There was no shortage of grounded air traffic on the nearby lander either, mostly big official cruisers, with the occasional four-engine flyer, armoured and expensive, drivers waiting around the open doors.

“Too damn many,” Ari muttered, hopping from site to site as his software jumped along the security perimeter, sorting files and searching those of attendees. It was the usual messy overlap of local, private and government security, too many layers in some places and too many holes in others. “We’re going to have to wait until we get inside.”

Ayako set the cruiser to auto-approach, the windshield display indicating the gleaming route ahead as she took both hands off the controls to check her weapon and belt interface. Ari did likewise, absently, staring intently through the right-hand windows as they came in past the front pillars. Hotel staff and security clustered about the unloading space before the main doors—various well dressed importances still arriving, a throng of over-long vehicles with tint-

out windows and accompanying security with dark suits and broad shoulders.

The airpark was temporary, a hotel staffer was waving them down in the wash of the cruiser's forward light. Ayako killed the glare with a control button as Ari holstered his pistol at his side, frowning as a pair of suited security came jogging their way from back near the main entrance. The cruiser touched, doors powering upward even as Ayako activated the standby sequence. They got out and left the cruiser to complete its own wind down, the hotel staffer protesting loudly that this was a temporary space and if they wanted to park permanently they'd have to move to the visitor's park . . .

Ari ignored him, walking even as Ayako jogged around the car to catch up. The two security agents, moving fast to intercept, had to change direction abruptly.

"Can I see your ID please?"

Ari flashed it, walking fast with Ayako in tow, headed back along the hotel front toward the clustered activity at the main entrance. They paused as the security man internalised both his and Ayako's vis-seal, no doubt sending back on uplinks to reverify for himself. Ari spared the front hotel gardens a brief scan as they walked. Broad and green in the wash of light, obviously wired end to end with sensor gear. Groundcars flashed by beyond the perimeter fence. Beyond rose the clustered towers of Patterson central, a pair of mega-rise soaring skyward in a blaze of light, flanked by smaller buildings. Several near-stationary aircars, circling slowly amid the usual airborne flow—official or media, he guessed, no doubt monitoring the protest.

Above the gentle, familiar rush of traffic noise, Ari fancied there was something else in the air. Not a sound, not a sight, nor a smell. A feeling. An urgent, prickling buzz in the air, like electrostatic charge. Tension. It was everywhere. The city was alive, with commotion, nervous energy and outright fear. A resident of Tanusha all his twenty-eight years, Ari could never remember having felt anything like it.

Even New Year's celebrations, notorious events in party-mad Tanusha, felt nothing like this. The old happy complacency was gone. The universe had descended upon Tanusha. In some senses, literally.

"How can we help?" the security asked, falling into step alongside Ari. Ayako edged herself past in annoyance, taking place at Ari's side.

"You've been branched," Ari told him. "I have a very reliable information source telling me that there is a potential code-red security threat present in the hotel, probably among the guests. You can get me whoever's in charge of security here and full access to the guest and staff lists, minus the usual privacy censors."

"You could have just told us that, we can handle it."

"Branched is branched, pal, your networks aren't secure. And I know who I'm looking for, you don't." Several more security were looking their way amid the procession of newly arrived guests and vehicles before the main entrance. At a signal and inaudible transmission from the first guard, one headed inside at a fast walk. Ayako skipped ahead onto the sidewalk, off the road as a departing ten-metre-long limo accelerated past, her smaller steps hurrying double time to keep pace with Ari's stride.

The guests at the main entrance ignored them as they entered the huge, gleaming lobby, all Tanushan importances being inclined to ignore the ever-present security these days. A huge staircase ascended past reception to the main ballroom, late arrivals climbing in tuxedos and a glitter of fancy gowns that caught the light and pastel shades of the walls and cavernous ceiling. A broad African man in a suit emerged through the crowd to meet them halfway.

"Takane," he introduced himself, hard and businesslike, "S-3. What's the problem?" S-3 was Parliament security. Ari knew there were three senators present, and one Progress Party backbencher . . . but no way did S-3 have this many personnel spare for the presence he saw, and certainly not for the snipers on the roof.

"You've been infiltrated," Ari repeated, reflashing his badge. "Who's your joint cover?"

