

TERMINAL WORLD

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CHAPTER ONE

The call came in to the Department of Hygiene and Public Works just before five in the afternoon. Something messy down on the ledge, maybe a faller from one of the overhanging buildings up in Fourth, maybe all the way from Circuit City. The dispatcher turned to the wall map, surveyed the pin lights and found a clean-up van close enough to take the call. It was one of the older crews, men he knew. He lifted the black handset of his telephone and spun the dial, taking a drag on his cigarette while the switchboard clunked and whirled.

‘Three oh seven.’

‘Got a smear for you, Cultel. Something out on the ledge, just west of the waterworks. Not much else out there so you should spot it easy enough. Take the service duct on Seventh and Electric and walk the rest of the way. Keys on the blue hook should get you through any municipal locks.’

‘We’re loaded here. And we’re about a minute from coming off shift. Can’t you pull in someone else?’

‘Not at rush hour I can’t. We wait for another van, smear’s going to start attracting a crowd and smelling bad. Seagulls are already taking an interest. Sorry, Cultel, but you’re going to have to suck it up and earn some overtime.’

‘Fine. But I was serious about being loaded. You’d better get another van to meet us, case we have to move some stiffs around.’

‘I’ll see what I can do. Call in when you’ve peeled it off the concrete; we’ll start the paperwork at this end.’

‘Copy,’ Cultel said.

‘And watch your step out there, boys. It’s a long way down, and I don’t want to have to call Steamville and tell them they need to deal with a couple of smears of their own.’

In the clean-up van, Cultel clicked off his handset and hung it back under the dashboard. He turned to his partner, Gerber, who was digging through a paper bag for the last doughnut. ‘You get all that?’

‘Enough.’

‘Another fucking ledge job. They know how much I love ledge jobs.’

‘Like the man said, suck it up and earn some overtime.’ Gerber bit into the doughnut and wiped the grease off his lip. ‘Sounds good to me.’

‘That’s because you’ve got a sweet tooth and expensive girlfriends.’

‘It’s called having a life outside of scraping pancakes off pavement, Cultel. You should try it sometime.’

Cultel, who always did the driving, grunted something derogatory, engaged the flywheel and powered the van back onto the pick-up slot. Traffic was indeed already thickening into rush hour, cars, taxis, buses and trucks moving sluggishly in one direction, almost nose to tail in the other. Being municipal, they could go off-slot when they needed to, but it still required expert knowledge of the streets and traffic flow not to get snarled up. Cultel always reckoned he could make more money driving taxis than a clean-up wagon, but the advantage of ferrying corpses around was that he mostly didn’t need to make conversation. Gerber, who generally had his nose into a bag of doughnuts, didn’t really count.

It took them twenty minutes to make it to Seventh and Electric. The service duct was accessed by a sloping ramp between two buildings, the ramp facing out from Spearpoint, an arched grillwork door at the bottom of it. Cultel disengaged the pick-up shoe and flywheeled down the slope, hoping he’d still have enough spin to get back up it when they had the smear loaded. No sign of the other van yet. He snatched the keyset from the blue tag, grabbed the equipment from behind his seat and left the corrugated-sided van, Gerber carrying a camera and a heavy police-style torch.

When Cultel was new in Hygiene and Works, the cops were always first on the scene at a faller, with the clean-up crew just there to go through the menial business of peel-off and hose-down. But the cops couldn’t keep up lately, and so they were perfectly willing for Hygiene and Works to handle the smears, provided everything was documented and signed off properly. Anything that looked like foul play, the cops could always get involved down the line. Mostly, though, the fallers were just accident victims. Cultel had no reason to expect anything different this time.

