

MECH

C.J. Cherryh

Originally published in *Futurecrime* 1992, Davis Publications.

Cold night in Dallas Metro Complex, late shift supper while the cruiser autoed the beltway, rain fracturing the city lights on the windshield.

"Chili cheeseburger with mustard," Dave said, and passed it to Sheila—Sheila had the wheel, he had the trackers, and traffic was half way sane for Dallas after dark, nobody even cruising off the autos, at least in their sector. He bit into a chili and cheese without, washed a bite down with a soft drink, and scanned the blips for the odd lane-runner. A domestics quarrel and a card snitch were their only two working calls: Manny and Lupe had the domestic, and the computer lab had the card trace.

So naturally they were two bites into the c&c, hadn't even touched the fries, when the mech-level call came slithering in, sweet-voiced: "Possible assault in progress, Metro 2, #R-29, The Arlington, you've got the warrant, 34, see the manager."

"Gee, thanks," Dave muttered. Sheila said something else, succinctly, off mike, and punched in a chilled thumb. The cruiser had already started its lane changes, with Exit 3 lit up on the windshield, at .82 k away. Sheila got a couple more bites and a sip of soft drink down before she shoved the burger and drink cup at him. She took the wheel as the autos dumped them onto Mason Drive, on a manual-only and most deserted street.

It didn't look like an assault kind of neighborhood, big reflective windows in a tower complex. It was offices and residences, one of the poshest Complexes in big D, real high rent district. You could say that was why a mech unit got pulled in off the Ringroad, instead of the dispatcher sending in the b&w line

*From: Altered States: A Cyberpunk Sci-Fi Anthology.
Edited by Roy C. Booth and Jorge Salgado-Reyes,
IAP, 2014.*

troops. You could make a second guess it was because the city wanted more people to move into the Complexes and a low crime rep was the major sales pitch. Or you could even guess some city councilman lived in The Arlington.

But that wasn't for a mere mech unit to question. Dave got his helmet out of the locker under his feet, put it on while Sheila was taking them into the curbside lane, plugged into the collar unit that was already plugged to the tactile, put the gloves on, and put the visor down, in the interest of checkout time—

"Greet The Public," Sheila said with a saccharine and nasty smirk—meaning Department Po-li-cy said visors up when you were Meeting the Man: people didn't greatly like to talk to visors and armor.

"Yeah, yeah." He finished the checks. He had a street map on the HUD, the location of 29-R sector on the overall building shape, the relative position of the cruiser as it nosed down the ramp into The Arlington's garage. "Inside view, here, shit, I'm not getting it, have you got Library on it?"

"I'll get it. Get. Go"

He opened the door, balled out onto the concrete curb. Car treads had tracked the rain in, neon and dead white glows glistened on the down ramp behind them. High and mighty Arlington Complex was gray concrete and smoked glass in its utilitarian gut. And he headed for the glass doors, visor up, the way Sheila said, fiber cameras on, so Sheila could track: Sheila herself was worthless with the mech, she had proven that by taking a shot from a dealer, so that her right leg was plex and cable below the knee, but as a keyman she was ace and she had access with an A with the guys Downtown.

She said, in his left ear, "Man's in the hall, name's Rozman, reports screaming on 48, a man running down the fire stairs—"

"Mr. Rozman," he said, meeting the man just past the doors. "Understand you have a disturbance."

"Ms. Lopez, she's the next door neighbor, she's hiding in her bedroom, she said there was screaming. We had an intruder

on the fire stairs—"

"Man or woman's voice in the apartment?"

"Woman."

"What's our address?"

"4899."

"Minors on premises?"

"Single woman. Name's Emilia Nolan. Lives alone. A quiet type...no loud parties, no complaints from the neighbors..."

Rozman was a clear-headed source. He unclipped a remote, thumbed it on and handed it to the man. "You keep answering questions. You know what this is?"

"It's a remote."

"—Sheila, put a phone-alert on Ms. Lopez and the rest of the neighbors, police on the way up, just stay inside and keep behind furniture until she gets word from us." He was already going for the elevators. "Mr. Rozman. Do you log entry/exists?"

On his right-ear mike: "On the street and the tunnels and the garage, the fire stairs..."

"Any exceptions?"

"No—Yes. The service doors. But those are manual key...only maintenance has that."