“Infiltrated by whom?”

“Dangerous people.”

Takane scowled at him, eyes narrowed. “What’s your source?”

“Can’t tell you.”

The eyes narrowed further. “This is S-3’s patch, *Agent*, I’m not going to allow some hotshot ghostie just to come in here and shoot off on his own private pursuits. If you’ve got a trace, you hand it to us and we’ll take care of it.”

Ari’s gun holster suddenly acquired an attractive, tempting weight beneath his jacket.

“Callsign Googly,” he said instead. Takane blinked. His security clearance was high enough, evidently, to know the significance. “Give me full access or there’ll be trouble.”

Receptor software kicked in, a pressure on Ari’s inner ear, as internal visual graphics overlaid schematics across his vision. It registered Takane’s own abrupt transmission, and the reply reception, confirming his own codes. But he didn’t need the enhancement to tell that Takane was rescanning his own datasource, looking for visual confirmation. Three seconds later . . .

“Get them full access,” Takane said to a nearby heavy, “do what they say, keep it quiet.” And he stalked off. Ari and Ayako followed the heavy up the broad staircase.

“*I trust that’s the last silly crack at the callsign?*” Ari formulated on their private, encrypted frequency.

“*For now.*” Ayako didn’t change her mind easily. “*Their joint cover is all separated. I checked their systems, they’re integrating on an MP5 tac-grid, local net, standard encrypt.*”

“*That’s about as safe as primed plastique . . .*”

“*No shit.*”

The main ballroom was broad and extravagant, filled with expensive guests sipping champagne and snacking from tables beneath gleaming chandeliers. Red-gold leaf decorations covered the broad

ceiling. The band was African, guitar and drums, strictly background music. Hardly a techno rage, Ari reflected, gazing about as they followed the security through the milling crowd and mingling perfumes, and up a side stairway that climbed the ballroom wall. The balcony ran in a big U across the ballroom's far and side walls, descending to the floor via the staircases on each side. Uplink graphic unfolded across Ari's internal vision, showing him the meeting rooms and auditoriums that lay beyond through the corridors that sprawled across the lower floors of the hotel. Dark suited security stood at intervals along the balcony, covering the doors that led back into those hallways. Observing the guests with dark, intensely scrutinising stares.

"Wait here," Ari told Ayako, before following his guide down a corridor that led off one side of the balcony. Headed past hurrying hotel staff and caterers and caught a brief glimpse inside a room through a closing door. Well-dressed people inside seated about broad display-equipped tables, deep in discussion. This, quite obviously, was where all the real business was taking place, away from the chattering masses of the ballroom—high-powered meetings between high-powered Tanushan and off-world elite, complete with five-star catering. Another corner, more security suits, and an innocuous side door. It opened onto banks of mounted displays, three security monitors seated before them, uplinked and visored, scanning all rooms, corridors and network monitors simultaneously in a multilayered rush of sensory data.

An uplink was available by a mobile unit. Ari took the chair, slipped on the visor and connected the input socket to the back of his skull behind the right ear—wham, the uplink hit him, vision glaring across the visor, datalinks and modules in colourful three dimensions. He selected, scanned, then picked out the correct links, sorting through the oncoming rush with practised skill.

"Ayako, give me a feed." Flicker and bloom, and a second, real-world visual scan overlaid his schematics, a first person's view over the ballroom—Ayako's view of the milling crowd. "Good . . . I'm

going to run you a sort-and-match, give me as much resolution as you can, show me those upgrades were worth the money you spent.”

“*I’m government now,*” Ayako replied smugly, “*the CSA pays my bills.*”

“Yeah, ain’t that a laugh.” He hooked the feed to the datasearch and let it run on auto. Guest names ran by, files, associated links, connections. The scan raced across the net, branching out from the hotel across Tanusha and Callay beyond, searching for incriminating data and matching faces in the room. The database continued to compile, and the list of suspects ticked slowly downward.

“Why not just use the ballroom security scanners?” asked one of the seated security techs, watching his progress with curiosity.

“Not safe when the system’s been branched,” Ari replied distractedly, “you can’t even trust that the monitors will show you the right face if they see it.” The sec-tech blinked in astonishment.

“Realtime graphical replacement? I didn’t know even the CSA can do that?”

