

CHAPTER TWO

CAPRICE NISEI
NAPD HEADQUARTERS
11 OCTOBER

Okay, here it is. Hard copy of the dossier.” [*Good enough for you now, Princess?*]

“Yes, thank you.” Caprice realized her mistake too late as Commissioner Dawn scowled at her. Sometimes the thoughts she picked up arrived in her head as clear as actual words, and it was work to tell the difference between the words she was supposed to hear, and the thoughts that she knew she wasn’t.

And of course she couldn’t exactly apologize for hearing them. Toshiyuki and his team had schooled her on that very carefully.

“I am sorry, Commissioner.” She reached for the file. “I realize that this was an inconvenience. I appreciate that you were able to provide this. I assure you it helps.”

“Do I get an apology, too? If I’d known I was going to get this yanked out of my hands on the way to the goddamn interview room—*literally*—I could’ve spent the last day or so at the sensies or something. They’re doing this marathon thing at the Boulevard, Commissioner—you’d love it—last week they had this old 2D thing called *Bl—*”

“No, Harrison, you don’t get an apology,” Dawn snapped at him. “Nisei hasn’t earned a round of assholery from you, and I certainly haven’t. She didn’t ask for this case. It wasn’t my idea to kick it across to her.”

“Police politics again, huh?” Captain of Detectives Rick Harrison was perched forward on the edge of his chair, hunched over his knees and glaring. Focusing her attention on him for a moment, Caprice focused it too far and brushed into his mind without meaning to. She felt how tired and stretched he was, dry-mouthed, eyes hot and scratchy from poring over the dossier for hours when he should have been sleeping. The dossier whose hard copy she had just been handed. Caprice pulled back inside herself, feeling ashamed.

“Harrison, if you haven’t learned to just swallow the damn politics by now, you should at least know better than to take it out on the rest of us. Who does it help?”

That seemed to hit home, and Harrison sat back into his chair and rubbed his eyes.

“Fine. Fine. Mine not to question why. Caprice, I’ve been through the dossier on this whole mess. I’m pretty good on the background stuff, on the principals from when we were getting ready to bring them in. ‘Course, I was still doing my homework when this morning hit the fan, so you’re on your own there.” He looked directly at her. “What I’m trying to say is, sorry for being...uh, sorry for carrying on just then. You need any help on the background, or a sounding board or backup or anything, lemme know.”

“Thank you, Captain Harrison.” She hadn’t dared check his thoughts to see if he was being genuine. “I regret the difficulties caused to you, as the commissioner does. I had no part in the case’s reassignment.”

“Sure. Yep. None of us has any part in it, do we? No part, that’s us.”

“Harrison, you’re tired,” put in Dawn without much gentleness. “Your mouth’s running away with you. Nisei, you’d better

go get started. Your girl should be out of medical and in one of the rooms by now. Off you go. Not you, Harrison. You stay right in that chair.”

Caprice was already striding away through the outer offices of the commissioner’s suite before Dawn’s office door had swung shut. She had no curiosity to spare about whether they were going to talk about her behind her back, a suspicion that would normally have had her rigid with anxiety for hours. She needed some time alone with her paper dossier, before the connection to the commissioner who’d handled it could get too blurred.

* * *

The case must already have been transferred to her in the station’s interweb, because by the time she was halfway to the interview suites the virt feed from her PAD at her belt had already pinned a display square to the air about a foot from her face, twenty degrees out from her left eyeline if she looked straight ahead. It was showing the auto-chopped footage from the gun and shoulder cams from the minutes before Tallie Perrault’s arrest. The brawl inside the Humanity Labor offices unfolded in miniature, tiny silent people tipping over tables into the path of the cops, a dogpile of frantic bodies on top of two struggling figures in riot gear. Outside the building, the line of shields forming, the first bottles being thrown. Sharp puffs of shots—canister launchers, not guns. Those would come later. Hoppers coming in, ground cars, too. Street views jittering back and forth as the officers sprinted toward the shooting. A man standing, jerking in time to muzzle flashes all around him and collapsing again. A face, wide-eyed, grey with shock, hair hanging in strings, staring at something above and to the right of the screen: the cop closing in on her. The facial recognition software had already talked to the city’s ID base and tagged her. *Perrault, T. Custody as of 0645 today. Case ref SPECIAL ACCESS—CONFIRM CREDENTIALS PLEASE.*