"Key that log to the dispatcher. Just put the d-card in the phone and dial 9999." The Exception to the log was already entered, miked-in from his pickup. "And talk to your security people about those service doors. That's city code. Sir." He was polite on autopilot. His attention was on Sheila at the moment, from the other ear, saying they were prepping interior schemas to his helmet view. "Mr. Rozman. Which elevator?" There was a bank of six.

"Elevator B. Second one on your left. That goes to 48s..."

He used his fireman's key on the elevator call, and put his visor down. The hall and the elevator doors disappeared behind a wire-schema of the hall and doors, all red and gold and green lines on black, and shifting as the mid-tier elevator grounded itself. He didn't look down as he got in; you didn't look down on

a wire-view if you wanted your stomach steady. He sent the car up, watched the floors flash past, transparenced, heard a stream of checks from Sheila confirming the phone-alarm in action, residents being warned through the phone company—

"Lopez is a cardiac case," Sheila said, "hospital's got a cruiser on alert, still no answer out of 4899. Lopez says it's quiet now."

"You got a line on Lopez, calm her down." Presence-sniffer readout was a steady blue, but you got that in passageways, lot of traffic, everything blurred unless you had a specific to track: it was smelling for stress, and wasn't getting it here. "Rozman, any other elevators to 48?"

"Yeah, C and D."

"Can you get off anywhere from a higher floor?"

"Yessir, you can. Any elevator, if you are going down..."

Elevator stopped and the door opened. Solid floor across the threshold, with the scan set for anomalies against the wire-schema. Couple of potted palms popped out against the VR. Target door was highlighted gold. Audio kept hyping until he could hear the scuff of random movements from other apartments. "Real quiet," he said to Sheila. And stood there a moment while the sniffer worked, filling in tracks. You could see the swirl in the air currents where the vent was. You could see stress showing up soft red.

"Copy that," Sheila said. "Warrant's clear to go in."

He put himself on no-exhaust, used the fire-key again, stayed to the threshold. The air inside showed redder. So did the walls, on heat-view, but this was spatter. Lot of spatter.

No sound of breathing. No heartbeat inside the apartment.

He de-amped and walked in. A mech couldn't disturb a Scene—sniffer couldn't pick up a presence on itself, ditto on the Cyloprene of his mech rig, and while the rig was no-exhaust and he was on internal air. It couldn't sniff him, but feet could still smudge the spatters. He watched where he stepped, real-visual now, and discovered the body, a woman, fully dressed, sprawled

face-up by the-bar, next to the bedroom, hole dead center between the astonished eyes.

"Quick and clean for her," he said. "Helluva mess on the walls."

"Lab's on its way," Sheila said, alternate thought track. "I'm on you, D-D, just stand still a sec."

The sniffer was working up a profile, via Sheila's relays Downtown. He stood still, scanning over the body. "Woman about thirty, good-looking, plain dresser..."

Emilia Francis Nolan, age 34, flashed up on the HUD. Canadian citizen, Martian registry, chief information officer Mars Transport Company.

Thin, pale woman. Dark hair. Corporate style on the clothes. Canadian immigrant to Mars, returned to Earth on a Canadian passport. "Door was locked," he said.

"I noticed that," Sheila said.

Sniffer was developing two scents, the victim's and a second one. AMMONIA, the indicator said.

"Mild ammonia."

"Old fashioned stuff," he said. "Amateur." The sniffer was already sepping it out as the number three track. Ammonia wouldn't overload a modern sniffer. It was just one more clue to trace; and the tracks were coming clear now: Nolan's was everywhere, Baroque, the sniffer said—expensive perfume, persistent as hell. The ammonia had to be number two's notion. And you didn't carry a vial of it for social occasions.

But why in hell was there a live-in smell?

"Male," Sheila commented, meaning the number two track. "Lover's spat?"

POSSeL-Q the manager didn't know about, maybe, lover's quarrel, clothes aren't mussed. Rape's not a high likely here." Stress in both tracks. The whole place stank of it.

"Going for the live one, Sheel. Hype it. Put out a phone alert, upstairs and down, have ComA take over Rozman's remote, I don't need him but he's still a resource."

Out of the door, into the wire-schema of the hall. The sniffer had it good this time: the stress trail showed up clear and bright for the fire-door, and it matched the number two track, no question. "Forty-eight damn floors," he muttered: no good to take the elevator. You got professional killers or you got crazies or drugheads in a place like this, fenced in with its security locks, and you didn't know what anyone of the three was going to do, or what floor they were going to do it on. He went through the fire-door and started down on foot, following the scent, down and down and down...

