

Chapter 1

Assassin

People rarely search for bodies in ceilings, Gabriel O'Donnell reminded himself. He should have a couple of hours before anyone discovered his latest victim. Slipping unseen from the side door, he dissolved into the amoebic mass of dignitaries arriving for the fund-raiser at Eden Mission Control. He itched to shed his tuxedo and starched shirt, but he needed the camouflage, along with the stolen emotion-ID that had required a messy killing, to secure entry. He blended in with the wealthy entourage decked in stark designer suits and power dresses. He didn't speak to anyone, didn't sip from the champagne glass he occasionally raised to his lips. He let his eyes glaze over as if he, too, were rich enough to forget what was outside, an Earth maimed by War, near collapse from heat exhaustion.

Somewhere here was his target, but as yet he didn't know who. He slowed his breathing and sharpened his senses, filtering out the bass hum of the aircon and the drone of conversation. He suppressed the cocktail of cologne and perfume the crowd wore to mask residual traces of sweat from their journey through the early evening LA heat-haze. He glanced at his wristcom, switched to privacy mode so only he could read it – no message yet confirming his mark's identity. The display did tell him it was a cool nineteen degrees Celsius, compared to forty-five out in the open, and way below the 2061 climate control mandate for public buildings. Nothing new, he thought: the rich make laws for others to follow.

The idea flickered across his mind that if he dispatched ten or twenty of the moguls here tonight, instead of just one, a lot more mouths would find food. But only for a while. The latest vidcast from his mentor had confirmed what he'd already suspected – the holocaust was mere days away. When he found the *right* target, maybe he could delay its onset, and save millions.

Maybe.

A fanfare of horns sliced through the banter, announcing the holorium was open: the Eden show awaited them. He swept forward with the elite mob, a spider hiding amongst flies.

As the alcohol-rouged gathering rounded a corner, he glimpsed the twin Stentons bordering the corridor: floor-to-ceiling carbon-black monoliths. State-of-the-art security gear. He focused his mind, careful not to tense his body. A few surreptitious glances verified what the memorised floor plans had told him – this was the only access point. Six heavily-armed security guards manned the station, eyeing people as they passed through. The two in the front used an age-old technique called the *fence*, an unblinking stare-down subduing those passing through, ruffling a few of the male celebrities in the process. The middle two checked people and bags, but this was more for show – the Stentons did the real work. The final two guards scanned the assembly using peripheral vision – letting their right brains detect any unusual behaviour patterns of the swarm. Not bad, he thought. He knew he could take down all six if necessary, but then his mission would fail.

He had to get past them.

The Stentons were top of their class – a biometric system based on psychological finger-printing, using subliminal stimuli to trigger minute fear responses. The monoliths were especially good at picking out kamikaze terrorists, whose fear response had a singular signature, and experienced assassins like Gabriel, who had none. Earlier, he'd had to instil panic into the day's first victim before terminating him, while downloading the visceral feedback. Gabriel now had those terror responses primed in the neural net embedded in his scalp – they would match

the dead man's E-ID card Gabriel held in his left palm. He'd actually apologised to the corpse afterward, taking rather more care than usual with the body. He was a Sentinel assassin, not a psychopath.

Slowing to an amble, he let one or two suits rub past him as he weighed his options. He laughed at a nearby joke as if he were part of that particular gang. But his insides felt hollow: too much was riding on tonight's mission. Watching the shuffling pack tighten toward the checkpoint scanners, he decided he needed an extra edge. Distraction was also an assassin's tool.

As they herded like cloned beef toward the final security check, he surveyed the audience and picked out a busty woman in her thirties, sporting an emerald halter neck dress of gossamer-thin silk. Most of the middle-aged men pretended a little too hard not to notice her. As he mingled behind the woman and her escort in the funnelling queue, he casually reached into his pocket. He extracted the sliver of acid-coated razor-wire from its sheath. He coughed as he approached the twin security columns. His right hand, en route to cover his mouth, grazed the material of the woman's halter with the filament, depositing a trace of acid. He let the hair-like strand drop to the floor, crushing it underfoot. Holding up his E-ID pass, he stared as required towards one of the monoliths, the under-dressed woman behind him. He held his breath.