They passed through the municipal gate and walked down the concrete-lined service duct, which was dark and dank, with bits of cladding peeling off every few spans. Rainwater run-off seeped through the cracks and formed into a slow-moving stream deep

enough to soak through Cultel's shoes. It smelled a little bit of sewer. Beyond, at the far end of the service duct, was a half-circle of indigo sky. Cultel could already feel the cool evening wind picking up. Back from the ledge, with buildings all around, you didn't feel it much. But it was always colder towards the edges. Quieter, too: it didn't take much to absorb the hum of traffic, the rattle of commuter trains, the moaning of cop car sirens as they wound their way up and down the city's lazy spiral.

Beyond the duct, the concrete flooring gave way to Spearpoint's underlying fabric. No one had ever bothered giving the black stuff a name because it was as ubiquitous as air. The ledge began level and then took on a gradually steepening slope. Cultel watched his footing. The stuff was treacherous, everyone knew that. Felt firm as rock one second, slippery as ice the next.

Gerber waved the torch downslope. 'There's our baby.'

'I see it.'

They edged closer, walking sideways as the angle of slope increased, taking increasingly cautious footsteps. The faller had come down about thirty spans from the very edge. In the evening gloom Cultel made out a head, two arms, two legs, all where they ought to have been. And something crumpled beneath the pale form, like a flimsy, translucent gown. You could never be too sure with fallers but it didn't look as though this one had come down very far. Dismemberment was commonplace: limbs, heads tended to pop off easily, either with the impact or from glancing collisions on the way down, as the faller bumped against the sides of buildings or the rising wall to the next ledge. But this jigsaw came with all the pieces.

Cultel looked up, over his shoulder, and lifted the rim of his hat to get a better view. No buildings or overhangs near enough for the faller to have come off. And even if they'd stepped off the next highest ledge, with the way the winds were working they'd have ended up at the base, back behind the rising tide of buildings. Should have been a lot more damage, too.

'Something's screwed up here,' Cultel said.

'Just starting to feel that way myself.' Gerber raised the camera to his eye singlehandedly and flashed off two exposures. They crept forwards some more, planting each footstep gently, hardly daring to breathe. Gerber directed the torch a bit more steadily. It was then that Cultel knew what they were dealing with.

Crushed beneath the form: that wasn't any gown. It was wings.

'It's—' Gerber started saying.

'Yeah.'

What they had was an angel. Cultel looked up again, higher this time. Not just to the nearest line of buildings, but all the way up. Up past the pastel flicker of Neon Heights, up past the hologram shimmer of Circuit City. Up past the pink plasma aura of the cybertowns. He could just see them circling around up there, leagues overhead, wheeling and gyring around Spearpoint's tapering needle like flies around an insect zapper.

And he thought to himself: *How the fuck did one of them get down here? And why did it have to happen on my watch?*

'Let's bag and tag,' Gerber said. 'Thing's creeping me out already.'

'You ever dealt with one of these?'

'First time. You?'

'Once when I was new on the job. Fell onto the third rail of the Green Line elevated. Fucking thing was toast by the time we pulled it off. Then again three, maybe four years back. That one was a lot more mashed up than this. Not a whole lot you could recognise at first glance.'

Gerber fired off another shot with the camera. In the after-flash Cultel had the weird feeling that the corpse had twitched, shifting almost subliminally from one position to another. He crept up beside the fallen creature and knelt down with his equipment next to him. Overhead the seagulls really were taking an interest, mewling and squabbling in the evening air. Cultel examined the creature, taking in its nearly naked form, the wings the only visibly broken part of it. It had come to rest with its head lolling to one side, looking at him with huge midnight-blue eyes. It could have been alive, except there was nothing happening behind those eyes.

'Damn thing must have been alive almost all the way down,' he said. 'This was a controlled landing, not a crash.'

'What a way to go,' Gerber said. 'You think it was suicide, or did it just, you know, lose its way?'

'Maybe there was a fault with its pack,' Cultel said, fingering the hard, alien alloy of the angel's propulsion harness. 'Hell, who knows? Cover all the angles, then we'll get it zipped up and into the van. Sooner this is off our hands the better.'