"We got further on Norton," Sheila said. "Assigned here eight months ago, real company climber, top grad, schooled on Mars, no live-ins on any MarsCorp record we can get to, but that guy was real strong in there. I'm saying he was somebody Norton didn't want her social circle to meet."

He ran steps and breathed, ran steps and breathed, restricted air, Sheila has a brain for figuring people, you didn't even have to ask her. A presence trail arrived into the stairwell, bright blue mingling with the red. "Got another track here," he found breath to say.

"Yeah, yeah, that's in the log, that's a maintenance worker, thirty minutes back. He'll duck out again on 25."

"Yeah." He was breathing hard. Making what time he could. The trail did duck out at 25, in a wider zone of blue, unidentified scents, the smell from the corridor blown into the shaft and fading into the ambient. His track stayed clear and strong, stressed, and he went on real-view: the transparent stairs were making him sick. "Where's this let out? Garage downstairs?"

"Garage and mini-mall."

"Shit!"

"Yeah. We got a call from building security wanting a piece of it, told them to stay out of it..."

"Thank God."

"Building Chief's an amateur with a cop-envy. We're trying to get another mech in."

"We got some fool with a gun he hasn't ditched, we got a mall full of people down there. Where's Jacobs?"

"Rummel's closer. —We got lab coming in. Lab's trying to get an ID match on your sniffer pickup."

"Yeah. You've got enough on it. Guy's sweating. So am I." He felt sweat running under the armor, on his face. The door said 14. The oxy was running out. Violate the Scene or not, he had to toggle to exhaust. After that, it was cooler, dank the way shafts were that went into the underground.

"We got some elevator use," Sheila said, "right around the incident, off 48. Upbound. Stopped on 50, 52, 78, 80, and came down again, 77, 34, 33, then your fire-call brought it down. Time-over-lap on the 78, the C-elevator was upbound."

"Follow it." Meaning somebody could have turned around and left no traces if he had gotten in another elevator-call. "Put Downtown on it, I need your brain."

"Awww. I thought it was the body."

"Stow it." He was panting again. The internal tank was out. He hoped he didn't need it again. Sheila went out of the loop: he could hear the silence on the phones. "Forty-damn-stories—"

Three, two, one, s-one. "Wire," he gasped, and got back the schema, that showed through the door into a corridor. He listened for noise, panting, while the net in the background zeed out his breathing and his heartbeat and the building fans and everything else but a dull distant roar that said humanity, a lot of it, music-the red was still there and it was on the door switch, but it thinned out in the downward stairwell.

"Went out on s-1."

"Street exit, mall exit," Sheila said. "Via the Arlington lobby. Dave, we got you help coming in."

"Good."

"Private mech."

Adrenaline went up a notch. "That's help? That's help? Tell them—"

"I did, buns, sorry about that. Name's Ross, she's inbound"

from the other tower, corporate security..."

"Just what I need. Am I going out there? They want me to go out there?"

"You're clear."

He hated it, he *hated* going out there, hated the stares, hated the Downtown monitoring that was going to pick up that pulse rate of his and have the psychs on his case. But he opened the door, he walked out into the lobby that was The Arlington's front face; and walked onto the carpet, onto stone, both of which were only flat haze to his eyes. Bystanders clustered and gossiped, patched in like the potted palms, real people stark against the black and wire lines of cartoonland, all looking at him and talking in half-voices as if that could keep their secrets if he wanted to hear. He just kept walking, down the corridor, following the faint red glow in the blue of Every-smell, followed it on through the archway into the wider spaces of the mall, where more real people walked in black cartoon-space, and that red glow spread out into a faint fan-swept haze and a few spots on the floor.

Juvies scattered, a handful out of Parental, lay odds to it—he could photo them and tag them, but he kept walking, chose not even to transmit: Sheila had a plateful to track as it was. One smartass kid ducked into his face, made a face and ran like hell. Fools tried that, as if they suspected there wasn't anybody real inside the black visor. Others talked with their heads partially turned, or tried not to look as if they were looking. That was what he hated, being the eyes and ears, the spy-machine that connected to everywhere, that made everybody ask themselves what they were saying that might go into files, what they has ever done or thought of that a mech might find reason to track...