Below those words was a gemlike placeholder button. When she waved the e-ID chip in the back of her hand over the virt display, that button would be replaced with the full case number and the confidential details would start flickering over the woman's frozen face. So something about the Perrault arrest was so important that the station interweb wasn't even giving out the case references without ID confirmation. She would look at that later. Caprice was going to get her first insights into this case a different way.

The virt blipped out as she stepped into the chill-cupboard and slid the door shut behind her. The cupboards were a new feature, dotted around the floors for when a detective needed greater privacy or freedom from distractions than even the new hush-cubes would give. They were shut off from the station's ambient wireless as well as shielded against external transmission. Caprice could still pick up the rustle of minds all around her, on the floors above and below, but her virt had gone silent and her PAD had given her the three warning vibrations it used to tell her it couldn't locate a signal. Caprice ignored it and sat down at the little carrel with her back to the door. The mind rustles turned sharp for a moment as she opened up and touched the dossier, and there was a moment of lurching vertigo as though the chair wasn't quite taking her weight. But that always came with fully opening her *psi*, and after a moment of controlling her breathing and posture she was able to focus. Her eyes drifted closed, and the dossier shivered slightly under her fingers as though it were alive.

[Good enough for you now, Princess?] The trace of the commissioner was strongest where her slender fingers had gripped the cover. Caprice stroked the spot with her thumb. *[Damn clone meatpuppet what the hell this special treatment for it...]* Now that wasn't Dawn she was picking up. The thought-taste felt like Gorsky, one of her junior aides, and was stippled with the sound-impression of a printer and collator clicking and shuffling. Gorsky must have been the one who had assembled

the hard copy dossier. [*Just waltzing in here thinking it can just sit down with us.*]

Caprice winced but kept reading. The first time she had run into those threads in one of her fellow officers' heads the shame had been scalding. But she pushed on, because she knew that where she found a thought like that she would also find...yes, here it was, in Dawn's hazy mind traces: [*what a goddamn mess oh get a grip not Nisei's fault*]. From there it frayed out into scraps again, only the strongest ones barely detectable: [*like a little kid sometimes how do they program bad business all around Harrison'll go spare why the hell*] and then mist and static.

Maybe one day it wouldn't be. When they had brought her out of the vat, every object they'd given her to read had felt like that. She had learned. She was sure there was more to learn.

Meantime, she shifted the angle of her psychometric senses and looked again.

Dizzying, tilting movement.

Caprice planted her palms on the desk to stabilize herself against it. She was sensing the dossier being swung back and forth in Dawn's hand as she marched to her office with it. She exhaled and tried to move her senses along the thing's timeline, but fine control slipped from her and she spent a few moments in a paralyzing barrage of not-quite-memories before she rebalanced and found herself sprawled on the commissioner's desk with Rick Harrison scowling at someone above and behind her.

Voices [*paper file cheap shots like that fashioned habits virt casts trash media proud*] growled all around her and her head spun for a moment, but then:

"This is a paper file, Commissioner. A *paper* file." Harrison. "Are we going back to rolling perps' fingertips in ink to print 'em? I learned this case off the virt dossier—why can't she?"

"Old-fashioned habits?" came Dawn's voice from behind her. Caprice's frame of reference rocked for a moment but she

didn't try to re-home on the ghostly shape of the commissioner. It was the voices that mattered.

"Old-fashioned? Not even the diehards insist on paper anymore. Anyway, they poured Princess Jinteki out of a vat, what, three years ago, max? How old-fashioned can a three-year-old be?" Caprice felt the desktop go damp under her palms.

"Harrison, if you've got any cheap shots like that left in your system I'd suggest you get them out quick before she gets here. C'mon, this isn't like you. You've told me you think of Nisei as a friend before, but now you sound like one of those red-faced assholes you see propping up a bar and mouthing off the latest talking points off the Humanity Labor shoutstream."