“Hey, it’s Tanusha. The biggest network geniuses don’t work for the government, you know.” Not until he’d joined, anyway.

Ari, meanwhile, switched attention to the back rooms. Seven meetings were in progress through the various hotel suites he counted, and several others that didn’t look so formal. Two of the senators and the Progress Party rep were in the second floor executive suite above the main kitchen on the floor below. Security there was super tight. The other senator was just two rooms down from this security hub. He switched to local visual and got an internal view of one of the rooms—five people, seated and standing, sipping drinks and deep in discussion. The display screen was running, someone was demonstrating a stats schematic of some business model or other.

He scanned the faces, zooming for closeup. The senator was Alessandra Parker, Progress Party again. All of them were Progress Party, plus the rep. Curious indeed. Parker, Ari knew only too well, was a good friend of high-tech industry, didn’t care much for social policy,

and hobnobbed frequently with the corporate movers and shakers. Pan to the man conversing with her . . . Ari recognised him too without effort, Arjun Mukherjee, Bantam Technologies CEO. Big-time infonet company, very big recent moves into implant interface software. It made waves because the interface modules themselves were threatening to override what the neuro-researchers were calling the brain's natural "load capacity," or the amount of digitally generated information it could handle without augmentation. Neuro-augmentation was of course a touchy subject in Tanusha. It warranted much discussion amongst policy makers, and they with their constituencies. Allesandra Parker's position was well known. Mukherjee's went without saying. The potential profits involved were, as always, colossal.

The auto-scan abruptly fingered a possible and Ari switched scans back to the ballroom, finding that an Asian woman in a glossy red dress had been highlighted. Too old, and wrong background, a few seconds' further pursuit showed him, especially considering who he thought he was looking for. But still, an unannounced breach . . .

"Who's this?" he said to the room at large, and flashed them the image on general freq.

"Um . . ." The woman in the seat behind did a fast scan. ". . . not on the main list, must be one of the sublist invites . . . hang on, I'll check."

"Sublist?" Ari frowned. Spun his chair about to stare at the young security woman. She looked barely twenty-two, S-3 were recruiting them young these days. "What sublist?"

"Oh . . . A-list guests had the option of selecting their own invites, security vetted them, of course, full checks . . ."

"Which security?" A very, very bad feeling was building in the pit of his stomach. As bad feelings went, this one rated among the very worst. "S-3?"

"Of course."

"You double-checked the IDs? Counter-forgery?"

Frown from the puzzled young woman. “No . . . should we have? They were all selected by A-list, security-cleared guests . . .”

“Who submitted the list?”

“Mrs. Tatiana Chernomirsky, she’s public liaison for the Government Trade Department . . .”

“Get her here, now!” In a tone of voice that turned the young security woman pale and wide-eyed as she rushed to comply. Ari switched frequencies, heart thumping, his mouth abruptly dry as all his previous contingencies went up in smoke. “Ayako, there’s a sublist of guests submitted by some damn Department woman, they didn’t run checks for shifters . . .”

“*Oh shit,*” Ayako summed up succinctly, “*you never trust civil servants with security, I thought everyone knew that!*”

“Okay, that could mean any number . . . we might need backup here. Be ready, there’s overlapping security concerns here, we don’t want to trigger a panic or they might end up shooting each other, for all I know . . .”

“*I’ve got a good view here, if we evacuate it’ll be spotted and that could be a trigger. Let’s just stay cool and find them first.*”

Ayako was keeping her head, Ari noted with relief. Probably better than he was. Dammit. He wiped sweaty palms on his thighs.

“Sir,” said the young security tech, “Ms. Chernomirsky’s on her way, she was just about next door.” A monitor screen showed a well-dressed woman walking up the nearby stretch of corridor. Ari unhooked from the monitor, went out the door and met her halfway.

“Oh hello,” said the rather attractive civil servant, blinking pleasantly, “you must be Mr. . . .”

“I need your sublist of invited guests. It’s not on database. I want full attachments and I want it immediately.”