Maybe it was the blank visor, maybe it was the rig—maybe it was everybody's guilt. With the sniffer tracking, you could see the stress around you, the faint red glow around honest citizens no different than the guy you were tracking, as if it was the

whole world's guilt and fear and wrongdoing you were smelling, and everybody had some secret to keep and some reason to slink aside...

"Your back-up's meeting you at A-3," Sheila said, and a marker popped up in the schema, yellow flasher.

"Wonderful. We got a make on the target?"

"Not yet, buns. Possible this guy's not on file. Possible we got another logjam in the datacall, a mass murder in Peoria, something like that." Sheila had her mouth full. "Everybody's got problems tonight."

"What are you eating?"

"Mmm. Sorry, there."

"Is that my cheese burger?"

"I owe you one."

"You are really putting on weight, Sheel, you know that?"

"Yeah, its anxiety attacks." Another bite. "Your back up's Company, Donna Ross, 20 years on, service citation."

"Shee." Might not be a play-cop then. Real seniority. He saw the black figure standing there in her own isolation, at the juncture of two dizzying walkways. Saw her walk in his direction, past the mistrustful stares of spectators. "Get some plainclothes in here yet?"

"We got reporters coming."

"Oh, great. Get 'em off, get the court on it—"

"Doing my best."

"Officer Dawes." Ross held out a black-glowed hand, no blues on the Company cop, just the rig, black cut-out in a wire-diagram world. "We're interfaced. It just came up."

Data came up, B-channel. "Copy that." Ross was facing the same red track he was, was getting his data, via some interface Downtown, an inter-system handshake. He stepped onto the downbound escalator, Ross in his 360 compression view, a lean, black shape on the shifting kaleidoscope of the moving stairs. "This is a MarsCorp exec that got it?" Ross asked in his right ear. "Is that what I read?"

"Deader than dead. We got a potential gun walking around out here with the john-qs. You got material on the exec?"

"Some kind of jam-up in the net—I haven't got a thing but a see-you."

"Wonderful, both of us in the dark."

The escalator let off on the lower level, down with the fast foods and the arcades and a bunch of juvies all antics and ass.

"Get out of here," he snarled on Address, and juvies scattered through the cartoon-scape.

"Get upstairs!" he yelled, and some of them must have figured shooting was imminent, because they scattered double-time, squealing and shoving. Bright blue down here with the pepperoni pizza and the beer and the popcorn, but that single red threat was still showing.

"Our boy's sweating hard," Ross said in one ear; and Sheila in the other: "We got a sudden flash in a security door, right down your way."

"Come on."

Dave started to run. Ross matched him, a clatter of Cyloprene on tile, godawful racket. The exit in question was flashing yellow ahead. A janitor gawked, pressed himself against the wall in a try at invisibility; but his presence was blue, neutral to the area.

"You see anybody go through?"

"Yeah, yeah, I saw him, young guy, took to the exit, I said he wasn't—" —Supposed to trailed into the amped mike as they banged through the doors and into a concrete service hall.

"Sheila, you in with Ross?"

"Yeah. Both of you guys. I got a b&w following you, he's not meched, best I could do..."

Red light strobed across his visor. WEAPONS ON, it said.

"Shit," he said, "Ross—" He stopped a breath against the corridor wall, drew his gun and plugged it in. Ross must have an order too; she was plugging in. Somebody Downtown had got a fire warrant. Somebody had decided on a fire-warrant next to a

mall full of kids. Maybe because of the kids.

"What's our make on this guy, Sheila? Tell me we got a make, please God, I don't like this, we got too many john-juniors out there."

"He's not on files."

"Off-worlder," Ross said.

"You know that?"

"If he's not in your files he's from off-world. The Company is searching. They've got your readout."

"Shit, somebody get us info."

The corridor was a moving, jolting wire-frame in the black.

Nobody. Not a sign.

But the red was there, bright and clear. Sheila compressed several sections ahead on the wire schema, folded things up close where he could get a look. There was a corner, he transviewed it, saw it heading to a service area. AIR SYSTEMS, the readout line said.

"We got an air-conditioning unit up there, feed for the whole damn mall as best I guess... he's got cover."

"Yeah," Ross said, "I copy that"

"We're not getting any damn data," Sheila said in his other ear. "I'm asking again on that make, and we're not getting it. Delay. Delay. Delay. Ask if her keyman's getting data."

"My keyman asks," he relayed, "if you've got data yet."

