

* * O N E * *

It was panic that killed Martin Yit.

He had very nearly gotten away from them when he bolted into a blind alley rather than along a street.

Jasmine knew every blind alley in the Core. She'd grown up on these streets. She would have died there if she hadn't run into a man who took her in, who let her anger and self-disgust wash over him till it spilled out of her entirely. He'd filled the void with hope and with laughter. That was all gone.

The man who ran from her had shattered her life for the sake of a political struggle Jasmine hadn't known about and didn't care about.

Jasmine and Mane ducked off the lit city sidewalk to follow him. Her eyes stayed on her target. Months of preparation for this day now cleared her mind of any thoughts other than catching the man who had killed her father.

She lifted her feet higher as she ran to avoid stumbling over the debris littering the narrow trench between buildings. Their shadows were long black fingers reaching in front of Jasmine and Mane in the near darkness. Mane, with his long legs, drew ahead of her. He was close enough to fire his tripline. As Yit went down, his legs in a tangle of thin cable, Mane stopped and stood aside to let Jasmine pass by. Yit rose to his feet again in seconds and worked to free himself. He started to run.

It had taken too long to identify him—too long to get this close to him. Jasmine sprinted after him and when she was close enough, leapt onto him, flattening him to the ground. She let go just enough to let him turn to face her. Yit stopped struggling when he felt the spiker at his throat. He moved his hands slowly to a position behind his head and tried to appear as harmless as he could. He didn't recognize her in her Core Rat clothes.

“If you want money . . .” he gasped.

Jasmine grimly whispered, “No.”

His face showed confusion as, still straddling him, she moved the spiker to a spot just below his sternum and angled it up. She paused for a moment to catch her breath, then Jasmine spoke the words she'd so carefully chosen.

“Martin Yit, the courts have held you and found you blameless. I judge you now and I won't be bought. For the murder of Owen Lamberin, I, Jasmine Melanie Rochelle, find you guilty.”

Yit's recognition turned to panic. Jasmine's thumb found the firing button and before he could squirm out from under her, the spiker jolted in her hands. Ten centimeters of sharpened metal cut through his heart. Jasmine stood and took a stumbling step back because he wasn't dead—he was staring at her. Had she missed? She'd practiced with the spiker until her arms were numb. A spike in the heart was supposed to—

“He'll be gone in a minute,” Mane's quiet voice rumbled as she turned away.

Jasmine shook out her arms and looked at her gloved hands, realizing she'd probably left her mark on him. Hair, a few flakes of dandruff, spit from her little speech. It would be enough. She hadn't thought this through—evidence remained.

When she looked back, Mane splashed Yit with an acrid-smelling fluid and put his hand out for the spiker handle. She gave it to him. Mane placed it on the dead man's chest and set flame to him. Jasmine turned

away once more. Yellow light flickered on the walls. The fire wouldn't destroy the body but it would destroy any trace of her.

Mane took her by the arm and led her out of the alley. They walked for several blocks down the night street. Jasmine hadn't thought beyond the death of Martin Yit. The outrage and hatred had nothing to focus on now and time spread out before her like an open pit, Jasmine standing frozen on the edge. She finally gave in to the dizziness and made for the alcove of a storefront doorway to sit on the step. She put her head on her knees, hugged her legs, and deep breaths became sobs without tears. She struggled to control her emotions.

"Hey." Mane crouched in front of her.

Jasmine looked up into his eyes for a moment. She spoke through the constriction in her throat. "The bastard deserved it. Why am I fractured over this?"

"Don't know, Doll." Mane stood and surveyed the street. He leaned against the edge of the storefront window and just waited. Jasmine had an urge to run and catch the next rail out of the city but that wasn't the plan. She couldn't afford to be seen as avoiding the investigation that would follow. She had to stick to the plan. Jasmine looked up at him.

"I thought you were only in this for the hunt, not the kill," she said, accusing him, she didn't know of what.

He shrugged without looking at her.

"I appreciate the help," she added and stood, "but I'm not paying you extra for it."

Mane's burst of laughter caught her by surprise because it was the first time she'd made him laugh and he sounded like he really meant it.

"Back to the den?" he asked as she stepped beside him. "No, need to be around people," he said when she didn't answer. "Let's go to the virtual dome. This time of night there's so many people there you can't move but go with the crowd." His eyes twinkled but she just stared at him. "Not

that many people. We could use a drink,” he said for her. “Say no more, come with me.”

After walking a few more blocks, Jasmine followed him into a small bar. It had a long counter, eight battered tables and lots of dark corners. It was the kind of place where people came in the door looking for trade as much as for drink.

Half a dozen people sat at tables and leaned against the bar and, as Jasmine and Mane walked in, everyone’s attention focused on Mane, the tall young man with the flowing hair. No one noticed the small dark-haired woman behind him. Jasmine enjoyed the anonymity. Mane left her at the table and went to get drinks. She pretended to look around but let her mind wander.

It took a physical effort to stay in her chair. Shouldn’t they be running? That had always been the best part when she really had been a Core Rat. The running was a physical release after hours of planning and doing the actual job, whether it was stealing, running street scams, or dealing in illegals.

