

Eight: 3047 AD

The Olden Days, The Broken Wings

Hoping Marya would make no sense of the data before him, Niven told her, "I'm checking to see where people go when they leave The Broken Wings. If a statistically significant number emigrate to certain worlds, we can begin to infer both their fantasies under dome conditions and what it is that attracts them to a particular type world. If it's environmental, then we've discovered a way to ease the negatives of dome life." He hoped he sounded tutorial. He cranked it up a notch to be sure. "Ubichi specializes in negative environment, high-yield exploitation operations. Employee turnover has become a major problem because of the expense of training and transportation for some of our field operations. It's in the corporate interest to reduce those costs by keeping our employees happy and comfortable."

Pretty glib, he thought. He congratulated himself. "What're you doing here?"

"Looking for you. We had a date."

"Not till . . . Holy Christ! Look at the time. Hey beautiful lady, I'm sorry. I got on the track of something. I worked right through lunch. Give me a minute, will you? I'll finish up, call my secretary, and we can get moving." He grinned. "I have to check in. Education didn't wear the Old Earth off of him. You wouldn't believe the hell he gave me last night!"

He no longer felt the smile. She was turning him to gelatin again.

Mouse did not answer his buzz. Niven would have been surprised had he done so. The call was simply a ploy to get the data out of Marya's sight, and to seize time to create a plausible structure of lies atop those he had just told.

He needed no story. Marya asked no questions except, "What do you want to do?"

He almost replied with the hard truth.

"I've had it with work, but we about covered everything last night. Angel City isn't swing-town." Gallantly, he added, "I'm content just being with you. You pick."

She laughed. "And they say there's no romance left on Old Earth. How about we just go for a walk? I feel like a good long one."

"Uh . . ." His hands started shaking.

He had gotten out young, but the lessons of an Old Earth's childhood died hard. People who did not learn them young also died hard. Not to walk the streets without a gang of friends was one of the strictest lessons of the motherworld.

This was not Old Earth. Death did not make the streets its home here. But the sticktights did lurk there, and they might up the ante in the game at any minute.

"How come you're grinning?"

"That's no grin, lady. That's what they call a rictus. Of fear. I'm Old Earther. You know how hard it would be for me to walk down a street without at least fifty guys to back me up?"

"I forgot. But there's nothing to worry about here, Gun."

“You know it. I know it here in my head. But down here in my guts there’s a caveman who says we’re both liars.”

“If it’s really that hard . . .”

“No, don’t get upset. I didn’t say I wouldn’t try. I’ve got to get used to it. Hell, I force myself to get out as much as I can. I just wanted to warn you so you won’t think it’s your fault if I get a little jumpy and quiet.”

“You’ll settle down. You’ll see. This is just about the dullest, least dangerous city in The Arm.”

A few hours later, shortly after The Broken Wings’ early night had fallen, Niven snarled, “What did you say back at the hospital? Something about the safest streets in the galaxy?”

The darkness of the alley pressed in. His frightened eyes probed the shadows for movement. The laser-bolt had missed his cheek by a centimeter. He still felt the heat of it. “Even my toenails are shaking, lady.”

Marya fingered her hair. A bolt had crisped it while they were running. Niven’s nostrils twitched as they caught the sharp burnt hair odor.

Marya’s face was pallid in the glow of a distant streetlight. She was shaking too. And apparently too angry to respond.

“You got a jealous boyfriend?”

She shook her head, gasped, “This isn’t Old Earth. People don’t do things like this out here.”

Niven dropped to all fours and crawled to the alley mouth.

Heavy work was not his province, but he had had the basic programs given all field agents. He could make a show if he had to.

He had to do something now. The alley was a cul-de-sac. And the rifleman might be teamed. A deathtrap could be closing.

A bolt scarred brick above his head. He rolled away, growling, “Starscope. Damn!” But he had spotted the triggerman. The bolt had come from atop a warehouse across the street.

“Can’t be much of a shot,” Niven mumbled. “That isn’t fifty meters.”

If he could survive the sprint across the street . . .

There was a startled exclamation from the gunman’s position, then a choked wail of fear and pain. A body plunged off the warehouse roof and thumped into the street.

Niven was across in an instant, shoving himself into the warehouse wall while he studied the corpse.

The weak light revealed the limper from the Marcos lobby. His windpipe had been crushed.

