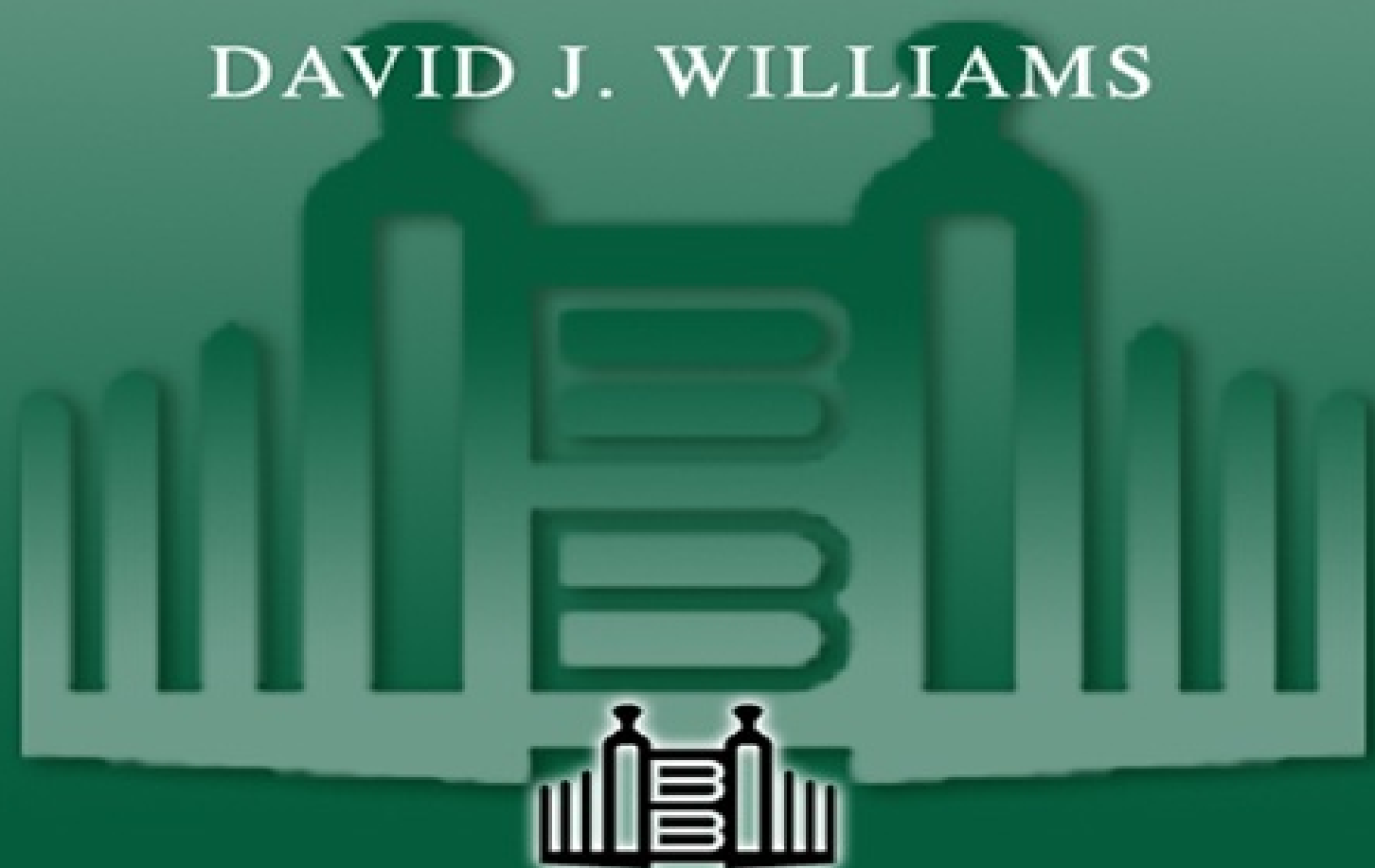


THE MIRRORED HEAVENS

DAVID J. WILLIAMS



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE
**MIRRORED
HEAVENS**



**DAVID J.
WILLIAMS**

BANTAM SPECTRA

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Text of the Treaty of Zurich](#)

[A.D. 211](#)

[Part I: Immersion](#)

[Part II: Incursion](#)

[Part III: Inversion](#)

[Part IV: Conflagration and Raids](#)

[Appendix: Timeline of World History, A.D. 2035–2115](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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To those who believed