Whoops and guffaws erupted as her halter snapped. Gabriel turned around, feigning surprise and interest, and the guards manhandled him through the full-scan checkpoint without serious attention. Once past he walked to the empty restroom and located the locked stall marked *Out of Order*. His fingers rapped in the entry digicode, and he stepped inside. He found what he expected, a small black rucksack, and checked the contents: gravitics, stiletto knife, and slimline S&W pulse gun with night-sighter. All he required now was his target's name, but his wristcom stayed quiet. His handler didn't usually leave it this late.

He zipped up the bag. As he headed out, he checked his reflection in the restroom mirror, and paused. He searched for any trace of the young man he'd been before the War, before becoming a killing machine, before losing her. Eyes black and remorseless as a shark's stared back at him; hers had been green, forgiving. She would have been twenty-seven today. He slung the rucksack over his shoulder. Happy birthday, Jenny. He broke off his gaze, stole through the door, and entered the holorium.

* * *

Despite the aircon maintaining the room at a fresh fifteen degrees Celsius to optimise the technology's performance, Micah was sweating.

"You won't make it, not this time," Rudi said, leering beneath a wavy moustache. He anchored his feet against the chrome desk, tilting the recliner back further, hands linked behind matted black curls.

You could have helped. Micah's silver gloves were a blur as he worked at the holo-bench. Its data columns and networking filaments resembled a complex city of skyscrapers: sapphire flying buttresses connecting golden spires and towers. He grimaced at the writhing red sores leaching energy from four of the amber columns, defects he had to remove for the program to run.

"Let me work, Rudi. I'm almost there."

Rudi persisted. "Why'd you agree to do this in the first place? Thought you'd get a chance to work with our resident Slovakian princess in Comms, eh?"

Micah dropped a filament and felt a stab of dread as it tumbled down inside the cylinder, ricocheting off several columns towards the central golden nexus. He caught it just in time with his left hand, without disturbing the overall structure. That was close! No time to wipe the beads of sweat building on his brow.

"Nice catch," Rudi muttered. "So is she, but out of your league. You know that, right?"

Micah ignored him, suspecting it wouldn't make any difference.

Rudi stretched his hands forward, framing Micah between thumbs and indexes as if taking a holopic. "I mean, look at you. The basics are okay – no hunchback, all your own teeth, body parts in the usual places. But the wiry fuzz on your head, the bulging eyes – is that a thyroid thing, by the way? And as for dress sense..." Rudi's hands returned to their habitual position, clasped behind his head. "Does your Mom still buy your clothes, or what? No style. That's the problem, Micah. She's class, you're not."

Micah braved a shrug, but he knew Rudi was right: unlike Rudi, he had an abysmal record with women. He glanced at the countdown: 3:08. Any second, he'd get the call. His fingers, wrapped in second-skin holo-transducers, felt the subtle vibrations in the digitised information, like pulsating ice cubes covered in Braille. This part of his job at Eden Mission Control still gave him a buzz. He threaded the teraquad info-strands into place with a precision and purpose he rarely knew in the rest of his life.

On cue, the screen switched on. A red-faced, balding man glared at him. Micah didn't stop. Seconds mattered.

"Sanderson. Tell me it's ready."

"Yes, Mr Vastra, Sir. Almost ready. It'll be on time."

"Better be." The screen blanked.

Rudi chuckled. "You're in deep shit. Three minutes till lights out."

Micah dismissed the remark and flipped back into the zone, holding his breath, rapt in concentration. All sound ceased in his mind, like a frozen waterfall. As he slotted the final filament into place, the reds vanished. The resultant data harmonic sent a tingling rush through his gloves into his arms and spine, making him gasp. He snapped his right forefinger and thumb together, transmitting the program.

"Done!" The display shimmered and was gone. He peeled off the gloves, threw them onto the work bench, and slumped into his chair.

Rudi sighed. "Why didn't you just re-use the last vid – why does each one have to be different? Why make work for yourself? These shitheads don't care. You'll get no credit. And meanwhile, *she* doesn't even know you exist!"