They got the angel bagged and tagged, taking care not to worsen the damage to the wings or break any of the creature's stick-thin limbs. Lifting the bag, Cultel could easily manage it on his own. It was like carrying a sack of bones and not much else. They didn't even need to hose down the ground. The angel hadn't shed a drop of whatever passed for blood in its veins.

The other van hadn't arrived when they called back to the dispatcher.

'Sorry, Cultel. Had to send them over to the boundary with Steam – had a report that the zone was shifting around again.'

'Well, you might want to rethink that. We got the smear.' He glanced at Gerber, grinning in the moment. 'You ready for this? It's an angel.'

'No reports of anything falling down from the Levels, three oh seven.'

'This one didn't fall. It must have flown almost all the way. Then died.'

'As they do.' He could hear the practised scepticism in the dispatcher's voice. Didn't much blame him, either. It wouldn't be the first time an angel corpse had been faked up for someone's twisted amusement. Might even be the kind of sick joke someone in Hygiene and Works would play on another clean-up crew, to see how gullible they were.

But Cultel knew this was a real one.

'You want us to squeeze the angel in, we will. Might get a little crumpled in there, but we'll manage. Just so you understand, I'm not taking responsibility for any breakages. I take it you'd like us to ship this thing over to Third?'

'If you think it's the real deal.'

'I'll take the fall if it isn't.'

'Fine; stop by at Third. But remove anything technical. Bag them separately, and we'll box them over to Imports.'

Cultel hung up.

'Why Third? We never deal with Third,' Gerber said.

They secured the angel, closed up the van and flywheeled back up the access ramp. It was another twenty-minute drive to the Third District Morgue, dodging through short cuts and back alleys, winding their way a little further up the spiralling ledge. The building was an ash-grey slab with a flat roof and a frontage of small square windows, lower than any of the office and apartment blocks crowding in around it. They drove to the rear and backed the van up to the dock, where a white-coated receiving clerk was waiting for them.

'Dispatch phoned through,' the clerk said as Cultel unlocked the van's rear doors. 'Said you had something juicy for Quillon.' He scratched a pen against his nose. 'Been a while, you know. I think he was starting to wonder if you'd forgotten about the arrangement.'

'Like we'd forget,' Cultel said, countersigning the delivery form.

'What's this all about?' Gerber asked.

‘Quillon likes to get first dibs on anything freaky,’ the clerk explained. ‘Kind of a hobby of his, I guess.’

Gerber shrugged. ‘Each to their own.’

‘Suits everyone,’ the clerk said. ‘Quillon gets his kicks. The other morgues don’t have to wade through a ton of paperwork – and there’s always a lot of triplicate when one of these things comes in.’ He peered at the bagged form as Cultel and Gerber eased it onto a wheeled stretcher. ‘Mind if I take a look?’

‘Hey, be my guest,’ Cultel said.

The clerk zipped the bag down half a span. Wrinkled his nose at the dead, pale, broken thing inside.

‘They look so beautiful flying around up there, wings all lit up and glowing.’

‘Cut him some slack.’ Cultel zipped the bag tight. ‘He’s not been having the best of days.’

‘You sure it’s a he?’

‘Now that you mention it—’

‘Wheel it through to Quillon if you want,’ the clerk said. ‘Take the freight elevator to the third. He’ll be up there someplace. Gotta wait down here to see in another delivery.’

‘Busy night?’

‘Busy week. They say the boundary’s getting itchy feet again.’

‘What I heard,’ Cultel said. ‘Guess we’d better batten down the hatches and get our watches wound.’

They pushed the wheeled stretcher into the building. It was all green walls, stark white tiles and the chlorine reek of industrial cleaning solution. The lights in the ceiling were turned down almost to brown. Most of the staff had gone home for the day, leaving the morgue to the night shift and the ghosts of former clients. Cultel hated the place, as he hated all morgues. How could anyone work in a building where all they did was cut open bodies? At least being on the clean-up crew got him out into fresh air.