Every man’s signature is unique. And an assassin leaves a grim sort of signature on his victims. Niven knew this one. He peered upward.

Why would Mouse be shadowing him?

Not that he objected. Not right now.

Marya arrived. She averted her eyes. “You must have a guardian angel.”

“One of us does.” He stared at her. Something clicked. It was nothing he could define, just a tweak of uneasiness because she had not asked him why anyone would want to kill him. A civilian would have asked that right away.

He looked for the assassin’s weapon, did not see it. “I’m going to try to get onto that roof.”

“Why? Shouldn’t we get out of here?”

Another click. Civilians started screaming for the police. Outworlds civilians, anyway.

“Yeah, I guess. If he had anybody with him we would have heard from them by now.” But where to go? he wondered. Not the hotel. Not with the number officially on. Not with the war rules proclaimed. And not to a safehouse. He did not yet know what Mouse had arranged. And he could not make the fallbacks to find out with Marya tagging along.

The death threat had alerted the professional in him. Had raised barriers that would wall off the whole universe till he had sorted the friends from enemies and noncombatants.

“We could go to my place,” Marya suggested.

Memories of countless spy and detective dramas battled for Niven’s attention. Was it all a setup? Three misses at fifty meters seemed unlikely for even a clumsy assassin. But he did not want to believe that Marya was involved. She was such a magnetic, animal woman . . .

Believe it or not, only a cretin would have ignored the possibility completely. Survival had become the stake on the board.

He dared not let her know he was suspicious. “All right.” He looked around fearfully, having no trouble projecting shakiness and confusion. “But I’ve got to do a couple of things first.”

Their eyes met. And he knew. He did not want it to be, but it was true. She was the enemy. Right now she was trying to find an excuse to stay close to him that would not arouse his suspicions.

She was not a good actress. Under stress she could not control the body language signals that betrayed her thoughts.

He felt betrayed and hurt, though he had known her just one day.

He had always needed to be wanted. Not for whom or what he was, but just as a human being.

Human. Was she even human? There was no sure way of telling without complicated tests. Geneticists were certain that humanity and the Sangaree shared a prehistoric ancestry.

She might even be the new Sangaree Resident. The last one had been a woman.

“Where do you stay?” he asked.

She chose not to push. She explained how he could get to her apartment.

“You don’t have to do this,” he told her, then cursed silently. By saying that, he had tacitly admitted being the sniper’s target. But sometimes it was necessary to take chances. He could at least feed her

belief in his lack of suspicion. "It might be dangerous."

"That's all right. I've never been involved in anything like this." Feigned excitement illuminated her face. "What have I gotten myself into, Gun?"

It was smoke screen time. "Sweetheart, I don't know. I really don't. This is the second time I've been jumped, but nobody bothered to tell me why last time either. They tried it right in the Marcos before. The day we got here. And we don't even know anybody here. But people have been following me all the time, and . . . If you're an Old Earther, you sense things like that."

"Maybe it's not you. Maybe it's your friend."

"John? I never thought of that. I guess it's possible. I don't really know anything about him. The Corporation sent him. Anyway, whatever's going on, I mean to find out."

He had yielded just enough distorted truth, he hoped, to leave her with doubts. A lot depended on whether or not the opposition had been able to evade Mouse's bug-scans.

"Will you be all right, Marya? Should I walk you home?"

"I'll manage."

"Probably be safer without me, anyway. See you in a while." He glanced at the dead man, then the streets. Not a soul was stirring.

It was odd how people sensed a gathering storm, then stayed inside where they would witness nothing and run no risks. Though this was a warehouse district, there should have been some traffic. Hell. Where were the security patrols? Where were the police cruisers?

He had seen the same thing happen on Old Earth, where the gangs went to their guns at the slightest provocation. Citizens and enforcers always kept a low profile till the stink of gunsmoke left the air.

Mouse was not at the first fallback, nor had he left a message. Niven did find a hastily scribbled message at the second. It told him that Marya was the new Sangaree Resident. And, as if in afterthought, Mouse went on to say that he was on the run from a dozen men who had gotten onto him after the incident at the warehouse.

Niven scratched a reply, explaining where he would be. The drop was large, so he left the notes he had taken at the Med Center.

Those had to be salvaged no matter what. Maybe by Chief Navy Recruiter for The Broken Wings. He was the Bureau Angel City station chief.

Niven began drifting, killing time in order to give Marya a chance to make a move that would illuminate the outfit's current thinking. After an hour he picked up a sticktight.