Micah grinned. This one was going to be good. It would move the audience, he just knew it. "You wouldn't understand, Rudi. It's... art. Besides, some of the Hi-creds here today have been to the show before – they'll be impressed when they realise it changes each time."

Rudi shook his head. "No hope whatsoever."

Micah snatched up the remote-ball and squeezed it to select the holorium viewscreen on his macro display, then pressed harder to show feeds from all eight cameras. He scanned the views, zooming in and out on the audience about to see his production. The stock-straight profile of the Eden Mission Director, Keiji Kane, was easy to pick out from the crowd, greeting indistinguishable men in dark suits with expandable waistlines. The younger women in the audience were strikingly dressed in angular flow-suits, the older ones decked out in more classic elegant outfits.

He watched Kane's acerbic assistant Sandy march up to him and whisper something in his ear, her hand touching his waist as she bent forward. Kane nodded, and headed over to his front row pew. People followed his lead and took their seats for the show, a prelude to a tour of Eden Mission Control, the first step in eliciting continued financial support from the ultra-rich. Micah wasn't keen on the fact they had to do this every month, but it was vital to keeping alive the four astronauts on their way to Eden.

He zoomed back out when someone unusual caught his eye – a tanned, slim man floating through the crowd like a dancer – all in black, no jacket, just a small back-pack. No one seemed to notice him as he headed toward the rear exit, cutting through the flood of people vying for the best places. Micah leant forward, intrigued by his effortless movements, like a dolphin swimming through the current. He lost him, though, as he moved out of camera range. Plain-clothes security, he assumed.

Rudi was right about one thing, though. This wasn't his real job. They were both full-time telemetry analysts, poring over sensor information slip-streaming back from Earth's only faster-than-light ship, the Ulysses. Comms was haphazard at best, involving unpredictable and still barely-understood tachyon fields, coupled with an increasing delay as Ulysses got farther from Earth. He didn't fully understand the theory, but he and Rudi were two of the people disentangling the data and making sense of it. Still, he had a modest talent for holo-vidding – not enough to give up his day job – but he enjoyed watching people's reactions, and it made a break from the drudgery of endless analysis of signals traversing incomprehensible distances across the void, telling everyone that all was *still* well on the mission to Eden.

Reluctantly, he had to admit that Rudi was right on the other count, too. He pretended he wasn't searching, but when he found Antonia in the audience, his breath softened. He zeroed in on her. Although she was staff, like him, Antonia always got an invite to these functions, being the daughter of the Slovakian ambassador. Though "Princess" wasn't correct, it wasn't entirely inappropriate – she was regal, statuesque, with porcelain skin and dark coffee eyes. He watched her slink into her seat, and observed the fading holorium lights twinkle on her sequined dress.

"Naughty, naughty!" Rudi said. "Mustn't spy on staff."

Micah frowned, only in part due to the comment: she had a tall, suave escort. Switching the cameras to night-vision mode, he zoomed away from her, resisting temptation.

Rudi slapped his thighs and got up. "God, I'm sorry, man, I can't bear to watch another one. I'm going for a spin on the Optron. Catch you later."

The door hissed closed. Micah switched off four of the camera views to allow a central picture to emerge of the main holo-images the two-hundred-strong audience had gathered to experience. They were in for quite a ride, and he'd have to write a report later on their reactions, to fine-tune it for next time. He sat back, and waited.

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Gabriel's wristcom located the surveillance weak spot at the rear of the holorium. He set it to emit a fold, allowing him to work within a three metre sensor void, rendering him invisible to normal security sweeps.

The lights dimmed. All eyes gazed forward.

He slipped on a black silk hood, donned his gloves, and switched his wristcom to nerve-stim mode. He curved his thinly-sheathed tongue inside his mouth to activate the hands-free control mechanism. Few could master it: a single cough, yawn, or

inadvertent swallowing could be misinterpreted as commands. But to Gabriel it was the ultimate assassin's tool: internal, invisible to anyone looking for signs of subterfuge.