Confused blinking. “Of course, it’s on my personal datacomp . . .” turning back the way she came, “. . . if you’ll just follow me . . .” Ari followed, heart thumping, pushing vision enhancements into multi-

light, the corridor turning to a wash of red and gold before him. “. . . is there some kind of problem? I’d swear I followed all the protocols . . . what we’re given, actually, is a standard form. CSA issued them to all government departments just last week, I believe, and we’re all trying to follow them as closely to the letter as possible . . .”

People passed in the corridor, hotel staff, mostly, and a guest on his way out of the men’s bathroom, wiping newly dried hands upon a handkerchief. Ari’s hand itched to reach for the gun holster beneath his jacket, but he did not want to start an alarm yet. He monitored his position in the back corridors, passing another smaller function room as they turned into a wider thoroughfare. Big double doors, an electronic noticeboard pronouncing a guest speaker at some earlier hour, attendees still milling around discussing the recent presentation. Adjoining double doors from the next presentation room up ahead, a security man on duty, doors opening to admit another guest from within . . .

“Oh look,” said Ms. Chernomirsky, “there’s Mr. Carvuto now. He’s one of the subliest invitees, perhaps he can help us . . . Mr. Carvuto!” Walking eagerly toward him as the dusky, clean cut young man turned to look . . . his eyes missed her completely, and locked on Ari, trailing a step behind. His eyes widened. Ari’s did.

Carvuto ran, with Ari exploding past the startled Chernomirsky in pursuit, ripping the pistol from its holster . . . no time for silent formulation . . . “Ayako, got one. Track him and watch for responses!” Carvuto slammed a pair of guests screaming to the ground, smashed a stunned security agent with a well-placed running elbow and vanished about the next left corner. Ari hurdled bodies and ducked, rolling around the corner . . . shots exploded overhead, blasting chunks from the walls, Ari rolling up, pistol tracking as Carvuto kept running, firing back past his side. Security appeared in front, Carvuto changed targets real fast and blew him messily in half. Ari fired from a tight crouch against the wall, three quick shots precisely between the shoulder blades . . .

The explosion blasted him backward, flaming wreckage and shrapnel shredding the hotel walls like paper . . . Ari rolled, arms over his face as the secondary explosion decimated the walls further up.

“Ayako!” he yelled on open channel amid the crackling flames, hissing fire retardant and screeching emergency alarms, “it’s fucking suicide rigs. They’ve got themselves primed to blow! Don’t shoot them with people around, the blast’ll kill everyone!”

“Ari!” Frightened and bewildered amid what sounded like the outbreak of mass panic in the ballroom. “*Are you okay?*”

“Get the sublist off Chernomirsky’s database!” he yelled, rapidly getting drenched by fire retardant as he heaved himself up on one knee, aware of flames crackling dangerously close and noxious fumes in his lungs. “It’s on her personal datacomp, rip the codes to pieces if you have to, just get it out. I don’t have time! Get anyone who came in with a guy called Carvuto . . . it was Hector Iglasio, the fucker recognised me . . .”

“*Iglasio! That’s Vanguard. I bet Yueman and Christophson are here too . . . Wait, I don’t need any sublist, I know what the fuckers look like . . .*”

“Great, good, go!” He staggered upright, cursing himself for not thinking as straight as Ayako in a crisis. He knew Christian Vanguard’s main goons as well as any underworld hack . . . Found himself being roughly grabbed by the arms and dragged stumbling around the corner . . .

“You okay?” shouted a man over the noise of alarms and fire . . . Not even security, Ari noted—the man holding his arm was a guest. Where the fuck were security? Uplinks rushed in as he accessed, racing across the local network . . . oh, of course, *that* was where they were . . . “Sonny, you hearing me? Oh hell, your arm’s hurt . . .”

He stared down, and found the jacket sleeve of his left forearm pierced in several places. A considerable amount of blood was seeping out. Human bombs. Shrapnel, ball-bearings. Recalled the wall being decimated beneath a hail of exploding metal . . . God only knew how

it'd missed him, maybe being set off accidentally had triggered it wrong . . . It should have hurt, but of course the enhancements took care of that too.

"I'm okay," he gasped, his lack of breath surprising him as he steadied against the corridor wall. "I'm CSA, you'd all better get out that way." Pointing unfeelingly with his damaged arm. "There're exits on the other side of those rooms . . ." His uplink-map showed him so. ". . . don't try to get out the main doors. There's important senators and stuff that way, security everywhere . . . they're the targets, you get me? Keep away from them, the bad guys aren't interested in you, only senators."