TEXT OF THE TREATY OF ZURICH

The United States of America and the nations that comprise the Eurasian Coalition, hereinafter referred to as the two contracting powers,

Proceeding from the premise that war between them would have devastating consequences for all mankind, Asserting that a bold posture of political and environmental cooperation is critical at this juncture in history, Believing that the exploration and use of outer space should be leveraged exclusively for those activities most likely to further the welfare of humanity,

Declaring their intention to achieve at the earliest possible date the cessation of the corrosive arms race that drains resources vitally needed elsewhere,

Have agreed as follows:

Article I:

The two contracting powers obligate themselves to refrain from every act of force, every aggressive action, and every attack against one another.

Article II:

The two contracting powers undertake to establish a Joint Environmental Commission, based in Zurich, whose members shall be charged with proposing worldwide environmental standards for industrial operations; the two contracting powers shall then act jointly to secure the ratification of these standards by all nations.

Article III:

The Joint Environmental Commission will operate in coordination with a Joint Space Commission based in Zurich, whose members shall be charged with crafting plans to transfer as much industry as feasible to points in orbit and on celestial bodies.

Article IV:

The two contracting powers recognize each other's sovereignty over their respective nets/information architectures and commit to keeping each other informed regarding communication protocols between

them.

Article V:

The two contracting powers recognize each other's right to equatorial launch facilities. In this regard, the Eurasian Coalition will continue to maintain the exclusive right to make treaties with nations within the continent of Africa, while the United States will continue to maintain the exclusive right to make treaties with nations within the continent of South America.

Article VI:

The two contracting powers recognize each other's territorial sovereignty over those segments of the geosynchronous orbits above their areas of terrestrial interest. Such sovereignty will include segments of additional adjacent orbits, as determined by the Joint Space Commission.

Article VII:

The two contracting powers confirm the Eurasian Coalition's territorial sovereignty over Lagrangian point L4 and confirm the United States' territorial sovereignty over Lagrangian points L2 and L5. In addition, Lagrangian points L1 and L3 are recognized as neutral, demilitarized sites.

Article VIII:

The United States renounces any exclusive claim to the Moon. The Eurasian Coalition will exercise sovereignty over territory amounting to no less than 25 percent of the Moon's surface and no less than 25 percent of the Moon's resources. Furthermore, both powers commit to a joint control of the Mare Imbrium north of Archimedes Crater. This shall occur within six months of the signing of this treaty.

Article IX:

The two parties to this treaty will establish a Joint Arms Control Commission, based in Zurich, whose members shall be charged with proposing reductions in both strategic and tactical weaponry, subject to ultimate ratification by the governments of the two contracting powers. Such reductions will be made according to the following general principles:

- Withdrawal of all nuclear munitions from outer space
- Demilitarization of the Arctic Ocean
- De-targeting of space-to-ground weaponry

- De-targeting of ground-to-space weaponry
-
- Registration of all major military bases
 - Registration of all submarine sorties from base
 - Limitations in total number of hypersonic missile engines
 - Limitations in nuclear megatonnage

Article X:

Effective within two months of the signing of this treaty, the two contracting powers undertake to cease the testing of all classes of directed energy weapons.

Article XI:

Upon amendment/ratification, the measures proposed by the Joint Arms Control Commission will be verified by agreed-upon satellite overflight and physical inspections of bases.

Article XII:

In the event of a conflict between the two contracting powers concerning any question, the two parties will adjust this difference or conflict exclusively by friendly exchange of opinion or, if necessary, by an arbitration commission based in either Zurich or Geneva.

Article XIII:

The present treaty will extend for a period of ten years, with the understanding that if neither of the contracting parties announces its abrogation within one year of expiration of this period, it will continue in force automatically for another period of five years.

Article XIV:

The present treaty shall be ratified within the shortest possible time. The exchange of ratification documents is to take place in Zurich. The treaty becomes effective immediately upon signature.

Drawn up in three languages, English, Russian, and Chinese, January 1, 2105.

Signed for the United States:

Alec Morgan, Secretary of State

Cosigned for the Eurasian Coalition by the Slavic Bloc:


V. I. Brusilov, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Cosigned for the Eurasian Coalition by the Republic of China:

Chen Xuesen, People's Minister of State

PART I
IMMERSION



 It's time," says a voice.