Turning away from the audience immersed in the holo-show net, he approached the vertical steel wall at the back of the holorium. He switched his genetically-coded boots and gloves to lizard mode, tough microscopic hooks and barbs crystallising within seconds. His breathing remained silent as he scaled the sheer face, taking care not to move too fast. He knew enough psycho-physiology and anatomy not only to kill efficiently, but also to use the strengths and weaknesses of human and animal perception: oblique, rapid movements were perceived by all mammals and reptiles faster than any other sensory signal, especially via peripheral vision, for self-evident survival reasons.

Six metres up, he positioned himself underneath a vacant balcony. He manoeuvred upside down, using his tongue control to activate gravitic contact pads on his feet, knees, waist and ribs. A millimetre at a time, he peeled his hands from the ceiling to test he was secure. His masked head fell backwards, upside down, like a gecko hanging from the ceiling, so he could see the audience. He had no interest in the holo. Tapping a short command into his wristcom to signal he was in position, he lifted an object the size of half an apple from his pocket and attached it to the ceiling. Last, he strapped the mono-pulse barrel with sighting lens to his forehead. He could see everyone in the audience – the backs of their heads at least. Everything was set.

He waited, immobile, an obsidian gargoyle ready to spit fire.

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In the darkening holorium, the last murmurings of the audience died away as all attention fell on the iridescent holographic net descending around them – as if it was snowing diamonds. A fanfare of brass horns and an explosion of eye-wrenching white erupted throughout the room. The audience flinched and squinted, before the light condensed into stars racing away from a central glowing hub. Holophonic tricks whirled and sustained a spiralling crescendo of strained violins. People gasped as they fell through space, away from the centre of the galaxy, coasting along a spiral arm towards a yellow star and a small, blue-green ball. As the image slowed and the tones merged into a softer cadence, a deep, stone-calm voice spoke.

"Earth. A jewel. A gift from heaven. Our home for millions of years."

The audience broke through the atmosphere, surfing cirrus strands until Everest reared up beneath them. They dived through a sea of clouds, speared over verdant Himalayan valleys, picking up speed. Streaking over the Indian sub-continent, they dodged the outstretched arms of the Mumbai Tower, the tallest building in the world, in the shape of the goddess Kali. They swept across a sparkling aquamarine Indian Ocean, soared over the Serengeti plains of Africa, disturbing hordes of wildebeest, and looped Kilimanjaro. The audience accelerated, skimming across the steel-grey Atlantic. Breathless, they breached the shores of North America, zipped over a subliminal patchwork of maize and soybean, slalomed through the Grand Canyon, then slewed upwards, punching through the cloud layer back into space.

Micah watched dignitaries clutch the arms of their seats during this roller-coaster ride. Good opening. He sat back in the Media lab to listen to his script's perfectly synthesised voice, designed using the latest emo-ware.

"This amazing world, this incredible resource, here for all mankind." The evangelical tone made even the hard-nosed magnates listen. "And then..." The

holorium contrast grew stark, then grainy, as the green-blue globe changed colour. Swirling amethyst clouds bubbled forth across the Earth's face, acid on flesh, leaving in their wake a rusty swathe raking across half the globe. Pock-marks appeared on the surfaces of North America, Europe and Asia, visible from space. Though this vision of what had happened to Earth was not new, the impact was palpable. Members of the audience bit their lips, nostrils flared, one or two of the women dabbed their eyes, and several men clenched fists. Micah tapped coded entries into the audience reaction slate, while many shook their heads with exasperation, and more than a few inspected their feet. Some here aren't without guilt.

The audience relived the relentless degradation of their planet, in fast-frame.

"How did we get here?" the voice asked, as the audience segued through pages of Pre-War history, images of humanity's progress and prowess leading up to the War.

Proud of this part, Micah zoomed in to see Antonia's reaction. Her eyes widened at the grand vistas of the exploration of Mars with its unexplained crystal caverns, and the underwater Arctic oilfield-cities of the first half of the century. Her lower lip trembled when the legendary African Conglomerate doctors from the medical "Golden Age" stood before her, brandishing their Nobel Prizes in one hand, and the vaccines for malaria, AIDS and CoR16A in the other. Her eyes steeled as she witnessed the First Generation robot soldiers quelling the Turkmenistan rebel invasion, paving the way for robot peacekeepers across the world, ushering in short-lived hopes for an end to war. He zoomed out; it was about to get rough.