They took the freight elevator to the third floor, heaved open the heavy trelliswork door and rolled the stretcher out into the corridor. Quillon was waiting at the far end, flicking the butt of a cigarette into a wall-mounted ashtray. It had been three or four years but Cultel recognised him straight away. Which wasn’t to say that Quillon hadn’t changed in all that time.

‘When I heard there was a delivery coming in, I was hoping it was the new medicines,’ Quillon said, in his slow, measured, slightly too-deep voice. ‘Cupboards were any barer, we’d have to start turning away dead people.’

‘We brought you a present,’ Cultel said. ‘Be nice.’

‘How’s work?’

‘Ups and downs, Quillon, ups and downs. But while there’s a city and corpses, I guess you and I don’t have to worry about gainful employment.’

Quillon had always been thin, always been gaunt, but now he looked as if he’d just opened his eyes and climbed off one of the dissection tables. A white surgical coat draped off his thin-ridged shoulders as if it was still on the hanger and a white cap covered his hairless skull. He wore glasses, tinted slightly even though the lights in the morgue were hardly on the bright side. Green surgical gloves that still made his fingers look too long and skeletal for comfort. There were deep shadows under his cheekbones and his skin looked colourless and waxy and not quite alive.

No getting away from it, Cultel thought. The guy had picked the ideal place of employment.

‘So what have you got for me?’

‘Got you an angel, my friend. Came down on the ledge.’

Quillon’s reaction was hard to judge behind the glasses. The rest of his face didn’t move much, even when he spoke. ‘All the way down from the Celestial Levels?’

‘What we figured. Funny thing is, though, there’s not much sign that this one was going fast when it hit.’

‘That’s interesting.’ Quillon said this in the uninflected tones of someone who’d be hard pushed to think of anything less interesting. But Cultel wasn’t sure.

‘Had some gadgetry on it, we removed all that. What you’ve got is essentially just a naked corpse with wings.’

‘That’s what we deal with.’

‘You ... um ... cut many of these things open, Quillon?’ Gerber asked.

‘The odd one or two. Can’t say they drop in with great regularity. Have we met?’

‘I don’t think so. What is it about them you like so much?’

‘I wouldn’t say “like” comes into it. It’s just a speciality, that’s all. We’re set up for it here. Got the positive-pressure room, in case anything toxic boils out of them. Got the blast-proof doors. And once you’ve done one, the paperwork’s fairly routine.’

‘Takes the pressure off the other morgues,’ Cultel said.

Quillon flexed his scrawny neck in a nod. ‘Everyone’s a winner.’

There was an awkward moment. The two of them by the trolley, Quillon still standing there with his green-gloved hands at his sides.

‘Well, I guess we’re done here,’ Cultel said. ‘Docket tells you everything you need to know. Usual deal: when you’re through with the bag, send it back to Hygiene and Works. Preferably hosed down.’

‘I’ll see to it.’

‘Well, until next time,’ Cultel said, backing into the still-open freight elevator.

‘Until next time,’ Quillon said, raising a forearm by way of farewell.

‘It’s been great meeting you,’ Gerber said.

Cultel closed the elevator doors. The elevator descended, the motor whining at the head of the shaft.

Quillon stood still at the end of the corridor until the panel over the door told him that the elevator had reached the ground floor. Then he walked slowly up to the stretcher, examined the docket and placed one gloved hand on the black zip-up bag containing the angel.

Then he wheeled it into the examination room, donned a surgical mask, transferred the bag onto the dissection plinth and carefully removed the angel from the bag.

It seemed to Quillon to be beautiful even in death. He had placed the angel on its back, its eyes closed, the ruined wings hanging down on either side so that their tips brushed the tiled floor, the floor’s sloping runnels designed to channel away bodily fluids. Under the hard lights of the dissection plinth, it was as ghost-pale, naked and hairless as a rat foetus.