His shadow was a sleepy-faced thug pretending to be a derelict. A not-too-bright offworlder, Niven decided. Angel City was too young and thoroughly ordered to sustain even a one-man Bowery.

The man did not move in. They were hoping he would lead them to Mouse.

He observed his shadow's tradecraft more out of curiosity than concern. The man was a professional but unaccustomed to this kind of work. He was probably a shooter or runner grabbed simply because he was available. He could be shaken at leisure. Niven shifted him to the back burner of awareness.

He drifted toward Marya's apartment. His nerves settled. He decided what he was going to do.

He did not relax completely. They might catch Mouse. Then his life would be worthless. But while Mouse remained at large, he was sure, they would not harm him.

He shook the sticktight, found a public comm, woke the Angel City station chief, explained where the Med Center information was hidden. He used a word code the other side would need hours to unravel—assuming they were tapping at all.

He reached Marya's apartment as dawn began coloring the dome. The molecularly stacked plastic glimmered redly. As the sunlight changed its angle of incidence, the plastic would alternate between transparency and a progression up an iridescent spectrum.

He was tired but still alert, and exhilarated because he had handled himself well.

Marya responded to his knock instantly. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "I've been worried sick." She peered over his shoulder, along the second floor hallway.

Checking for Mouse? For her backup?

"Somebody started following me around. I didn't know what to do, so I just walked around till he gave up. Or I lost him."

"Gun, I don't understand all this. Why? . . ."

"Honey, I don't know. And I've been thinking hard. All I can figure is maybe one of Ubichi's competitors thinks I'm after something besides that research data . . ." He paused, pretending to have been startled by a thought. "Hey! They never did tell me why they want the data. I just assumed . . . Maybe it's for a project that's stepping on somebody's toes."

Had he been what he claimed, the possibility would have been real. Ubichi maintained its own armed forces. The frontier corporations played rough.

Uncertainty filled Marya's eyes for a moment.

Bureau miscalculated, he thought. He could have convinced her had he looked like a social psychologist. His cover could be checked all the way back to his birth. The Bureau was thorough that way. Especially Beckhart's section.

But Niven looked like an Old Earth heavy. And that was the death of any other credential a man could present.

"Mom? What's going on?" A dark-haired girl of seven or eight stumbled into the room. She ground sleepy eyes with the backs of her fists. She was small for her age, a breastless miniature of her mother.

"Brandy, this is my friend Dr. Niven. I told you about him."

"Oh."

Less than enthusiastic, Niven thought. In fact, her expression said he was a threat to her world.

She was a beautiful child. Straight out of a toy ad.

Niven could not frame a compliment that did not sound inane. "Hi, Brandy. You can call me Gun. It's short for Gundaker."

“Gundaker? What kind of name is that?”

“Old Earth.”

“Oh.” She wrinkled her lip. “Mom called you Doctor. Michael’s sick.”

He turned to Marya. The woman still stood at the door. “My son. Brandy’s younger brother. He’s got some kind of bug. Looks like flu.”

“I’m not that kind of doctor, Brandy. But if there’s anything I can do . . . ”

“Do you know any good stories? Michael don’t like the ones I make up. And Mom’s never here.” She glanced at her mother accusingly.

She was good, Niven thought. Better than Marya. “What kind of stories? Pirates? Olden days? War stories? Richard Hawksblood and Gneaus Julius Storm? Did you know they fought a war right here on The Broken Wings?”

He mentioned it casually, conversationally, fishing for a reaction. The war in the Shadowline, the last great mercenary war, had taken place on Blackworld not long after the encounter on The Broken Wings.

Sangaree interests had taken a beating because of the Shadowline. But one or two Families had begun recouping here before the shock-waves from Blackworld had died.

Getting caught with their hands in there had cost them control of numerous legitimate corporations and the lives of several Family chieftains. The disaster had been so huge and widespread that it had become Sangaree legend.

The girl just shrugged, implying that Blackworld meant nothing to her. “Pirates, probably.” She seemed to lose interest.

She left the room. Cooking sounds followed her departure.

Must not have heard about the Shadowline, Niven thought. What Family did Marya represent? A minor one crowding the First Families because of their loss of face on Blackworld? Surely not one that had been involved there.

“She’s a doll,” he told Marya. “You thought about getting her into modeling?”