The vidcom buzzed, catching him unawares. He hastily took his feet off the table, then relaxed as he realised the message was audio-only.

"Sampson?" The voice was sharp and clipped, the caller's register blank.

"Sanderson. My name is –"

"Okay, okay, *Sanderson*. Security here, so pay attention. We need you to check something. Just before the show started, we did a head count. Should have been 208, but for a moment we had 209. With the show running it's hard for us to see anything on our monitors. You have bio measures, don't you? You can scan the number of people?"

"Er, well, maybe." He called up the biometric screen, tracking audience heart rates and pheromone levels.

"Well?"

"Um. The thing is, they're macro measures, designed to look at whole audiences, not individuals." The vidcom became muffled; he thought he heard the word *Jeez!*

The sound cleared. "Look, just see if you can filter them, okay? If you get a count, just hit call-back – think you can do that?"

"Sure." It cut off. Micah raised a third finger in silent protest, then turned to the bio-filter controls. He wished Rudi hadn't left, they could have done this quicker together. Glancing back at the Holo Control Screen, he saw he'd missed the collapse of the Chinese Dragon Hegemony, and the nano-plague. He caught the tail-end of the bungled US-led anti-terrorist nuclear bombing in Afghanistan, which finally triggered the three-year long World War between the United Secular Nations and the "Big Five" Religious Front countries.

Micah knew that most saw the War as the inevitable blood-letting following two decades of increasingly polarised basic religious rights: fervent believers on the one hand, whose beliefs affected all aspects of their lives, and on the other, those who either did not believe, or believed in moderation. The War's outcome, with a price tag of a half-billion dead, was the Global Tolerance Pact, with the inter-meshed Fundie

religions exercising power – and in some cases neo-Sharia law, depending on the country, at local but never national level – and the secularists running governments and international trade. Global freedom of movement meant people moved to where they felt they fit best, if they could afford to move.

Following the fragile truce borne more from mutual exhaustion than true reconciliation, Peacekeeper forces merged with anti-terrorist agencies to form the much nastier and hence more effective Chorazin Interpol, semi-autonomous agents accountable only to national governments and the fledgling New World Alliance Council. Despite a pessimistic post-war outlook, the peace had held for ten years.

But Micah scowled. The War's secondary ignition points, which had escalated a tragic but singular event into global carnage, had all occurred in the vicinity of places such as the Venezuelan deep-ocean oil fields, the Botswana uranium mines, the Amazon rainforest – what had been left of it – and the Asian e-stock market. The War had also been about money and resources, as usual, all of which had been depleted during the bitter fighting.

He picked up his cold coffee, downing it in one gulp to chase away morose thoughts, and focused on his new task, staring at the forest of green and red biofeedback signals shuffling across the monitor. He munched on a stale noni-muffin for inspiration.

He decided to go with heart rate rather than any of the other measures – the rest were too sensitive, too evanescent. If he could predict when certain reactions would happen, he should be able to obtain a number of correlated signals. The perfect event to elicit a visceral reaction was just about to happen. He set up a parameter file, hit "track", and turned to watch the audience.

Silent visions of nuclear detonations in Frankfurt, Dublin, London, Moscow and his own Los Angeles were unleashed in the holorium, amplified by the vibration devices in the audience seats, slowed down to show their devastating power. The audience felt the warm lick of holographic flame fronts spreading outward from incandescent mushrooms.

He drew his arms around him. He'd left out the bass, grinding sound, partly because this way allowed more artistic impact, but also because, like many survivors, he knew the sound of a nuclear detonation only too well, and would panic if he heard it again.

The image pulled back, showing the final stages of the "browning" of Earth. He noticed some audience members were distressed. He brushed aside a momentary pang of guilt – the Eden Mission needed the money, being fifty per cent funded by donations and advertising. Kane, with his political influence, somehow kept their financial head above water – not easy after two expedition failures. If it weren't for him, the Mission wouldn't survive another month.

He edged forward and zeroed in on Antonia again, then wished he hadn't. Her eyes were wet, but worse, the man next to her was squeezing her hand, offering comfort. Micah bit off another chunk of muffin.