Thirty clicks above Earth's surface. Thirty minutes after takeoff. A small room within a large jetcraft: Jason Marlowe opens his eyes.

He looks around. No one there.

"Prep for drop," says the voice.

He sits up. Gets up. Goes to the washbasin. Lets water dash itself against metal and skin. He runs his hands along his face. He wonders if something has changed.

"Stop it," says the voice. "Move it."

He turns away. He starts to pull things onto his body: vest, pants, belt. Light boots. Redundant biomonitors around his arms. A knife strapped below his left knee. A pistol below his right. Everything else he's going to be wearing is contained in the hardware standing in this room's corner.

"Suit up," says the voice.

The armor's the standard heavy model. Too standard. It's not even his. Marlowe climbs within, wondering as he does who else has worn it. He wishes they'd shipped his own suit as quickly as they did him.


"Power up," says the voice.

Vibration churns through him as the suit seals. Lights come to life around his face. He turns, feeling

pneumatic joints dig into him. He stops to adjust them. He calibrates the suit's cameras to ensure 360-degree vision—sets the range-finders, lets numbers chase themselves across the displays, interfaces with the ones within his head. He walks to the door, slides it open, walks down a corridor. He goes through into another room.

“Load up,” says the voice.

But Marlowe doesn't need to listen to know what to do with the ammunition racked upon the walls. Or the fuel pipes that emerge from the ceiling to slot into his armor's tanks. He watches his screens as those tanks fill. He wonders who he's going to demolish this time. They told him while he was asleep. Told him he'll remember when the time comes. It's the same thing every time. He opens one more door. He looks down the corridor beyond, feels the adrenaline hit him in one pure wave.

 Another ship, far higher: the Operative's rising into space for the very first time. He can't believe he's never been up here before. Nor can he believe how several hundred tons of metal clank as the winds of atmosphere hit on the ascent. For one crazy moment he thinks it's all over. That all his missions on Earth have led up to this one blaze of glory—one blast of flame to crash back into the Atlantic.

But the only thing that's falling is the burnt-out first stage. The massive engines plunge to ten thousand meters—and then switch on their own engines, turn west, hurtle back to base, and reappear while high above the Operative turns dials, prowls frequencies, listens as the pilots call out telemetry readings, watches as blue of sky becomes black of space. Ocean rolls into the window as the craft rolls onto its orbit. The last remnants of day slide over western Atlantic. Eastern Atlantic is swathed in early evening.

And Africa's given over to pure night. But the maps on the screens within the Operative's eyes show him all that matters anyway. He gazes at the Eurasian fortresses strewn across Sahara—watches them across the minutes as their own launch routines crank and the Moon casts shadows on the sand and the immensity of desert at last gives way to Nile. And what's left of the Middle East. The Operative was thirty-eight when it got flash-broiled. He's fifty now. He's starting to wonder how long he's got before he drops below peak condition. How long the enhancers that course through his body can fight off encroaching age. Surgery after surgery. Drug after drug. Training that's ever more intense. And the mission: to infiltrate his own side's off-world forces and terminate irregularities with no little prejudice.

A summons he wishes had come a decade ago. The Operative has fought Jaguar insurgents in Central America. He's iced his own side's defectors as they tried to run the border. He's battled the East's agents in the neutral territories: Europe. Australia. South Africa. Argentina. He's taken out targets all over the world.

But never in space. He doesn't know why. Maybe up until now his handlers optimized him for

gravity. Maybe their orbital brethren are territorial. No reason they shouldn't be. Every outfit divided against itself. Bureaucracy builds in the back office while agents work the field solo or in teams. The other member of this particular team is holed up in one of the lunar bases. The Operative is supposed to meet him there.

But first he's got to do one orbit. So that the craft can line up the angles for the translunar burn. The Operative pictures what's left of that craft: the engines, the cargo-modules, the cockpit. He's just a part of that cockpit, in a room where passengers sit. He's the only one that fits that description. He got slotted on here special. He takes in the roof of the world below him. Moonlight glints across receding snowcaps. Memory gleams within the Operative's head. India's on his mind. A nation caught between the Eurasians and the rising oceans, its power crushed and its coastlines swamped. Everybody who could get the hell out.

And the Operative was down there once, caught up in that crunch. Tracking down a scientist on the run from Mumbai who was trying to sell her expertise in the Kuala-Lumpur markets—until the Operative caught up with her, persuaded her to give it up for free. Now she's doing life in a laboratory in New Mexico. A comfortable life, to be sure. Far more so than the Operative's own.