“No. She wouldn’t. Sit down. Relax. Ill fix you something to eat. Then I’ll move Michael in here. You can sleep in the kids’ bed.”

Brandy brought coffee. It was real.

He discovered what Marya had meant about Brandy. He had not caught it earlier because she had not looked his way.

The girl’s one eye trained wildly walleyed and appeared blind.

He showed no reaction to her pained, defiant stare. Her sensitivity screamed at him. He supposed the damage was recent.

Niven indulged in tradecraft during the few seconds when Brandy had returned to the kitchen and Marya had not yet returned. He examined his surroundings critically.

The time would come when he would have to report, accurately, where every speck of dust had lain.

The apartment was cramped. That was typical of dome city living quarters. It was sparsely populated by ragged second-hand furniture. That was to be expected of poor folks. And Marya, clearly, was not an obsessive housekeeper. Cobwebs hung in the ceiling corners. Junk cluttered the chairs and floors.

Her sloppiness had nothing to do with poverty or lack of time, only with habit. Sangaree at home had animal servants who picked up after them.

Marya shared her roof with whole tribes of roaches. Dirt streaked the plastic walls. The curtains were frayed and soiled.

It was exactly the sort of place where a busy, impoverished woman would come to rest. She was crafty, this one. She had converted her ethnic liabilities into assets.

But would a poor woman serve real coffee? When coffee had to come all the way from Old or New Earth?

He did not call her on it. He might give something away by revealing that he recognized the real thing when he tasted it. Most Old Earthers would not, because every ounce went into export.

They were fencing now, subtly, with rapiers consisting of little tests.

One of the rules of his profession was never to yield anything concrete.

She was not giving him anything either. Certainly not enough to understand her.

Who could comprehend the Sangaree mind? The Admiral had been trying for decades. He barely got by.

Like Mouse, though, Beckhart did not want to understand. Not really. He wanted to destroy. Comprehension was just a weapon in his arsenal.

They sat in silence for several minutes. He watched Marya over his cup. She considered him. He wondered what strange thoughts might be running through her alien brain.

“I’d better check on Michael, Gun.”

He followed her as far as the bedroom door.

The room was tiny. It contained two dilapidated beds. One for Marya, one for her children.

Marya settled on the edge of the one containing a pale five-year-old. The boy watched Niven warily.

“Michael, this is my friend Dr. Niven. He’s going to stay with us for a while.”

“Hi, Mike.”

“Not Mike.” The child’s voice was weak but angry. “Michael. After my great-grandfather.”

Marya winced.

Michael radiated pride.

Niven controlled his surprise. “Right. Michael it is.”

He had been wrong. Almost fatally wrong. These Sangaree would know the Shadowline well.

There had been but one Sangaree with the human name Michael. Michael Dee. The man who had engineered the war. The man who had been both the pride and despair of his race.

The man who had paid the ultimate price for failing.

“Brandy says you like pirate stories. I knew a pirate once. Only he wasn’t a pirate when I met him. That’s what he is now. I grew up and went to school, and he grew up and became a pirate.”

“I don’t think he’s ready for that right now, Gun.” Marya seemed honestly worried. “I’m going to have to call a doctor, I think.”

Niven was surprised at himself. He was concerned too. “You want me to call a cabcar?” What was he doing? The kid was Sangaree. His purpose in life was to help guide that species to a final solution. Little ones became big ones.

“Oh, no. There’s one from the hospital who lives right upstairs. I don’t know her very well, but . . .”

“Go get her, woman. I’ll manage here.”

She stared. Something within her softened momentarily. The hidden woman, the one behind the one behind the one she was trying to portray, showed through. She kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Gun.” When he pulled her closer, “Later. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He had not been after a kiss. He had attached a tiny chameleon transmitter to the back of her collar.

She closed the apartment door behind her. Niven inserted a receiver into his ear while pretending to scratch.

Smiling wryly, he patted himself where she had touched him. Had she done the same to him?

There was no reason why she should have to go out for a doctor. She would have sufficient medical background herself—if there was any truth to her cover.

He smiled again. Marya was no tactician, either.

“Are you my mom’s new lover?”

He was surprised. Little girls did not ask questions like that.

“No. Not yet.”

“She needs one. Do you think she’s pretty?”

“I think she’s gorgeous.” He was uncomfortable. He did not know how to socialize with children. The only child he knew was Jupp’s boy, Horst-Johann.