A single beep rescued him. He swung over to the biometric monitor and froze mid-chew. The number of hearts beating in the holorium was neither 208 nor 209: there were two additional hearts beating.

That wasn't all. Two heart rates had remained completely stable during the nuclear detonation scenes. He'd never seen that before.

But now the data had merged again. He glanced sideways toward the vidcom, wondering what to do.

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Gabriel's wristcom twitched. He manoeuvred his arm to see the text-space through the autofocus gun sight. A single name appeared – *Kane*. He'd hoped it would be someone else, given Kane's philanthropy, but he didn't question orders. Beneath his name was an hourglass symbol: *not yet*. He checked to see if anything else followed, then his head returned upside down to scan the audience. Locating Kane's front row seat, he zoomed in, and found the tell-tale mole on the left side of the man's neck, nestling below a well-groomed hairline. He locked his target.

* * *

Micah cleared his throat and tapped the vidcom.

The reply was instant. "How many?"

"Well, the only stable count I got was during the nuclear scene, that's when the filters have most chance –"

"Answer the question."

"Two-ten," Micah said, annoyed at himself. He heard a muffled silence.

"Okay, leave it to us now, no need to monitor any more."

The vidcom clicked off. Micah stared at it, then at the biometrics. He flicked the main viewer to a bird's eye view of the holorium. He filtered out the holoshow, switched to infrared, and began counting the blobs on the screen.

The effusive voice from the show continued: "... that mankind was on the brink of extinction. But we were not extinguished. As the politicians and the people realised that they were about to be destroyed, we pulled back, just in time."

Micah's teeth clamped down at these last words. He always left them in the speech, but for him they were laced with bitterness. He'd been a fifteen-year old draftee, his squad captured on their very first field training mission, three weeks before the end of the War. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to exhale slowly to the count of ten, suppressing the memories of his brief incarceration – nights littered with tortured screams; the naked silence when they abruptly stopped.

Ten years on, the episode still clung to him like a phantom limb.

Yet in many senses, he knew mankind had been "lucky": all the computer models of global nuclear theatre had proved wrong. Only a few countries had suffered blanket attacks, and most other nations had found their situation "recoverable", especially after scour-tech had been developed to dampen rad-levels. Life was still tough – he only had to look out a window to see the relentless heat haze rippling buildings in the distance or stars at night, and rationing of food, power, fuel and aircon would go on for decades. But it could have been so much worse – terminal.

He recalled a few pundits who'd argued that the results of the War were so counter-intuitive, the only rational explanation was that it had all been orchestrated by an unseen organisation, controlled to do limited damage. Conspiracy whackos. What possible motive could there be? He was just thankful it hadn't gone too far.

He resumed the head-count. From the corner of his eye he saw the main holo screen suffuse with green, showing more upbeat images. He'd been advised by the Mission psych, Carlson, that in Post-War culture, lifting people up after taking them down a guilt trip was the best way to wring out money. He knew the show by heart anyway – the audience were trundling their way through the genetically-modified Astrasa wheat fields of snow-less Antarctica, which still fed most of the world's population.

208. No question about it. He shook his head. Maybe the equipment was faulty. He'd have one more shot at it, but he'd have to wait. He slapped a control, restoring the full holo-show image. The prototype dark-matter-powered propulsion system whisked the audience away from Earth, accelerated past Mars and then executed a sling-shot around Saturn to whiplash out of the solar system. He'd fused original vid-footage from both the ill-fated Prometheus and Heracles missions. Most people assumed it was sped-up for effect; in fact he'd had to do slow it down. What he was unable to show, because no one really knew what it looked like, was what happened next. Once well past Pluto's orbit, the long-researched Alcubierre drive kicked in, forming a warp shell around the Ulysses, its dark energy wave front slicing through normal space-time.

The audience catapulted forward to Eden, a purple-green world bathed in blood-orange sunlight from its star, Kantoka Minor, then screamed down through its outer atmosphere, piercing puffy, ivory clouds. They re-emerged and pulled up at the last moment, scraping so close to the mountains that most of the audience half-stood, then sat back down again, laughing, as the vista panned out, unveiling Eden's virgin lakes and forests.