"Nothing new. I'm telling you, we're not priority, it's some little lover's spat—"

"That what they're telling you?"

"Uh-uh. I don't know a thing more than you. But a male presence, female body up there... that's how it's going to wash out. It always does."

"Dave," Sheila's voice again, while their steps rang out of time on the concrete and the red track ran in front of them. She had a tone when there was trouble. "Butterflies, you hear?"

"Yeah. Copy." Sheila wasn't liking something. She wasn't liking it a lot.

They reached the corner. The trail kept going, skirled in the currents from air ducts, glowing fainter in the gust from the dark. He folded the view tighter, looked ahead of them, didn't like the amount of cover ahead where they were going to come down stairs and across a catwalk.

Something banged, echoed, and the lights went out.

Didn't bother a mech. Maybe it made the quarry feel better, but they were still seeing, all wire-display. He was right on Ross, Ross standing there like a haze in the ambiance. Her rig scattered stuff you used in the dark. It was like standing next to a ghost. The Dallas PD didn't afford rigs like that. Governments did. Some MarsCorp bigwig got shot and the Company lent a mech with this stuff?

Ross said. "IR. Don't trust the wire. Stay here."

"The hell."

Infrared blurred the wire-schema. But he brought his sensors up high-gain.

"No sonar," Ross said "Cut it, dammit!"

"What the hell are we after?"

"There he is!"

He didn't half see. Just a blur, far across the dark. Ross burst ahead of him, onto the steps; he dived after, in a thunder the audios didn't damp fast enough.

"Dave." Sheila's voice again, very solemn. His ears were still ringing when they got to the bottom. "Department's still got nothing. I never saw a jam this long... I never saw a rig like that."

They kept moving, fast, not running, not walking. The mech beside him was Company or some government's issue, a MarsCorp exec was stone dead, and you could count the organized crazies that might have pulled that trigger. A random crazy, a lover—a secessionist...

"Lab's on it," Sheila said. "Dave, Dave, I want you to listen to me."

He was moving forward. Sheila stopped talking, as Ross moved around a bundle of conduits and motioned him to go

down the other aisle, past the blowers. Listen, Sheila said, and said nothing. The link was feeding to Ross. He was sure of it. He could hear Sheila breathing, hard.

"Mustard," Sheila muttered. "Dave, was it mustard you wanted on that burger?"

They'd never been in a situation like this, not knowing what was feeding elsewhere, not knowing whether Downtown was still secure with them on the line.

"Yeah," he breathed. He hated the stuff. "Yeah. With onions."

Sheila said, "You got it."

Ross started to move. He followed. The com was compromised. She'd asked was he worried, that was the mustard query. He stayed beside that ghost-glow, held to the catwalk rail with one hand, the other with the gun. The city gave out a fire-warrant, and your finger had a button. But theirs overrode, some guy Downtown. Or Sheila did. You didn't know. You were a weapon, with a double safety, and you didn't know whether the damn thing was live, ever.

"Dave" Sheila said. Totally different tone. "Dave. This Ross doesn't have a keyman. She's backpacked. Total. She's a security guy."

Total mech. You heard about it, up on Sol, up in the Stations, where everything was computers. Elite of the elite. Independent operator with a computer for a backpack and neuros right into the station's high-tech walls.

He evened his breath, smelled the cold air, saw the thermal pattern that was Ross gliding ahead of him. A flash of infrared out of the dark. A door opened on light. Ross started running. He did.

A live-in lover? Somebody the exec would open the door to?

A mech could walk through a crime scene. A mech on internal air didn't leave a presence—nothing a sniffer would recognize.

A Company mech had been damned close to the scene—
showed up to help the city cops...

"Sheila," he panted, trying to stay with Ross. "Lots of
mustard."

Infrared glow ahead of them. A shot flashed out, from the
company mech. It exploded in the dark, leaving tracers in his
vision. Ross wasn't blinded. His foot went off a step, and he
grabbed wildly for the rail, caught himself and slid two more
before he had his feet under him on flat catwalk mesh-it shook
as Ross ran; and he ran too.

"She's not remoted!" he panted. As if his keyman couldn't
tell. Nobody outside was authorizing those shots. Ross was. A
cartoon door boomed open, and he ran after a ghost whose fire
wasn't routed through a whole damn city legal department.
"Fold it! He gasped, because he was busy keeping up; and the
corner ahead compacted and swung into view, red and green
wire, with nobody in it but the ghost ahead of him.