“Maybe she should get married again. Are you married?”

Marya had reached a public comm. She was briefing someone. Following her part of a conversation and trying to guess the other half while carrying on another with Brandy proved impossible. He did hear Marya ask for a deep trace on his cover. That meant he had won a round. She had doubts. Or wanted to have them, which came to the same thing.

“No. I never met the right lady.” This was one bold child. Did she know she was not human? Probably. From the little he had heard, Sangaree had no childhood in the human sense. Their children were

shielded from nothing. They were treated as, and expected to behave as, miniature adults.

“Don’t know if I’d like you, though.”

Honest, too, he thought. He went to check on Michael. The boy still watched him with wide, wary eyes.

He was bad sick. Marya would not risk a human doctor otherwise. There were few greater risks the underground Sangaree could take. Physicians could sometimes spot the subtle differences between species.

Marya returned with the doctor before Niven’s conversation with Brandy became impossible.

The doctor, he decided, was “tame.” She worked with a confidence and quickness that betrayed her.

Niven whispered to Marya, “Brandy’s been matchmaking.”

She laughed. “Husband-shopping for me again? She never gives up.”

“I don’t think I passed the exam.”

“Doesn’t matter. I won’t get caught in that trap again.”

“Why’d you bring them out here?” On Old Earth parents usually put their children into public care as soon as they were born. Niven had had an unusual childhood in that he had spent much of it with his mother. He still kept in touch with her, but had lost track of his father years ago.

The shedding of children was a common practice on the tamed outworlds, too. Fewer than a quarter of Confederation’s children were raised by their biological parents.

Marya was shocked. Her Sangaree sense of Family had been outraged. But she could not tell him that. “I forgot. You do things differently where you come from. Yeah, it would be convenient sometimes. But they’re my kids.”

“Don’t try to explain. Just call it one of the differences between the Inner Worlds and the frontier. I’m getting used to them.”

The doctor returned from the bedroom. “I gave him a broad-spectrum antibiotic, Marya. And an antiviral. It’s nothing serious. See that he gets plenty of bed rest and lots of fluids, and keep an eye on his temperature. It’ll go up. Give him some aspirin if it gets too high. Do you need a thermometer?”

Marya nodded. She portrayed embarrassment beautifully.

You did that well, lady, Niven thought. *Too poor to afford a thermometer. But you serve genuine coffee*. He smiled. She was doing a chemo-psychiatric internship, but had to summon an outside doctor . . . Was she driven by some secret death wish?

“Nice to have met you, Doctor Niven,” the doctor told him.

“You too.” He watched her go to the door. There was no pride in the way she walked.

“You want to get some sleep now, Gun?” Marya asked.

“Going to have to.” But would his nerves permit it here in the heart of enemy territory?

They would. After he had skinned down to his underwear, had flopped into Marya’s bed, and had told

Michael, "Good night, Captain," the lights went out.

He wakened once, hazily, when Marya slipped into bed beside him. He mumbled foggily, then knew nothing for hours.

He wakened slowly. Gradually, he realized that The Broken Wings' truncated day had sped by. It was night again. He did not remember where he was till he rolled against the woman.

That simple movement initiated three tempestuous days.

Marya was insatiable. The only word he found to fit her was "hungry." He had never encountered a woman who had such a need for a man.

Niven astounded himself. Their lovemaking became so savage, so narrowly scoped, that it was more like combat. As if, "Let he who first cries 'Hold! Enough!' be damned forever."

They seemed to do nothing but sleep and copulate, making attack after attack in some sort of sexual war. The outside world seemed to have lost all meaning.

Yet there was method. There was rationality. In struggling to please Marya, who was struggling to distract him, Niven kept himself motivated by remembering who she was. He kept trying to convince himself that he was doing this to sabotage the enemy chain of command.

He knew Marya was not motivated entirely by lust either.

Oh, but they did have one hell of a good time on the rumpled sheets of that battlefield.

In the interims Niven sometimes wondered what had become of Mouse. Mouse, he reflected, sure had the free hand he always wanted.

Brandy, recognizing the way of things, had taken her brother out the first night. They were staying upstairs with the doctor. Michael, looking a little better, sometimes wandered in, moped around without saying much, then wandered out again. Brandy stayed away all the time.

"What are we doing?" Niven once muttered to himself. They were enemies to the death. That was the prime rule, the blood rule, by which he and she were supposed to live and die. Yet they were denying it, or sublimating it in the form of love . . .