It reminded Micah of pictures he'd seen of pre-War Switzerland, albeit with a mauve tint. He could almost feel Eden's sunlight, though it was over a hundred light years away. Still, just knowing it was there warmed him.

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Gabriel didn't allow himself to tense, though the main lights would flick back on soon. When they did, his chances of being spotted would spike. He would wait until the signal. Perhaps his masters wanted him to terminate Kane and be discovered. He had the standard suicide unit. His wristcom pulsed again. *Secure*. He pressed his jaw together for one full second to release the target auto-lock from Kane. The message meant two things: first, Kane must be protected, not terminated. Second, another assassin was hidden somewhere in the chamber, with Kane in their sights. This time Gabriel tensed. He had to up his game; this was no simple hit anymore. He scanned the audience, checking to see if anyone was paying more attention to Kane than the show.

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Micah reached the point in the show where he could do one last heart rate check linked to the final emotional event. He tapped *track*. Seconds later, each member of the audience saw the four Ulysses astronauts – Blake, Zack, Pierre and Katrina – standing right in front of them, as if they were with them aboard the space station Zeus I, hours before the Ulysses' departure for Eden, three months ago. He pumped up the volume.

"They will be arriving in Eden in less than a week's time, and when they breathe in Eden's atmosphere they'll be taking a breath of fresh air for all mankind. This whole venture has given humanity the solid hope we so desperately need. Of course, it will take decades to transfer a sizeable portion of the population. But Eden represents a second chance for us all, and that helps keep peace here on Earth. The hope – the dream – must continue."

The final, only completely fictitious scene in the show, pictured the Ulysses settled on Eden, its four astronauts walking atop a ridge above a Mediterranean-blue sea, to a background of stirring music, the New World Alliance anthem.

The holorium lighting returned to normal. Kane strode tall onto the stage to rapturous applause, the audience rising to their feet. Far away on the other side of the building, Micah stood up, took a mock bow, and sat down again. *Not bad.*

Kane held up a hand as he spoke into the microphone. "Hopefully, we'll all be seeing real pictures and accounts of Eden from our four heroes in just over a week. We wish them God's protection, and all religions pray for their safe return. Mankind is moving on to a better future."

The beep brought Micah back to the biometric analyser: 210. He trawled his fingers through his hair, unable to work it out. Then he remembered the man who moved like a dancer, and looked like he didn't belong there; Micah couldn't see him anywhere. He noticed several agitated security men enter the chamber, looking over the heads of the crowds, toward the back of the holorium. They were armed. Micah sat up, and instinctively searched for Antonia.

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Gabriel activated the visual diffuser as soon as the lights went up. It would mask the area in front of him, though only temporarily. Once the security guards arrived, he knew he had to act quickly. He sent an electronic signal to a small explosive device eight floors down in another part of the complex. Within seconds the security guards each moved their left hands to their earpieces, then quit the chamber.

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The final wave of applause sputtered to a close as people quit their seats. Micah watched Kane stride to the front exit to press the fatty palms of his wealthy guests, sending them on their way to visit the rest of Eden Mission Control; every handshake worth millions of credits.

Micah saw the security guards depart, and leant back in his chair, guessing it must have been some kind of false alarm. He flicked off all the monitors except one. Antonia's backless, low-cut silver dress clung to her as she stood up, hair held high with a gold clasp. He touched her image on the screen with the tip of his finger, then drew it back, trying to ignore her depressingly handsome escort, looking instead for any sign that she was unhappy, that something was missing from her life, but saw none. Who am I kidding? Rudi's right. She's class, and I'm –"

The comms screen flashed on. "Nice work, Sanderson," Vastra said. "Just spare me the fucking down-to-the-wire heart attack next time, okay?" He cut off without waiting for an answer.

"You're welcome." Micah watched everyone leaving, and gave up on the heart rate monitor – it was useless now, and Security was down there.

Facing the opposite wall, his gaze fell upon the solitary poster of the four Ulysses astronauts standing at the Zeus I airlock, helmets in hands. He tried to imagine himself there too, a fifth astronaut. Like thousands of others, he'd taken the entrance exams as soon as he was twenty-one. The psy-profile had screened him out: over-analytical. He'd thought about that evaluation a lot, not missing the irony. At least they'd given him a job. He remembered what Rudi had said one day.