"Slow down!" he said. "Ross! Wait up, dammit! Don't
shoot!"

His side was aching. Ross was panting hard, he heard her
breathing, he overtook in a cartoon-space doorway, in a dead-
end room, where the trail showed hot and bright.

"We have him." Ross said. The audio hype could hear the
target breathing, past their exhaust. Even the panicked
heartbeat. Ross lifted her gun against a presence behind a stack
of boxes.

"No!" he yelled. And the left half of his visor flashed yellow.
He swung to it, mindless target-see, and the gun in his hand
went off on Ross, went off a second time while Ross was flying
sideways through the dark. Her shot went wild off the ceiling
and he couldn't think, couldn't turn off the blinking target
square. Four rounds, five, and the room was full of smoke.

"Dave?"

He wasn't talking to Sheila. He wasn't talking to whoever'd
triggered him, set off the reflexes they trained in a mech.

Shaky voice from his keyman. "If you can walk out of there,
walk. Right now, Dave."

"The guy's in the—"

"No. He's not, Dave." The heartbeat faded out. The cartoon
room had a smudged gray ghost on the floor grid at his feet. And
a bright red lot of blood spattered around. "I want you to check
out the restroom upstairs from here. All right?"

He was shaking now. Your keyman talked and you listened
or you could be dead. He saw a movement on his left. He swung
around with the gun up, saw the man stand up. Ordinary looking
man, business shirt, soaked with sweat. Frozen with fear. The
sniffer flashed red.

Sheila's voice said, from his shoulder-patch, "Don't touch
anything, Dave. Get out of there. Now."

He moved, walked out, with the target standing at his
back. He walked all the way back to the air-conditioning plant,
and he started up the stairs there, up to the catwalk, while
nothing showed, no one. Sheila said, "Dave. Unplug now. You
can unplug."

He stopped, he reached with his other hand and he pulled
the plug on the gun and put it in its holster. He went on up the
cartooned metal stairs, and he found the cartooned hall and the
cartooned restroom with the real-world paper on the floor.

"You better wash up," Sheila said, so he did that, shaking
head to foot.

Before he was finished, a b&w came in behind him, and
said, "You all right, sir?"

"Yeah," he said. Sheila was quiet then.

"You been down there?" the cop asked.

"You saw it," Sheila said in his ear and he echoed her: "I saw
it—guy got away—I couldn't get a target. Ross was in the way..."

"Yes, sir," the b&w said. "You're on record, sir."

"I figured."

"You sure you're all right? I can call—"

"I can always call, officer."

The guy got a disturbed look, the way people did, who forgot they were talking to two people. "Yes, sir," the b&w said, "All right."

On his way out.

He turned around to the mirror, saw a plain, sick face. Blood was on the sink rim, puddled around his boots, where it had run off the plastic. He went into a stall, wiped off his rig with toilet paper and flushed the evidence.

Sheila said, "Take the service exits. Pick you up at the curb."

"Copy," he mumbled, took his foot off the seat, flushed the last bit of bloody paper, taking steady small breaths, now. They taught you to trust the autos with your life. They taught you to swing to the yellow, don't think. Don't ask, swing and hold, swing and hold the gun.

A mech just walked away, afterward, visor down, communing with his inner voices. Everything went to the interfaces. There was a record. Of course there was a record. Everyone knew that.

It was at the human interface things could drop out.

He used the fire key, walked out an emergency exit, waited in the rain.

The cruiser nosed up to the curb, black and black-windowed, and swallowed him up.

"Saved the soft drink," Sheila said. "Thought you'd be dry."

It was half ice-melt. But it was liquid. It eased a raw throat. He sucked on the straw, leaned his head back. "They calling us in?"

"No," Sheila said. That was all. They didn't want a de-brief. They didn't want a truth. They wanted—wanted nothing to do with it. Nolan's body to the next-ofs, the live-in...to whoever, wherever would hide him.

Another mouthful of ice-melt. He shut his eyes, saw wire-schemas, endlessly folding, a pit you could fall into. He blinked on rain and refracted neon. "Ross killed Nolan."

"You and I don't know."

"Was it Ross?"

"Damned convenient a Company mech was in hail. Wasn't it?"

"No Presence at all. Nolan—Nolan was shot between the eyes."

"MarsCorp exec—her live-in boyfriend with no record, no visa, no person. Guy who knew The Arlington's underground, who had a pass key—"

"He was keying through the doors?"