"Shows how much you know. Most of the two-bit rabble-rousing on that score's shifted to the vlogs. Lupe Ryder, Jeremy Stanhope, lovely specimens like that are too fond of the idea of everyone *hearing* them speak, not just reading their words on a shoutstream. You're no expert on trash media, ma'am."

"Proud of it." Caprice was fascinated despite herself. On the face of it, Harrison had just disrespected the commissioner and she had admitted error. But their tones had an easy, amiable rhythm that she had no idea how to interpret. Or how to mimic. She knew perfectly well how stilted and prissy she sounded when she spoke. How did they do it?

How smart can a three-year-old be? Harrison asked in her head, and she gasped before she realized it was just her own imagination, not a reading of something he'd really said. Biting her lip, she concentrated on the conversation again.

"Remember my point, though, please." Dawn's voice was starting to sound sludgy and distant. Sometimes trivial-seeming impressions were still vivid after days or weeks; sometimes they seemed to just slide off. Caprice hadn't worked what made the difference. "It's not the 'Princess' half of 'Princess Jinteki' that's on my mind here."

"That's a hell of a riddle to give a tired man, ma'am. Are you saying the case got taken off me because—"

The impression fragmented as it overlapped with memories of her physical senses. A tap on the door and Commissioner Dawn's voice saying, "Come in, Caprice, and close the door if you don't mind."

The last of the impression slipped through her thoughts like ice melting away through her fingers, and she let it go, let her *psi* relax. The sensation was like letting her eyes unfocus, like letting out a breath. Her physical eyes opened and she looked at the dossier cover. The only detective's name printed on it was hers. Harrison hadn't needed a physical dossier, but virt files didn't bring readable impressions with them.

Not the "princess" half. The "Jinteki" half. Without conscious thought, Caprice's hand drifted up to her neck. Her thick black hair cascaded down the back of her neck and over her shoulders. For good measure her collar was up. The clone barcode wouldn't be visible.

This case had been taken off Harrison and given to her because of some sort of pressure from Jinteki. That meant she had to find out—

No. That meant she had to do well. It was always important that she do well. But never more than now. She knew that with an intuition more basic than any sense, physical or *psi*.

She opened the dossier and her fingers flicked the pages past at a blur. She had taken in the names and places from the virt on her PAD; now she took in everything else the NAPD had. They had optimized her brain for the special gifts that no one had even been sure would manifest, but they had also wired her for fast data assimilation. She reached the end of the dossier in the time it would have taken Harrison or Dawn to read the cover brief.

Her PAD thrummed at her belt when she left the chill-cupboard and her virt flared alive a second later with a message from booking administration: Tallie Perrault was waiting for her in the interview room.

Her first thought was, *Good grief, she's exhausted*, and the second was, *And she won't admit it, or give in to it*. The will that the woman was putting into sitting straight and not letting her weariness show was vibrating out of her. Caprice was sure she could have spotted it even without the edges of the pain and fatigue washing against her mind.

She was Anglo, her hair honey-blond and in the dirty remains of a stylish cut. Her lips were pale, her eyes dark blue, the nails on the fingers she was tapping on the table unpainted and chewed. She was shorter than Caprice, with a swimmer's muscular shoulders and a desk-worker's thickness around the hips. There were livid marks around her neck, and one edge of her mouth was an ugly mess of bruises and swelling. She watched as Caprice sat down opposite her, and her thoughts remained quiet and very much her own. For now.

"Ms. Perrault, I am Detective Caprice Nisei, for the New Angeles Police Department." Her only response was a wary tilt of the head. "I understand that you have been through a great deal, and have already assisted our technicians with their work, but we are anxious to begin taking your testimony as soon as we can. I am hoping you can give me a first account of what has happened to you."

[...with the plan with the plan] came the flash from behind those big, deep eyes, and Caprice blinked at the focus in the words. She weighed them for a moment, got a feel for the texture of Tallie's thoughts, and studied her again. A touch of nervousness had crept into the other woman's expression.

"Just begin at the beginning," Caprice said gently. "Tell me about Leah and Valentin."