Which right now consists of sitting in a metal room and watching dawn creep across the Pacific toward China's endless cities. Looking at that ocean reminds him of the trance he woke from just before the launch. Those swirls of sea are far more real than the swirling in his head. He remembers the way his handlers prowled his dreams—remembers the bit about SpaceCom and the bit about Lynn and the rendezvous somewhere on the nearside. And that's about it.

Save for one other memory of the time before he boarded. A memory of the launch complete spreading out beneath him as the elevator trundled up sixty stories of rocket. He could see all the way to jungle. He could hear the tanks pressurizing for main-engine start. But that was an hour ago. Ignition's long past. That rocket's gone.

All that's left is spaceship.

...

☉ Claire Haskell's coming awake. It doesn't come easy. Her head hurts. The seat in which she sits is shaking. She's in motion. She opens her eyes.


To find herself in the rear of what looks to be a jet-copter. A low ceiling curves above her. The straps of her seat curl over her. The cockpit door is plainly visible from where she sits. It's shut. She feels the same way. She feels there are things she can't recall. It's always like this when she wakes from trance: before awareness folds in, lays bare the residue of dreams. Ostensibly, those dreams look the same as any others. But they give themselves away with telltale signs she knows too well—the green of the old man's eyes, the soft tone of his voice, the particular ambience of a room. It seems there was a room. It seems she was there, out upon some sea. But that chamber had no windows. The

one in which she sits now does. Each one is covered with a plastic shade. She reaches over to the nearest.

But now the dreams surge in upon her. They remind her who she is. They remind her who's been in her mind again. Those dreams: there was a time when she regarded them as her succor. There was a time when she grew to hate them worse than death. But lately it's been both thrill and revulsion simultaneously—and with such intensity that she's no longer sure she can even tell the difference. And what does it matter? *All primary briefings of agents take place under the trance, get remembered by those agents only in retrospect.* It doesn't matter how she feels about that. Emotions are incidental. Facts aren't—her charge, however difficult, her lot in life for now, is to tend these thoughts that aren't hers, to shelter them and incubate them, and then do whatever they may ask.

And now she's waiting for that moment. But her hands aren't waiting. They grasp the shade. Her fingers fumble with the clasp. She rips aside plastic to reveal window. She blinks. She stares.

And draws back as she realizes what she's looking at.


 Marlowe's got two minutes. Lighted arrows show him the way, but he no longer sees them. Disembodied voices goad him on, but he no longer hears them. All he hears is the soundless noise that's building up within him—the silent siren that accompanies the moments that play out before the run...out of that formless dark in which the word goes down, out into the events in which he writes that word across flesh. He races down another corridor. It's getting narrower. Up ahead, a door slides aside. He runs through the opening and down a ramp.

He's in the underbelly. The ceiling's lower here. Technicians step in from left and right. They check his suit's seals. They check the thrusters on his back and wrists and ankles. They make some adjustments to the minigun that's perched on his right shoulder. They wave him onward. Marlowe moves past more ladders, closes in upon one ladder in particular. Blank screens are everywhere. He feels the stare of invisible eyes upon him. He's going straight for the door at his feet. It seems to lead directly into a crawl space—a tiny alcove that he might have missed had the arrows not led him straight here. But it's not an alcove. It's not a crawl space.

It's his ride to ground.

“Get in,” says the voice.

But Marlowe's paying no attention. He climbs in, activates magnetic clamps. The door folds in over him, encloses him in darkness. But only for a moment—and then screens snap on inside his skull. His armor's software syncs with that of the craft. Coordinates click into place. System specs parade past him. A vibration passes through him. The locks that hold his craft in place retract. He starts plunging toward the city stretching out below him.



One orbit almost done, and now the Andes rise toward the Operative's ship. They don't get very far. A few more minutes and those peaks are crumpling back into what's left of jungle. The remnants of that green are cut through with great brown and black streaks. Amazonia's seen better days. From up here, the cities are shrouded in smog so thick they look like little more than massive craters. If a meteor plunged into them, it'd be hard to tell the difference.

"And this is on a *good* day."

The voice is coming from the speakers. It's one of the pilots. But it may as well be a million clicks off. The Operative feels it slowly impinge upon his consciousness. He feels so high he feels he will never anything else. He waits for all eternity.