And beat his way clear, off down the thoroughfare, shoving and weaving past screaming, panicking guests emerging from side rooms or looking wildly about for lost friends . . . Uplinks showed him the way, a staircase ahead and main corridor leading back to the ballroom on level one. All the security were up here on level two where the senators were, but the underside was vulnerable . . .

"Ayako, see anything?"

"Nothing, everyone's panicking, there's a mad crush headed for the exits . . ." A brief flash to visual channel, Ayako's overlaid view of the ballroom from the level two balcony. Crowds of running guests swarming toward the main staircase and entrance hall . . . *"Anyone could be right under me and I couldn't see them, I'm going to get down there . . ."*

The staircase descended left and Ari hurtled down it, leapt the last seven steps and hit the ground running, avoiding major collisions through good luck and agility . . . The ballroom doors ahead were ajar, hotel auto-safeties activated for evacuation, and most people were running in the same direction he was. Ari roughly collided with someone on the point of entering, bounced off breathlessly, staring around the huge, increasingly empty ballroom. Tables overturned, glasses and food platters strewn and broken across the floor, instruments abandoned . . .

Gunfire crackled from out beyond the grand staircase, accompanied by an explosion of warning yells over general frequency . . . Secu-

rity broke and ran across the ballroom, hurdling debris. More yells for help and backup . . .

“Come on!” came Ayako’s yell from the right-hand stairway leading up to the balcony above, a small figure in a long-tailed leather jacket pelting down the steps . . . Uplinks showed the firefight outside, someone in the gardens by the side exit way, pinned down and spraying fire. Another, they thought, might have gotten in through that exit, though cover was now on the way . . .

“Wait!” he shouted at Ayako as she hit the bottom step. She spun, frustrated, security racing out down the main steps beyond. Ari stared blankly ahead, only marginally sighted on her or the ballroom. Ayako’s eyes widened. She recognised that look.

“What? You think . . . ?”

“Senators are that way.” Pointing back and upward to the corridors leading back from the balcony above. “Security just went that way.” Pointing out at the main entrance. “That’s not right.”

“Shit, how powerful are the bombs?” She strode quickly his way, angular Intel-issue pistol comfortable in her small hand. Ari shook his head, racing full speed through the uplinks, scanning all available hotel schematics and getting way too many blanks . . . the blast had taken out half the hardware network. The inner convention centre was effectively network blind.

“Powerful enough. I’d guess someone’s chem-lab plastique, directional shrapnel front and back. It went straight through the walls back there . . .”

“Would it go through floors and ceiling?” And saw at close range . . . “Oh shit, your arm . . .”

“It’ll last ten minutes.” Distractedly. “I’d be almost as worried about the firearms. He had an Ubek-5, he was taking out whole pieces of wall back there. That’s the HE-shells—if someone’s got AP mags, he wouldn’t even need to blow himself up, he could shoot through the floor.” The volume of gunfire from beyond the main entrance had

increased to steady, irregular bursts—covering fire, Ari figured from the schematics before his eyes, pinning the infiltrator down while someone moved around for the killshot.

Another rush-scan through the nearby rooms . . . S-3 had only enough personnel for level two, not enough for top and bottom. He determined several signals on S-3 frequency that showed agents in blocking positions about the ballroom level, but there were plenty of gaps, especially with half the network hardware missing . . .

“Take that side,” he said to Ayako, pointing across to the other doors in the ballroom’s rear wall, beneath the overhead balcony. “I’ve got this one . . . remember if you have to shoot, shoot for the head, these things could be uplink triggered.”

In which case there was no guarantee, he reckoned, as he darted back up the corridor he’d come from, that blowing the bomber’s brains out wouldn’t also trigger the explosion. Took the first right into a small meeting room. Comfortable chairs set about a central table, doubtless for comfortable covert meetings between various involved persons. His uplinks got no reading on the room through the open doorway beyond. He flattened himself against the side wall, darted a quick look around, then followed, with gun levelled one-handed. Rear corridor, much smaller than the mains. Staffroom down one way, dead-end door with no-admittance notices. Closed. They shouldn’t be closed with the auto-emergency systems opening everything for evacuation. He edged sideways down the corridor, pistol trained the opposite way, covering his more vulnerable side. Uplinks gave him nothing beyond the closed staffroom door either.