The clunk of glasses startled her and she glanced up. Mane took a seat beside her by lifting a leg over the back of the chair. Jasmine just looked at her glass. Mane held his up.

“To Owen Lamberin?” he suggested.

“To Owen Lamberin,” she agreed and raised her glass. They each took a sip.

“What now, boss?” he asked.

“Now we get drunk.”

“Hmm,” he grunted and gave her a sidelong glance.

He was right. Jasmine never got drunk. She shrugged. Mane glanced at her once more, got no response, and sat back in his chair, turning it a bit to get a better view of the room.

Jasmine let the beer linger, savoring it before she swallowed. Little by little she let herself remember the chase. When she remembered the recognition in Yit’s eyes she waited for a sense of satisfaction.

Nothing.

It would come. Once the adrenalin was gone there would be peace and her life would be the way . . . no. How could it ever be the way it was? Then she felt a dread so fierce she drained her glass to bring herself back to the table she sat at, to Mane who sat beside her. She tried to concentrate on what Mane was saying. The best she could do was to stop thinking altogether while he chatted to her about things she didn't hear until she could at last focus her thoughts on him; on that friendly face framed by a thick mass of red-gold hair.

The more time she spent with him, the more he baffled her. When Jasmine had decided to go back to the streets to find her father's killer, she'd been away for eight years. She knew she needed help. She spent most of what her father had left her on bribes and to hire Mane. He was a mercenary who pretended, very well, to be an investigator. Yet she couldn't help liking him. He was charming, supportive, and extremely competent at dealing with Core street games. She felt safe with him.

"Mane?"

"Mmm?"

"Why'd you help with the . . . at the end?"

He looked at her, then, seemed offended. "Think you're the only person on the planet who thinks what that guy did deserves punishment?" He turned back to his perusal of the room. "Besides, somebody had to bring the lighter."

"Thanks."

He shrugged. After a moment he turned to her. "What are you going to do now?"

She stared at him. A hired investigator wasn't supposed to care about his clients after the job. "Dunno." She looked at her glass and felt like she was falling. There was nothing to catch her. Owen Lamberin was gone—her adopted brother hated her for going back to the Core. If she told her school friends what she'd been doing while she'd walked out on her

classes. . . . She had nothing left. Martin Yit had left her with nothing and she could only kill him once.

“Kay?” Mane asked.

“No. Are you?” she snapped.

He shrugged and let his gaze wander to the door. Mane took a sip from his glass, his eyes following a woman who’d just walked in. She sauntered to the counter, ordered a drink and looked around. Her eyes rested on Mane and he smiled at her.

“There’s Manda. Be right back,” he said, rising and taking his drink with him.

Of course he knew every street trader in the Core. Jasmine knew from experience it made sense to know all the players. As she expected, Mane had the woman laughing in six seconds. Jasmine had taken to timing him. His height and big build scared most people, until he opened his mouth. He could get people laughing more quickly than anyone she knew. She’d miss him.

Jasmine saw him hook his thumb in her direction. Manda glanced at her and shook her head. They continued their conversation and Jasmine tried not to stare at Manda. She was a patch job; patching or popping too many of the chemicals she traded. That was one trap of Core life Jasmine had never fallen into. No matter how self-destructive she got, she never liked the loss of emotional control that came with patching.

It seemed Mane had finally convinced Manda to join them. Jasmine gave her a bow of the head as Manda took up a position opposite her. Jasmine could tell she was being purposely kept in Manda’s direct line of sight. A lot of Core Rats loved the paranoia—went with the image.

Mane’s voice grew low and quiet. “Manda’s got some Green. Thought we might like to sow it.”

“What have you got?” Jasmine asked, stalling while she tried to think what the benefits might be from peddling illegal natural drugs.

“All the most potent recs.” Manda sniffed deeply and took a swallow from her glass. “Then there’s this Green called veejix—a spec buy. As a

euphoric it's power of zero but the guy told me it was endangered and would grow me rich beyond—”

“You mean VJX?” Jasmine asked. She'd heard Adrien talk about it with regret that it was illegal Green, but it sounded like he had a use for it. Eventually, she'd have to tell him she'd gone after their father's killer. She could use a peace offering.

“Know what it is?” Manda asked.

“A mild euphoric but mostly they use it for some kind of medical research.”

“Aw, frass, did I go extinction on that one. Medical shit. That's all I need.”

“How much you got?”

Manda squinted with concentration. “Point three k, far as I remember.” Her expression brightened. “Want it?”

“How much?”

“Six hundred dollars.”

Jasmine prepared to haggle the price down when Mane said, “She'll take it,” and looked at Jasmine as if he'd done her a favor. She had to admit she had no idea what it was really worth and for some reason she trusted Mane.

Manda turned her attention to Mane. “H'bout you? Need anything?”

“No thanks.”

“Got some—”

His raised hands stopped her. Manda shrugged, then a potential customer caught her eye. “Crown the trade tomorrow at twenty.” She rose and left without another word.

“Why'd you make it so easy for her?” Jasmine whispered.

“Know what she paid for it. She's giving it to you at cost.”

“Oh.” She didn't know what else to say. The world was tossing her wherever it wanted. “I assume she's got a trading spot?”

“Yeah, I'll take you out there.”