He began to dread mission's end. Debriefing . . . He would have to answer questions. He would have to explain.

Niven was snoring. He had one arm beneath Marya's neck.

The building shuddered like a dog shaking off water. A window cracked. Tableware clattered onto the kitchen floor. The whole neighborhood reverberated to the explosion.

Niven jerked upright. "D-14," he grunted.

"What?"

"What was that?"

"An explosion."

They dressed, almost racing. Reflections of dancing firelight colored the cracked window. Marya looked out. "Oh, Holy Sant!"

"What?"

"The warehouse . . ."

"Eh?"

"I'll be right back . . . What's that?"

A yell had come from somewhere downstairs. Cries and screams followed it.

Niven knew that first yell. That was Mouse in assassin's mind.

Earlier, he had seen the shape of the needlegun lumping her underwear in a dresser drawer. He beat her to it.

The door crashed inward. A ragged, battered, bloody Mouse hurtled through. He was so keyed for action that he looked three meters tall.

"Easy," Niven said, gesturing with the needlegun. "Everything's under control, Mouse."

Mouse was not hurt. The blood was not his own. "Got everything," he croaked through a dry throat. "Message away. Got to bend the bitch and get out."

That was their business, but . . . Niven could not permit the woman's murder. That she was Sangaree seemed irrelevant. "No. There's no need. Not this time."

Mouse was coming down. Thought was replacing action. He glanced at Niven's weapon, at the woman. "All right. You're the boss, Doc. But I've got to get something out of this. Where're the damned kids?"

"Upstairs. But I won't let you kill children, either."

"Wouldn't think of it, Doc. Wouldn't even drown a puppy. You know old John. So tie her up, will you? Can't have her coming after us." He backed out the door.

Siren howls tortured the streets. The grumble of a gathering crowd slipped tentacles into the room. "Sorry it had to end this way, Marya. But business is business."

"I almost believed . . ." She stared at him. For an instant she looked small and defenseless. He reminded himself that she was Sangaree, that she would become instant death if he were careless. "I suppose you're soothing your conscience. I wouldn't if the tables were turned. You've hurt us too much already."

Not a smart thing to say to somebody pointing a gun at you, Niven thought. He shrugged. "Maybe. It's not conscience, though. A different weakness. You'd probably have to be human to understand." He left it to her to figure out what he meant.

Mouse returned with the children and doctor. In the process he had acquired a weapon. "Tie these three, too, Doc."

The doctor was more frightened than Brandy or Michael. Humans on the fringes of the Business generally imagined operations by and against the organization to be more deadly than they were.

Brandy asked, "What're you doing, Gun?" Straight out, emotionlessly. As if she were used to being under the gun.

"Business, dear."

"Oh." She sped her mother a disgusted look.

"He's the Starduster," Marya told her.

"And you fell for his story?"

Niven tore sheets into strips, tied the doctor, then the girl, then Michael. "Told you I knew a pirate, Captain."

"Good," Mouse said. "Let me have the gun, Doc."

"Eh? Why?"

"Because I need it."

Puzzled, Niven handed the weapon over. Mouse tossed it into the hallway.

Niven shook his head, said, "We'd better get moving. They won't stay disorganized forever."

"One thing first." Mouse shoved his weapon under his arm. He took a hypo from the doctor's bag and filled it from an ampule he carried in his pocket. "This one's for your great-grandfather, kids. And all his brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews."

"What the hell are you doing?" Niven demanded.

"Just business, Doc. Turnabout's fair play, right? We should expand our own markets." He raised Michael's sleeve.

Marya understood instantly. "No! Piao! Not my children. Kill me if you want, but don't . . ."

Mouse answered her with a tight smile. "Just business, lady. Gag her, Doc. Hurry. We got to get the stuff out before Navy pops to we've cut out the instel here."

Niven suddenly understood what Mouse was doing. "Hey! You can't . . ." He wanted to stop it, to protest, to refuse, got confused by the reference to Navy. "Stardust?"

Mouse nodded, smiling wickedly. His hand strayed toward his weapon.

"Oh." How could the man be so cruel? That was murder in the worst possible way.

Marya needed gagging desperately. Her screams could attract attention . . .

Dazed, Niven silenced her. Her flesh seemed icy beneath his fingertips. He felt the rage and hatred boiling inside her. She started shaking.