And then he speaks.

"And when it's bad?"

"All you'll see is junkyard."

"Price we pay for cheap launch real estate."

"The only people down there doing any paying are the Latins," says the pilot. "For shortcutting the way into the modern era."

"That's one way to look at it."

"It's hard to understand anything down there without understanding that."

"Didn't realize you flyboys studied history."

"Nothing we don't study," the pilot says languidly. "Nothing but ways of killing time."

"So come on back here and let's have a chat."

A spluttering emerges from the speakers. The Operative assumes it's a laugh. "I don't think so."

"Why not."

"No fraternization with the cargo. Cockpit door remains shut."

"Says who."

"Says the ones who told us to add you to that cargo. As you well know."

"So why are you speaking with me?"

"Because this isn't a social call. I'm just letting you know we've got clearance for the burn to the Moon. As soon as we hit Atlantic, we're in the window. Which will take us within a hundred clicks of the

Elevator.”

“No shit?”

“None at all.”

“Visible from this window?”

“Eventually. But visible on the screens right now.”

“Put it through.”

But the thing is, there's no vantage that's advantaged to frame the foremost wonder of the age. There's no such thing as the whole thing. The joint construction of the superpowers: the Elevator is four thousand clicks long. It circles Earth twelve times each day. It stretches from the lower orbits all the way toward the mediums. Any view that takes in the entirety is too removed to register the thickness. Any view that catches that thickness can't hope to catch the length. So now something that looks like a luminescent tendril cuts in on the screen. It rises from the horizon. It vanishes into the heavens.

“So that's it,” says the Operative.

“Come on, man. You must have seen it before.”

“Only on the vid.”

“How's this any different?”

“Because now I'm up here with it. Where do we hit closest proximity?”


“Where Amazon hits Atlantic,” replies the pilot.

“Belem-Macapa? That's almost where we launched from.”

“Yeah. That window'll give you a great view of the whole town.”


“What's it like?”

“I'll give you one guess.”


 It's like being underwater. The architecture of Belem-Macapa's visible only indistinctly buildings towering out of the smog, towering back into it. Stacks of lights shimmer through the haze. There's no way to see the ground. There's no way to see the sky. Haskell cycles through the optical enhancements she has at her disposal. All they show her are the other vehicles in her convoy—several other 'copters in the air about her, several crawlers roaring at speed along the skyways and ramps th

twist among the buildings. And those are just the ones in sight. A quick glance at her screens reveals the real extent of it: at least forty vehicles in the immediate vicinity, several flanking formations on to either side, and—two clicks up—ships roaming through this city’s upper reaches, ready to swoop down at the first sign of any trouble. She wonders if it’s all for her. She’s tempted to feel flattered. It’s the closest she’s come to feeling anything all day.

But that’s starting to change. She shouldn’t be this close to the action. Not physically, at any rate. She’s a razor. She’s supposed to sit back and work the wires from afar. She’s not supposed to be thrust into a live war zone. As if on cue, more things surface within her. More pieces of her purpose. She marvels at the spaces they fill—marvels, too, at all the gaps they still leave. What they reveal has the feel of a plan laid hastily. It has the feel of the same old story: get them before they get us—and turn out that she was the right woman for the moment. She’s sick of it. She can’t get enough of it. Her pulse is quickening. So is her mind. The city streams past. Her destination looms on the screens ahead.

 **S**tealth pod tumbling from the heights: and within that pod is Marlowe, watching the sun sinking to the west, watching all the readouts, watching as he drops toward Belem-Macapa’s sprawl. It’s like the swamp to end all swamps: swarms of roving jet-copters are the insects, while the city’s highest spires reach out of the murk like reeds. The levels below that waver in the gloom. The levels below that are invisible.

Even to Jason Marlowe. He has the sensors, sure. But he’s not using them. He doesn’t dare. All he’s using are the maps he’s been given. He’s got the city’s simulacrum burned into his brain. He sees the way the city looks beneath its veil. He sees what his pod’s descending into—feels the pod jettisoning, feels his suit’s glidewing buffeted by turbulence even as visibility drops toward nil. What’s left of the sun dissolves. Marlowe turns his attention to the buildings in his mind, drifts in among them.

 **T**he Amazon twists and turns, closing on the ocean. The Operative gazes down at the city that’s sliding into view, watches as it swallows the river in smog.