Not expecting to be disturbed, he took off his glasses.

He pushed a squeaking-wheeled trolley next to the table, pulling aside the green sheet to expose an assortment of medical tools. There were scalpels, forceps, bone-cutting devices, gleaming sterile scoops and spatulas, and an array of glass and stainless-steel receptacles to receive the dissected tissue samples. These tools had once struck him as laughably crude, but now they fell to hand with an easy, reassuring familiarity. A microphone dangled from the ceiling; Quillon tugged it closer to his face and threw a heavy rocker switch in its side. Somewhere beyond the room, tape reels started whirring through recording heads. He cleared his throat and enunciated clearly, to make himself heard through the distorting mask.

‘Doctor Quillon speaking. Continuation of previous record.’ He glanced up at the row of clocks on the far wall. ‘Time is now ... six-fifteen p.m. Beginning autopsy of a corpse, docket number five-eight-three-three-four, recently delivered to the Third District Morgue by the Department of Hygiene and Public Works.’ He paused and cast his eyes over the corpse, the appropriate observations springing to

mind with a minimum of conscious effort. 'Initial indications are that the corpse is an angel, probably an adult male. Angel appears uninjured, save for impact damage to the wings. There are some longitudinal bruises and scars on the limbs, together with marked subepidermal swelling – recent enough to suggest they might be contributory factors in the angel's death – but the limbs appear otherwise uninjured, with no sign of major breaks or dislocations. Indications are that the angel's descent was controlled until the last moment, at which point it fell with enough force to damage the wings but not to inflict any other visible injuries. Reason for the descent is unknown, but the likely cause of death would appear to be massive maladaptive trauma due to sudden exposure to our zone, rather than impact onto the ledge.' He paused again, letting the tape continue recording while he reached for a syringe. He punched the needle into a small rubber-capped bottle – one of the last dozen such bottles in the morgue's inventory – and loaded the tube, taking care not to draw more than was strictly necessary.

'In accordance with protocol,' he continued, 'I am now administering a lethal dose of Morphax-55, to ensure final morbidity.' He tapped the glass until there were no more bubbles, then leaned over to push the needle into the bare skin of the angel's chest.

In the six years that he had been working as a pathologist, Quillon had cut open many hundreds of human bodies – victims of accident, homicide, medical negligence – but only eleven angels. That was still more than most pathologists saw in their careers.

He pressed the tip of the syringe against skin.

'Commencing injection of—' he started.

The angel's left arm whipped over to seize his hand.

'Stop,' it said.

Quillon halted, but it was more out of reflex than a considered response to the angel's actions. He was so startled that he almost dropped the syringe.

'The angel is still alive,' he said into the microphone. 'It has exhibited comprehension, visual awareness and fine motor control. I will now attempt to alleviate the subject's suffering by ...' He hesitated and looked into the dying creature's eyes, which were now fully alert, fully and terrifyingly focused on his own. The angel still had his hand on Quillon's wrist, the syringe hovering dagger-like above the angel's sternum.

'Let me do this,' he said. 'It'll take away the pain.'

'You mean kill me,' the angel said, speaking slowly and with effort, as if barely enough air remained in his lungs to make the sounds.

His eyes were large and blue, characteristically lacking visible structures. His head rolled slightly on the dissection table, as the angel took in his surroundings.

‘You’re going to die anyway,’ Quillon said.

‘Break it to me nicely, why don’t you.’

‘There’s nothing nice to break. You’ve fallen out of the Celestial Levels into Neon Heights. You don’t belong down here and your cells can’t take it. Even if we could get you back home, too much damage has already been done.’

‘You think I don’t know that?’ The angel’s piping, childlike voice was just deep enough to confirm him as male. ‘I’m fully aware of what’s going to happen. But I don’t want your medicine. Not just yet.’ The angel let go of his hand, allowing Quillon to place the syringe back on the trolley. ‘I need to ask you something.’