For an instant he thought she was having a seizure.

Mouse injected the children. That wicked little smile kept playing with his lips. He was blissfully happy in his cruelty.

Why did he hate so much?

“Come on, Doc. They’re on their way down. Can’t you hear them?”

The crowd noise and sirens were yielding to the rumble of assault landing craft descending on penetration runs. The Broken Wings’ atmosphere howled its protest of the violation.

Jupp was on his way.

Someone stuck his head through the doorway. Mouse shot, missed, jumped into the hallway and shot again. “Doc, will you come on?”

“I’m sorry, Marya. Really. It’s the way things had to be.” He snagged the needlegun in passing, skipped a fresh corpse, and pursued Mouse into the emergency stairwell.

Later, as they waited in the crowd watching the invaders pour through the main city locks, Niven asked, “What was that crap about getting off before Navy finds out?”

“We’re supposed to be the Starduster and Piao, remember?”

“But they’ll know when . . .”

“Not yet. Look.” The Marines entering the city wore uniform gear, but it was not Service issue. It was like nothing Niven had ever seen.

Mouse had chosen the waiting place with care. A man loaded with brass headed directly toward them. “Mr. Piao?” He avoided looking at Niven. His attitude seemed one of mixed awe, fear, and loathing. “You have the material for my officers?”

“That I do, Colonel.” Mouse proffered a thick package. “Congratulations. Your men are as efficient as ours.”

The Colonel reddened. His mouth snapped open, but he caught himself. Carefully, he said, “More so, Mr. Piao. As you’ll someday learn.”

“All things are possible to those who believe.”

The Colonel riffled through a stack of copies. Other officers gathered behind him. He started passing them papers.

“Let’s drift, Doc. They can handle it.”

Niven did not miss the wariness in all those Marine eyes. “What was that all about?”

“Oh. They think we’re Piao and the Starduster too. They think we worked a deal with Luna Command so we could knock over the Sangaree and take control of their nets.”

“What’s all the smoke screen for?”

“We’ve got to keep the Starduster story alive, at least till Jupp makes his hit. Otherwise they might evacuate their production facilities. By the way, I wanted to say you did a job digging all that info out. The Old Man is going to love you.”

Niven did not follow it. “It’s too Byzantine for me. Are the Sangaree supposed to find out that they’re Marines? And then figure we didn’t say anything about the production facilities because that would cut off our own supply?”

“Wait till you’re in on one of the Old Man’s complicated ones.”

“Mr. Piao?” a Marine non-comm asked.

“Yes.”

“If you’ll follow me, sir. Your transportation.” Marines surrounded them. A precaution against assassination, Niven supposed. Those bounties still existed.

Sounds of sporadic fighting came from the city. Believing the raiders to be Starduster men, the Sangaree minions would battle hard. The Starduster’s viciousness toward collaborators was legend.

The Marines guided them into an armored personnel carrier. They had it to themselves. It rumbled away toward Angel Port.

“Mouse, I get the feeling the Admiral threw in a few twists just to make it interesting. What happens when the Starduster finds out that we’ve been using his name in vain?”

Mouse was in a bright, expansive mood. He had had a beautiful day. He had carved his initials on the Sangaree soul. He had vandalized their house of crime. “I’ll tell you a secret, Doc. If you promise you won’t ever let the Old Man know you know.” He looked at Niven expectantly.

“All right. I give. What?”

“You really are the Starduster.”

“What?”

“The Starduster. Piao. The Old Man invented the whole thing. The Starduster is whoever he points at and says, ‘You!’”

“Well, shit. Mouse, I really needed that. Here you’ve had me scared to death that the son of a bitch was going to crawl out of the woodwork and cut my throat. I got a year’s vacation coming after debriefing. And, dammit, as soon as it goes through, I’m going to . . .”

“Don’t count on it, Doc. Not when you’re working for the Old Man.”

October 3047. Captain Jupp von Drachau, commanding Special Action Task Force IV, with a heavy siege squadron attached, surprises and commences reduction action against Sangaree manufacturing facilities hidden in the inner asteroid belt surrounding Delta Sheol, a white dwarf in the mini-cluster called the Hell Stars. Destruction is swift, savage, and complete. At the same time Confederation and local police agencies begin closing down the drug networks formerly rooted on The Broken Wings.

Admiral Beckhart has taken every point in a victorious round against his oldest and most favored enemy.