He spun and kicked in one smooth motion, pistol searching as the door smashed open . . . there were lockers, cabinets and drawers for various staff things in rows, narrow aisles between for access. No sound, beyond the echoing wail of emergency sirens, and the background crackle of reports, gunfire and schematic audio in his ear. The room smelt slightly stale, telling of less than perfect ventilation, and too much shoe polish and body spray . . . and something else.

He crept forward, darting a quick look into each aisle between the big storage rows . . . and was little surprised by the dark-suited body lying face down in the third aisle, head bent around at an unnatural angle. S-3 monitored each other's vitals, was his immediate thought. But the network was chaotic, damaged, and various encryption channels weren't working at all. A quick attention to his uplink schematics showed where the next obvious hole in the perimeter would be.

He turned and walked, briskly, weapon ready. Running was too dangerous now. In this proximity, he needed time to react. Down the narrow corridor into the broader thoroughfare and turned right where the main traffic would continue straight ahead—that was carpeted, with wall signs pointing toward convention rooms. The way right was bare floor, and the open doors down the end revealed wide steel benches for food preparation.

Ari entered the kitchen sideways, back to one side door, weapon ready. Switched quickly across to the other side. The kitchen was broad, divided by several long aisles, benches, microwaves and other kitchen stuff between . . . Ari didn't know, he preferred takeaway most nights. He rolled quickly behind the near benches, and crawled.

Heard muffled activity, close by, like someone rearranging gear. A clatter that could have been a weapon on a steel counter. Whoever it was was in a hurry. He reached the end of the bench and rolled fast to his feet, pistol levelled. "Don't move."

The man froze. He'd been standing on a counter, out of sight of the main kitchen entrance behind the tall storage units, now side-on to Ari's position. Attempting to stuff something into the space between the big storage cupboards and the ceiling. He was wearing formal pants and shoes like any number of guests, Ari noted, but his jacket was lying on the counter alongside his feet, and his plain shirt bore crease marks in unusual places. The bundle he was attempting to stuff into the gap between cupboard and ceiling dangled harness straps, close-fitting, low-intensity magneto locks, undetectable on basic

security scan. God knew how they'd gotten the charge past the detectors, though.

"Hello, Claude," Ari said. The pistol fixed an unwavering sight upon the blond-haired young man's left eardrum. That was where the uplink transmission would come from. With his own systems at full-max, Ari reckoned he'd detect anything serious in time. Human encrypt formulations weren't exactly millisecond fast, and personal bombs would require serious encryption to avoid them going off in random traffic. "Change your mind about the 'suicide' bit, did you?"

"Ariel." With jaw-tight frustration. "I might have known. Did you kill Hector?"

"Hector killed himself. His death was pointless and achieved nothing. Yours will be too unless you deactivate that stupid thing and step down here. You can't penetrate the floor with that explosive, anyway, it's too thick."

A blatant lie . . . at least he had no real idea of the truth. But Claude had the position spot on, directly beneath the room now holding the senators. He'd done his homework. And, at this range, Claude had enough uplink capability to detect if Ari made a transmission to warn them. Ari knew he had that capability, it was on file—a file he himself had written. If Claude tried the trigger, Ari knew he'd have to shoot to kill. And Ari wanted a live interrogation. This much of a security breach warranted some serious analysis.

"Hector's death was *not* pointless," Claude retorted, clenched jaw trembling. Not looking Ari's way. "He has gone to a far better place. As will I. You, however, Ariel, are in question in this regard."

"You're running around the city blowing people up, and you question *my* Godly virtue?" Damn these guys were funny. His arm was suddenly throbbing. "That's . . . that's creative, Claude, really."

"Ariel . . . Ariel, in the Lord's name," Claude burst out in frustration, glaring with wide, trembling eyes in his direction, "you're a smart man, can't you *see*? Can't you see what's going on? This . . . this

is lunacy!” Waving a hand about, encompassing the kitchen, the hotel, the entire teeming city of fifty-seven million.