‘Of course.’

The angel was looking at him, the blue eyes windows into an alien soul. His head was only a little smaller than an adult human’s, but almost entirely hairless, beautiful and unworldly, as if it were made of porcelain and stained glass rather than living matter and machines. ‘You must answer me truthfully.’

‘I will.’

‘Are you Quillon?’

He was silent for a few seconds. He had often wondered how it would happen, when his pursuers finally caught up with him. Strangely, he had never envisaged the encounter taking place in the morgue. He had always assumed that the time would come in some dark alley, a packed commuter train, or even his own apartment as he clicked on the light after returning home. A shadow moving into view, a glint of metal. There would be no reason to ask his adopted name. If they had managed to track him down that efficiently, his real identity would have been beyond question.

The only reason for asking, in other words, would be to taunt him with the sure and certain knowledge that he had failed.

‘Of course,’ he said, with as much dignity and calm as he could muster.

‘That’s good. They said I’d be brought to you.’

The unease had begun deep in his belly and was now climbing slowly up his spine.

‘Who said that?’

‘The people who sent me here, of course. You don’t think any of this happened by accident, do you?’

Quillon thought about killing the angel there and then. He still

had the Morphax-55 to hand, ready to inject. But the angel knew he was capable of doing that and was still talking. His mind raced. Perhaps trying to kill the angel would be the very trigger that caused him to kill Quillon.

He kept his composure. 'Then why did you fall?'

'Because I chose to. This was the quickest – if not the least risky – way.' The angel swallowed hard, his whole body flexing from the table. 'I was under no illusions. I knew this was a suicide mission; that I would not be returning to the Celestial Levels. But still I did it. I fell, and stayed alive long enough to be brought to you. They said when an angel falls into Neon Heights, it almost always gets taken to Quillon to be cut open. Is that true?'

'Most of the time.'

'I can see why that would work for you.'

The tape reels were still running, recording every detail of the conversation. Quillon reached up and clicked off the microphone, for all the good that would do.

'Can you?'

'You were once one of us. Then something happened and . . . now you live here, down amongst the prehumans, with their stinking factories, buzzing cars and dull electric lights.'

'Do I look like an angel?'

'I know what happened to you. You were remade to look prehuman, your wings removed, your body reshaped, your blood cleansed of machines. You were sent to live among the prehumans, to learn their ways, to prove that it could be done. There were others.' The angel drew an exhausted, rasping breath. 'Then something went wrong and now there's just you, and you can't ever go back. You work here because you need to be on guard, in case the Celestial Levels send agents down to find you. Ordinary angels can't reach you, so you know that whatever they send will have to be unusual, or prepared to die very soon after finding you.'

'There's just you and me in this room,' Quillon said slowly. 'Why haven't you killed me yet?'

'Because that's not what I was sent to do.' The angel inhaled again, the breath ragged and wet-sounding. 'I came to warn you. Things are moving in the Levels. You're back on the agenda.'

'What do you mean, things are moving?'

'Signs and portents. Indications of unusual instability in the Mire. Or the Eye of God, if you're religious. You're not religious, are you, Quillon?'

'Not really.'

‘If you were, you’d say God was getting restless again. You’ve probably noticed the pre-shocks down here. Boundary tremors, warnings of zone slippage. There’s something inside Spearpoint that no one really understands, not even the angels, and it’s got a lot of us rattled. The people who sent you down here, the ones you’re hiding from? They want you back.’

‘I’m useless to them now.’

‘Not what they believe, unfortunately. There’s information in your head that they’d very much like to suck out. And if they can’t, they’ll kill you anyway to make sure no one else gets their hands on it.’

‘Who else cares?’

‘The people who sent me. We want that information as well. Difference is we’d rather you stayed alive.’

‘Are the others here?’