“The epicenter of the latest flare-up,” says the pilot. “That’s not just environmental meltdown. It’s scorched-earth warfare.”

“Come again?”

“They’re burning their own buildings to blind our satellites.”

“Ah,” says the Operative.

“The latest round started up ten days ago,” says the pilot. “It now extends through half this city’s districts. They say the Jaguars view it as a test of strength. They say that if they can force us

withdraw, they'll show the world who really rules this continent.”

“They wish,” says the Operative.

“You’re saying we have all the answers?”

“Nobody has all the answers, flyboy. All I’m saying is that all they’re doing is killing their own people.”

“Not to mention our soldiers.”

“Who are a hell of a lot cheaper than our machines.”

“You sure?”

“Look,” says the Operative. “Hate to break it to you, but everything you see down there *collateral*. If the Jaguars torched the whole thing, they’d be doing us a favor.”

“And the economy of South America—”

“Would collapse? Already has. Doesn’t matter. Only thing that means anything is our control of the equator. Don’t you get it, man? The profit margins that gives us in vacuum turn those cities into writ off.”

“Maybe it once did,” says the pilot. He sounds testy. “Maybe. But not now. You can’t write off whole war.”

“Jesus Christ,” the Operative mutters. “I thought you said you’d read history? I thought you thought you knew something about the way this world works? What you’re looking at isn’t a *war*. It’s just fucking *domestic disturbance*. And all we’re laying down is just a little police action. Isn’t space supposed to give you some perspective?”

“You wouldn’t believe what space has shown me,” the pilot hisses. “But that doesn’t mean that I’m going to see things your way. If what you say is true, why don’t we just withdraw from all those cities down there. Abandon them. Seal them off.”

“You probably would if you were in charge,” says the Operative. “Problem with you flyboys is that you’ve got no sense of the subtle touch. You can’t seal off a tumor. Can’t withdraw from cancer. If we left the cities to the Jaguars, they’d mobilize all urban resources against us. They’d be fanning out through the jungles and the sewers. They’d be assaulting our launch bases in nothing flat.”

“If that’s true, then why don’t we just nuke them?”

“We may yet.”

“But why haven’t we yet?”

“Because no one’s used a nuke since Tel Aviv and Riyadh.”

“So?”

“So this is the era of *détente*. The second cold war ain’t that far in the rearview. The last thing anybody needs is for one of the superpowers to start frying populations wholesale. How do you think the East’s analysts are going to rate the situation’s stability if we start charbroiling the Latins?”

The pilot doesn’t reply.

“Exactly,” says the Operative. “And while you’re at it: don’t forget the East has a similar problem in Africa.”

“Lagos and Kinshasa.”

“And about twenty other cities.”

“Didn’t they once contribute to our Latin problem?”

“By supporting the insurgents? They may still.”

“No kidding?”

“And we may still be returning the favor.”

“You’re joking.”

“You’re naïve,” says the Operative. “Don’t you know what *détente* means?”

“I’ve heard many definitions.”

“So let me give you the one that counts.”


“Namely?”

“Same game. New phase.”

“That’s all?”

“Believe me: that’s enough.”

• • •

 They’ve reached the perimeter. Haskell watches as her ’copter sweeps past skyscrapers that have been transformed into mammoth firing platforms: whole sections of walls, whole stacks of floors removed to allow scores of gun-emplacements to be situated within those scooped-out innards. Giant metal nets drape here and there, connecting other buildings. The whole area looks like the domain

some monstrous spider. The 'copter starts to weave in among those nets. It's a complicated route. Haskell counts at least three distinct lines of defense, each one containing untold fields of fire.

Though she knows full well the real point of this place isn't defense. It's the reverse. It's the way modern urban warfare gets waged. Establish bases in the city in question, use those sites to launch forays into the concrete wilderness all around. Hedgehogs, some call them. Hell on Earth might be more accurate. Haskell never thought she'd be in the middle of one.

But there's a first time for everything. She feels her stomach lurch. The 'copter's circling. Those circles tighten around one building in particular. The craft floats toward it, touches down on the roof.

The engines die. She hurriedly pulls her breath-mask into place, strapping it onto her chem-suit—just in time as the hatch swings back. Helmets peer inside. But Haskell's already coming out—"Out of my way," she snarls, and they back away quickly.