"Same as you were. Real at-home in the bottom tiers. You see a weapon on him, you see where he ditched one?"

"No." Raindrops fractured, flickering off the glass. He saw the grey ghost again, the no-Presence that could walk through total black. Or key through any apartment door, or aim a single head-shot with a computer's inhuman, instant accuracy.

He said, "Adds, doesn't it?"

"Adds. Downtown was seeing what I was. I told them. Told them you had bad feelings—"

"What the hell are they going to do? We got a dead mech down here—"

"The live-in shot Nolan. Shot the company mech. That's your story. They can't say otherwise. What are they going to say? That the guy didn't have a gun? They won't come at us."

"What about our record?"

"Transmission breakup. Lightning or something." Sheila's face showed rain-spots, running shadows, neon glare. "Bad night. D-D, bad shit."

"They erase it?"

"Erase what?" Sheila asked.

Silence then. Rain came down hard.

"They want to bring their damn politics down here," Sheila said, "they can take it back again. Settle it up there."

"Settle what?" he echoed Sheila.

But he kept seeing corridors, still the corridors, folding in on themselves. And sipped the tasteless soft drink. "The guy's

shirt was clean."

"Huh?"

"His shirt was clean." Flash on the restroom, red water swirling down and down. "He wasn't in that room. Nolan knew Ross was coming. The guy was living there. His smell's all over. That's why the ammonia trick. Nolan sent him for the stairs, I'll bet it's in the access times. He couldn't have hid from a mech. And all that screaming? The mech wanted something. Something Nolan wasn't giving. Something Ross wanted more than she wanted the guy right then."

"Secession stuff. Documents. Martian Secession. Not illegal, not in Dallas..."

"The mech missed the live-in, had to shut Nolan up. Didn't get the records, either. A botch. Thorough-going botch. The live-in—who knew the building like that? He wasn't any Company man. Martian with no visa, no regulation entry to the planet? I'll bet Nolan knew what he was, I'll bet Nolan was passing stuff to the Movement."

"An exec in MarsCorp? Over Martian Transport? Ask how the guy got here with no visa."

"Shit," he said. Then he thought about the mech, the kind of tech the rebels didn't have.

They wouldn't want a witness," he said. "The rebels wouldn't. The Company damned sure wouldn't. Ross would've gone for me, except I was linked in. I was recording. So she couldn't snatch the guy—had to shut the guy up somehow. They damn sure couldn't have a Company cop arrested down here. Had to get him shut up for good and get Ross off the planet..."

"Dead in," Sheila said. "Dead for sure, if he had talked. Washington was after the Company for the make and the Company was stonewalling like hell, lay you odds to that—and I'll bet there's a plane seat for Ross tonight on Guiana flight. What's it take? An hour down there? Half an hour more, if a shuttle's ready to roll, and Ross would have been no-return for this jurisdiction. That's all they needed." She flipped the com

back to On again, to the city's ordinary litany of petty crime and larcenies, beneath an uneasy sky. "This is 34, coming on-line, marker 15 on the pike, good evening, HQ. This is a transmission check, think we've got it fixed now, 10-4?"

END TRANS

C.J. CHERRYH has won four Hugo Awards and is one of the best-selling and most critically acclaimed authors in the science fiction and fantasy field, the author of more than forty novels. Her hobbies include travel, photography, reef culture, Mariners baseball, and, a late passion, figure skating: she intends to compete in the adult USFSA track. She began with the modest ambition to learn to skate backwards and now is working on jumps. She sketches, occasionally, cooks fairly well, and hates house work; she loves the outdoors, animals wild and tame, is a hobbyist geologist, adores dinosaurs, and has academic specialties in Roman constitutional law and Bronze Age Greek ethnography.

She has written science fiction since she was ten, spent ten years of her life teaching Latin and Ancient History on the high school level, before retiring to full time writing, and now does not have enough hours in the day to pursue all her interests. Her studies include planetary geology, weather systems, and natural and man-made catastrophes, civilizations, and cosmology...in fact, there's very little that doesn't interest her. A loom is gathering dust and needs rethreading, a wooden ship model awaits construction, and the cats demand their own time much more urgently. She works constantly, researches mostly on the Internet, and has books stacked up and waiting to be written. She can be contacted on Facebook, Twitter, and her website Closed Circle www.closed-circle.net.