‘Yes. They’re like you, to some extent: modified to work down here. But without the expertise you brought to the first infiltration programme, the modifications aren’t as effective. They can’t stay as long and they don’t blend in as well.’ The angel studied him. ‘Inasmuch as you blend in, Quillon.’

‘How near are they?’

‘Chances are they already have you under observation. They may already be covering likely exit points, in case you try to leave Neon Heights.’

‘Then I’ll hide.’

‘You’re already hiding and it hasn’t worked. They’ll have a chemical trace on you by now, sniffing you out by your forensic trail. Running’s your only option. Being here is already pushing them to the limit. They won’t be able to track you if you cross zones.’

‘Leave Neon Heights?’

The angel licked his lips with a fine blue tongue. ‘Spearpoint. All the way down, all the way out. Into the great wide open.’

The thought made Quillon shiver. ‘There’s nothing out there.’

‘There’s enough for survival. If you’ve adapted to life down here, you’ll cope. What matters above all else is that the information in your head never reaches your enemies.’

‘Why do they care now?’

‘The work you were involved with was only ever the tip of a project, a covert programme designed to create an occupying force. An army of angels with sufficient built-in tolerance to take over the rest of Spearpoint.’

‘I know.’

‘Without you, the work stalled. But now the prospect of a zone

shift has heightened the urgency. They want that occupying force, which means they want your knowledge.'

'And what do your people want?'

'The same knowledge, but to use for different purposes. Not to take over the rest of Spearpoint, but to provide for emergency assistance if the worst does happen.'

'Seems to me the safest thing would still be to have me killed.'

'That was . . . considered. I won't lie to you.' The angel gave him a weak, pitying smile. 'But in the end it was agreed that you were too valuable for that. We can't see your knowledge wasted.'

'Then help me get back home.'

'Not an option. Best we can do for you is warn you to get out. After that, you're on your own.' The blue eyes regarded him with deep, penetrating intelligence. 'Can you leave Spearpoint without being followed, Quillon?'

'I don't know.'

'Because if you can't be certain, there's very little point in trying. There's no one you can turn to?'

After a moment Quillon said, 'There is someone.'

'A prehuman?'

'A man who's helped me from time to time.'

'Can he be trusted?'

'He knows what I am. He's never betrayed me.'

'And now?'

'I've no reason to assume otherwise.'

'If this man can help you, then go to him. But only if your trust in him is absolute. If you're not sure of that, you have to get out on your own.'

'How long am I supposed to be away?'

'You'll know when it's safe to return. Soon there's going to be a change in the power balance in the Celestial Levels.'

'I can't just drop everything and leave. I've got a life down here.'

'Our intelligence says you have no one, Quillon. No wife. No family. Hardly any friends. Just your work. You cut open corpses and lately you're starting to look like one. If you want to call that a life, fine by me.'

Quillon stared down at the angel. 'Did you really sacrifice yourself for this?'

'To reach you, Quillon? Yes. I did. Knowing that I would die, and that my death would not be an easy one. But I also knew that if I could reach you, and persuade you to take your own survival seriously, something good might come of it. Something that would

make my own death seem a very small price to pay.'

'I don't even know your name.'

'Do you remember yours?'

'No. They scrubbed that from me when they layered in the new memories.'

'Then we'll part as strangers. It's better that way.'

'I understand,' Quillon said softly.

'I'll take that injection now, if you have no objections.'

Quillon's hand closed around the syringe of Morphax-55. 'If I could do more for you, I would.'

'You don't have to feel bad about this. It was my choice to come here, not yours. Just don't waste this chance.'

'I won't.' Quillon made sure the syringe was still free of air. He touched his other hand to the angel's bare sternum, applying gentle pressure. 'Hold still. This won't hurt.'

He pushed the syringe in and squeezed the plunger.

The angel sighed. His breathing became slower and more relaxed.

'How long?'

'Couple of minutes. Maybe less.'

'Good. Because there's something I forgot to tell you.'