She leaps lightly to the rooftop, looks around. Two other jet-copters sit alongside hers. Soldiers in powered armor stand at attention. Barbed wire rings the rooftop's perimeter. Buildings protrude out of the murk beyond like fingers jutting up from quicksand. The sky overhead couldn't be more than two hundred meters up. Half-seen lights move through it.

"Get me off this roof," says Haskell.

"Yes, ma'am," replies one of the soldiers. He turns. She follows him toward a single-story structure set atop the center of the roof. As they reach its door, the soldier steps aside, gestures for her to enter. She steps within, finds herself on a metal-grille stairway. The door closes behind her. She hears atmospheric purifiers working as she descends.

At the bottom of the stairway she finds a room. It looks to be some kind of storage chamber. A single door's set within the opposite wall. Two men stand before that door. One's another powered soldier. The second isn't. He's wearing civilian chem-clothes. His face is gaunt. His eyes are pale.

"Claire Haskell," he says.

"Yeah?"

"My name's Morat. You can take your breath-mask off now."

"Thanks," she says. But she leaves it on.

"It's clean in here," says Morat.

"It doesn't feel that way," she replies.

"You get used to it," he says.

She stares at him. She pulls her mask off, lets brown hair fall back. He grins at her naked face.

“Welcome to what’s left of Brazil.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“How was your trip?”

“Uneventful.”

“So it was good.”

“Until I got here, yes.”

“A sense of humor,” says Morat. “I like that.”

She doesn’t reply.

“Come with me,” he says.

Morat turns, opens the door behind him. He starts to walk down a corridor, stops, turns back toward her.

And beckons.

“Come with me,” he repeats.

This time she does. The soldier steps in behind her. She realizes that she can hear his footfall. She really shouldn’t. She thought those suits were supposed to be silent. Evidently, this one’s not. Or else the pre-zone rush is rendering her all too sensitive...because she can hear everything—the slight clatter of feet against the floor, the tiny hisses of gas from neck joints, the whirring of cooling motors...all of it trailing in her wake down the corridor.

At the end of the corridor’s an elevator. Its doors slide open. Morat enters. Haskell follows, turns—looks into helmeted visor. The soldier’s stopped at the elevator’s threshold. The doors slide shut. The elevator starts to drop. It’s just the two of them now.

“Can we talk freely in here?”

“Nothing’s ever free,” Morat replies, pulling out a pistol. “Particularly not talk. This is clear terrain in theory. In reality”—he hands her the pistol, hilt first—“you’d better hang on to this.” She takes the weapon. He flips open a panel in the wall, pulls a lever. The elevator shudders to a stop.

“Where do you want to begin?” she asks.

“With you.”

“There’s so much I can’t recall.”

“And so much you’re about to.”



Blind man in the city: but Jason Marlowe utilizes the coordinates programmed into his heads-up as he maneuvers his glidewing amidst the buildings of this megalopolis. Occasional thinnings of the mist reveal vast grids of light, stretching out of nothing, dissolving into even less. Marlowe's steering is toward one grid in particular. It swims toward him on the heads-up display, one column protruding past the others. He can't allow himself to drop below its roof. He's got to slow down: he works the flaps, sails down toward it. Suddenly it's filling the screens. He braces himself. And then he's striking that roof at speeds that knock the breath from him—even as he jettisons the glidewing, rolls along the roof, springs to his feet in a semicrouch.

Marlowe looks around at the buildings that tower around him. No one seems to have spotted him. He steps lightly to a trapdoor in the rooftop's corner, wrenches it open. He finds a ladder, disappears within.



The maw of delta-city has now moved to the very center of the window. The Operative stares down at the spires that rise out of the clouds that gather more than two clicks up.

“Penthouse suite,” he says.

“The Citadel,” replies the pilot.

“The what?”

“You don't know what the *Citadel* is?”

“Maybe I'm just testing you.”

“Test away, asshole. I'm not afraid of you.”

“Maybe you should be.”

“Maybe you don't know shit about the biggest hedgehog of them all. Room with a view. They say the Jaguars can't get within a kilometer of the basement.”

“A kilometer's a pretty specific number,” replies the Operative. “Particularly when it involves classified operations. You're merchant marine. Where are you getting all this from?”

“Information's harder to lock down in space.”

“Give me another example.”

“How about *you* give *me* an example?”

“Such as?”

“What’s your business on the Moon?”

The Operative laughs. “Who says I have business on the Moon?”

“That’s where we’re supposed to drop you, isn’t it?”