“You’re damn right it is.” Thinking furiously. He couldn’t patch-and-disable Claude’s uplink trigger by remote, Claude could mistake it for a warning transmission and blow them both to pieces. He needed to knock him out cold, but carried no stunner. Dammit. Last time he made that oversight.

“Ariel, I know about you . . . most of my friends know about you. Opinion is divided but I, I, Ariel, I alone believe you to be a decent person. But you serve the wrong side, why don’t you *see* that? These . . . these people, Ariel, they believe in ungodly things, they would vote for things that would forever warp and . . . and distort all of humanity in evil ways, and they would use this vote in the houses of power, Ariel, and life for all God’s children would never be the same again!”

“Claude,” Ari said, with what he thought was commendable calmness, “I respect your beliefs.” Holding up a placating free hand. The arm was definitely throbbing now. It made concentration difficult. And holding one’s temper. “I respect your beliefs, and I respect your right to hold them—and to voice them to whoever may choose to listen. But there are other ways to voice your beliefs than to go about killing people . . . ‘thou shalt not kill,’ Claude, does that ring a bell?”

“Like they’re killing us?” Eyes blazing. “Like they’re wanting to turn us all into some . . . some damn synthetic machines for their *profits* and their *portfolios* and their grand corporate empires!? Like they’re wanting to kill our *souls*, Ariel? Dammit, man, how can you be so naïve? You know better than anyone how the system works, you’re a part of it! You know the politicians are in the corporate executives’ pockets! And you’re protecting them, you’re protecting the whole, twisted, immoral system!”

Like it was such a horrible, sinful thing to do. Well, Ari’d heard that one before. And from saner people than Claude Christophson. He pursed his lips in exasperation.

“You know, Claude . . . you’ve nearly convinced me. Really. Why don’t you put that explosive vest away, and rather than blowing yourself and all your very convincing rhetoric into very small pieces, you can live on, and stay here in Tanusha . . . You’ll get a trial, it’ll probably be public, with all the civil rights attorneys who’ll no doubt do your case for free because of the publicity . . . You’ll get a planet-wide broadcast podium, everyone will be listening, and then you can tell them all what you’ve just told me and everyone will believe, and then everything will all be right again. What d’you say?”

Too sarcastic, was his immediate thought. It was his usual flaw. But Claude actually hesitated. Ari could see it in his eyes, the faint uncertainty, the pause for thought. And maybe, just perhaps, that little voice of self-preservation whispering in the background, looking for excuses, reasons to be listened to. Religious loonies always believed their truths were universal. That there was such a thing as truth itself. It was their weakness.

A blue flash lit the air. Claude jerked and convulsed, then fell from the bench.

Reflex overcoming initial surprise, Ari leapt forward, awkwardly catching the falling body one-armed, the other ready in case the vest tumbled from its hiding spot . . . it didn’t. He dumped the young man’s limp body upon the floor between stainless steel benches and checked his vitals. Racing heartbeat, but he was still breathing.

“CSA give you that too?” he asked, searching Claude’s pockets.

“Of course,” said Ayako, coming down the aisle and repocketing her stunner. “You can get them through the underground, of course, but they’re too expensive.”

Ari found the sidearm, an Ubek-5 again, and plenty powerful for a concealed weapon.

“That Claude?”

“Yeah . . . I think he’s the last. There’s at least two outside. Four’s the absolute limit I’d have thought could get in. The rest of it looks pretty well covered.”

“And you left someone alive to question this time.” Ayako sounded impressed. “You’re evolving as a CSA operative, Ari.”

“First guy who gave me a choice,” Ari replied, finishing with one leg, then the other. There was a light thump as Ayako leapt onto the counter behind, and started to gingerly remove the explosive vest from up against the ceiling. “You know,” he added, “I always picked Claude for a nutter, but suicide vests are just a bit extreme.”

“The future of the human race is something that tends to make them a bit upset.” After disarming the vest, Ayako pulled it down. A simple contraption, a basic vest with flat, body-hugging pockets, a few wires and a trigger switch. Too slim to be visible under an evening jacket. “You know, if this keeps up, you’re going to lose all your lunatic friends very shortly.”

“Oh no.” Ari gazed down at the young terrorist’s calm, sleeping face. “I can always make new friends. Plenty more where these came from.”