"Micah, with you the glass isn't just half empty – you think the liquid is wrong – your life is a beer glass, but you want champagne."

Maybe he was right. Micah stood up and stretched. Now his mind was free of the holo-presentation, he returned to the problem he'd been wrestling with the past few weeks: the missing lighthouse markers in the recent Ulysses data streams. If the third one was no longer there, it could spell trouble for the astronauts. He quit the Media Lab, as if discarding an old shoe. Rudi's right, I don't know why I do this. Eager to immerse himself back in Dataland as they called it, he headed off to join Rudi in the Optron Lab.

* * *

Gabriel scanned the holorium using his sighter's fish-eye mode as the last of the delegates, attendants and security left, Kane shooing them onwards until he was alone. The hit was imminent, but Gabriel could see no one. Kane paced a little then made a call on his wristcom. Just in case it was relevant, Gabriel activated his eavesdropper. It only picked up Kane's side of the conversation.

"We need to meet... Yes, I have it... No, not on an open line... Very well... Tonight, late, let's say midnight... Don't worry, I'll be alone."

Kane flicked off his wristcom and spun around towards the exit, to catch up with his entourage.

The tiniest flicker of movement caught Gabriel's eye, in a darkened and disused glass-fronted control booth on the right side of the holorium; it had been his own back-up choice as sniper location. The woman – from what he could see of the side of her face – had waited till the last moment. He used his sighter to auto-zoom in. Her eye met the sighting-glass of her pulse rifle, forefinger curling around the trigger. Gabriel flexed his tongue against his lower gum, and a red spot appeared on her left temple. As he heard Kane grab the exit door handle, he clicked his teeth, fast. There was no recoil. The laser pulse passed straight through the glass booth window with minimal refraction. A black hole of charred flesh, the size of a small coin, burst open where the spot had been, accompanied by a wisp of grey smoke. The woman slumped on the table she'd rested her rifle on, then slid silently out of sight, the weapon toppling after her. He hadn't been sure if the booth had been soundproof, but was relieved to find that it was.

The holorium doors closed behind Kane and the lights dimmed. Gabriel deactivated the gravitics and fell, twisting like a cat to land on all fours. He sprang up and raced to the side wall of the sealed control booth. Forcing open a panel, he entered the tiny room to find her spread-eagled on the floor, eyes glassy green.

All assassins knew this fate awaited them sooner or later. He rested his right palm on her forehead, closing her eye-lids with a fluid stroke of his fingers. "Be at peace now, your part is over. Rejoin the river." He said it in Tibetan, incanting their shortest prayer for the dead.

He searched her matt black clothes and her body for any signs of her origin or who she worked for, not expecting to find anything; she was clearly a professional. On instinct, he pulled up her tunic and checked her waistline for a clan assassin's tattoo, but saw no mark. Gloves off, he ran his fingers around her lower waist. He encountered a rougher layer of flesh above one hip – a stencilled tattoo had been erased, though not without leaving a trace – the yoga mudra symbol. So, she was from Indistan, most likely ethnic but gene-altered to render her skin white and her hair

blonde, though her eyes should have remained brown. He re-opened one eye-lid and placed a finger-tip on her eye-ball, dislodging the tinted contact lens.

Satisfied, he heaved her limp frame over his left shoulder, carrying her rifle in his other hand, and headed towards a nearby maintenance shaft leading to the furnaces, seven floors underground. As he opened the hatchway to the vertical shaft, a gust of hot air greeted him. He wondered if she had climbed up it to get into the booth, since the only other way in was through a heavily secured area. He inhaled deeply, but smelt no traces of sweat from her body. Not good. Unlike him, she'd had inside help, which meant Kane was still in danger. He tapped in a coded message: *target not safe*, and waited.

Gabriel's wristcom twitched three times – *return to base* – he would be instructed to kill again. He launched the corpse into the shaft, re-activated his boots and gloves, and descended, ignoring the searing heat. He recalled Kane's last words – a meeting tonight, at midnight. His instincts told him that whoever had arranged this hit would do all in their power to make sure the meeting never took place.