“Maybe that’s just my transfer point.”

“And maybe it’s not. Come on, man. We’ve got three days together.”

“So?”

“So indulge me. It’s not like I expect you to tell me the *truth*.”

“Then what the hell do you expect?” asks the Operative.

“How about a good story?”

“Even if it’s a lie?”

“Remember what I said about killing time?”

“I thought you said this wasn’t a social call.”

“So I’m mixing business with pleasure.”

“So put the Elevator back on that screen.”

“I never took it off,” the pilot says.

“Where is it?”

“Lower right-right.”

“Put it at the center.”

“Sure thing.”

It’s the surest thing there is. It’s scarcely two hundred clicks distant. It’s practically a drive-by. Yet it still requires magnification to make out the workers on its side—still requires magnification to discern how they’ve jury-rigged whole series of pulleys to haul themselves along it while they lay down the maglev tracks along which the freight will someday flow. The Operative lets his gaze stray down toward the Elevator’s extremity at Nadir Station some hundred clicks below. Below that’s on the atmosphere.

“Am I ever going to get to see it out that window?” he asks.

“You could if the window weren’t facing Earth.”


“I can see it’s facing Earth. What I’m asking is, is that going to change soon.”

“Man’s in luck. When we prime the burn we’ll shift our angle. You should get yourself a good view then.”

“Excellent.”

“So what’s going down on the Moon?”

But the Operative’s just noticed something going down on the screens.

 I’m an envoy,” says Morat.

“I’d guessed as much,” replies Haskell.

“I’m an envoy,” he repeats, as though her words compel reiteration. “I report directly to the handlers.”

“How direct can it be when you never see them either?”

“As direct as it needs to be for me to give you your final orders. You’ve been primed across your dreams. You face me in the flesh for activation.”

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“You already know what’s going on,” he says. “We’re getting hammered.”

“By the Latins.”

“By the Jaguars. The Latins didn’t mean shit until the Jags gave them a voice. Five years ago, the cities were virtually pacified. Everything was locked down. Look at them now. The governments we bought and paid for don’t dare to go inside. The militias are like iron filings over which a magnet is passing. They’re focused like they’ve never been before.”

“Which is why I’m here,” says Haskell.

“Which is why you’re here.” Morat smiles without warmth. “This city is where they’re making the latest push. It started ten days back. Now it’s as bad as I’ve ever seen it. I tell you, Claire—we either find a way to break them, or else one of these days it’s going to be the other way. And if we’re going to win this, it’s going to have to be CounterIntelligence Command that gets in there and does it. The other Commands won’t. Army’s a hollow shell. Space rides high and disdains dirt. Info avoids the

human touch. Navy steers clear of anything that isn't ocean. The Praetorians have their hands full safeguarding the Throne. It's going to have to be Cicom. It's going to have to be you, Claire."

Silence. For minutes. For hours. Is she tripping on the pre-zone rush? Maybe. A structure's forming in her head, aggregating out of nothing—it spins before her. It's everything they told her while she was sleeping. It's the codes that will allow her to beat what she's about to face. Yet it's as blurry as the mist outside. It needs the trigger words that Morat's about to give her to make it real. Those words don't have to make sense on a conscious level to unearth what's been buried further down. If they do, it's only because Morat is choosing to bind them up in context. But context is optional.

Codes aren't.

"Is this building empty?" she asks. She realizes that Morat has just spoken. That her reverie's already gone down in one moment.

"Of course not," Morat replies. "It's filled with our soldiers."

"If they're our soldiers, why are they wearing Army colors?"

"Because ArmyCom's been divvied up by the rest of the Commands."

"I hadn't heard."

"Shouldn't let yourself get so out of the loop, Claire. Army did, and now it's dead in the water. They're keeping the name, but that's about it. Cicom got the franchise for all operations in this city. The Throne's charged Sinclair with cleaning the place up."

"Have these Army units been reconditioned?"

Morat looks at her like she's stupid.

"Where are we in relation to this hedgehog's perimeter?" she asks.

"About two or three streets from the edge. We extended the perimeter to encompass these blocks only yesterday."

"And which floor are we heading to next?"

"The ninety-fifth," he replies. "It's the one we were tipped off to."

"Who tipped us off?"

"An informant. Highly placed in what we believe to be the Jaguars' command structure."

"Is this informant reliable?"

"Reliable enough."

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