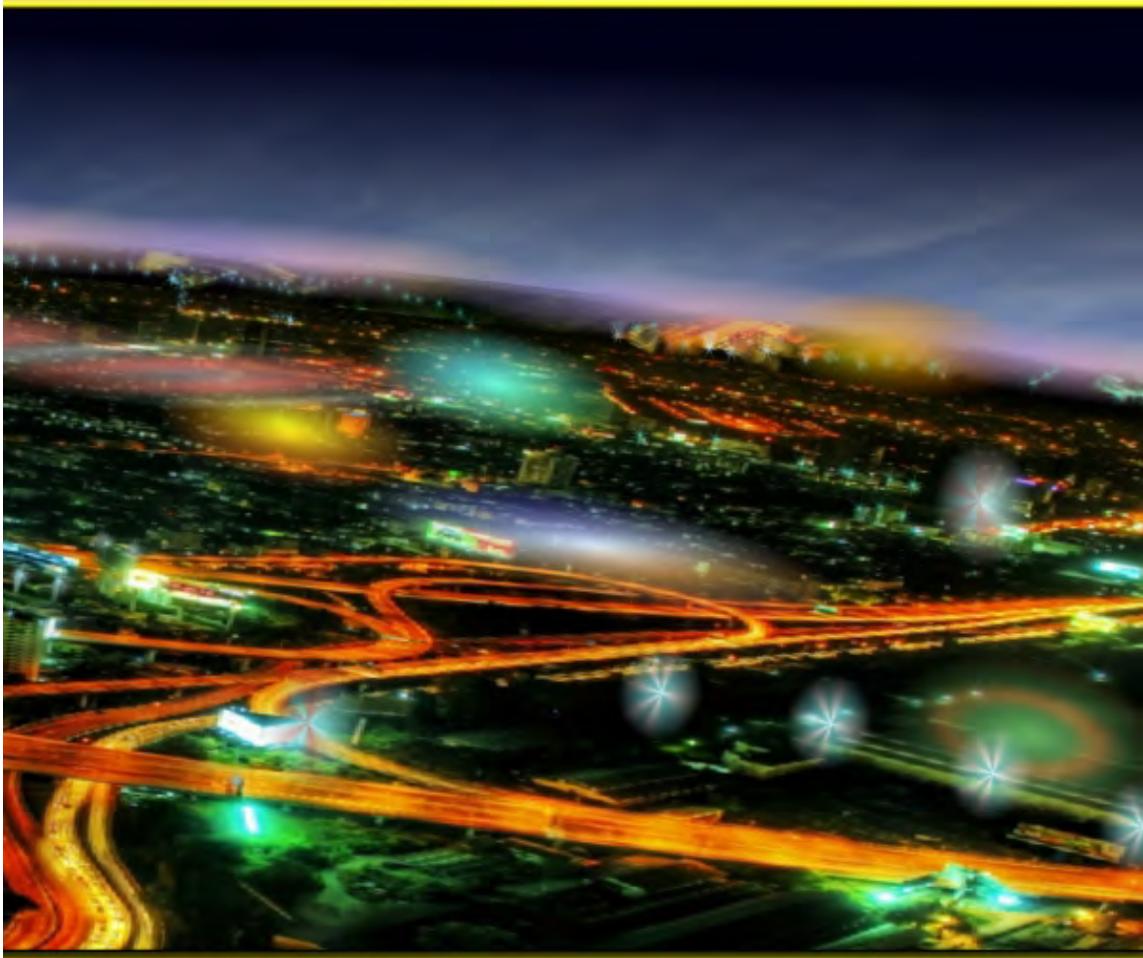


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MEL KEEGAN

DREAMCRAFT MULTIMEDIA, AUSTRALIA

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DreamCraft Multimedia
Box 270, Brighton 5048, South Australia

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**HELLGATE:
Cry Liberty**

Prelude

Hydralis, Omaru

The squad flyer came out of nowhere, cut a line over the roofs of Arkady Mall and buzzed the crowd. Six months ago the panic would have been thick as smog, with civilians screaming and running, and the Fleet security detail would have found easy pickings. Tonight, the flyer attracted a mix of curses and big-caliber gunfire. Shots peppered the blue and white tail of the squat, stubby craft and it bobbed up, high above the mall, rotating through three-sixty as it rose.

The squaddies were scanning, pinpointing the snipers, and moments later four rotary cannons in the blunt nose opened up. Windows blew out on the second and third levels of the Meiguo Hotel, and the kiosks and stalls threading down the center of the mall were pelted with glass and masonry. The public address bawled over the gathering riot with orders to lay down arms, be still, surrender.

But Leon Sherratt had never seen a Hydralis crowd obey orders from the squaddies. They were *Fleet*. They were military police from the blockade, as loathed as plague carriers — but no longer feared. Six months of constant spar- ring with gunships, squad flyers and worse had scarred the city, demolished parts of it, reduced others to fields of cinder. But while buildings could easily be ruined, *people* became inured to threat, and so habituated to the sound of chain guns, they merely dove into cover. Panic was sparse on the street; rage was ubiquitous.

Pressed against the bricks in the service alley at the side of a dance-shop called Désireux, Sherratt covered his ears with both hands. The combination of guns and public address would make a man's eardrums bleed, no less than the blare of 'music' from the danceshop. Synthrock was not to Sherratt's taste. Perhaps Resalq nerves were more

receptive to the subetheric tracks, and while humans actually paid to enter Désireux and listen to the din, it was making Leon Sherratt's spine crawl.

Lit in purple and blue by the animated neon from the danceshop, the blind windows in the hotel across the mall gushed return fire. Someone up there had a light launcher and a supply of rockets — enough to worry the squaddies. Not quite so brave now it was a standup fight, the flyer's crew pulled out to rooftop level and the crowd below broke into a chorus of cheers of abuse. Sherratt was less optimistic. He leaned out of the alley and gave the squad a glare.

They 'situation' had turned ugly. It was racing out of their control, and he knew the Fleet MPs must be routing in backup.

It could be a gunship next, blotting out the late evening sky above Arkady Mall, and Leon's palms prickled with anxious sweat. The squaddies were not here by chance. No one among the crowd would guess what had brought the Fleet bastards here tonight, but Sherratt was painfully well aware of it.

His palms were still blistered and the muscles in his thighs trembled with leftover fatigue. He was out of shape, and if he died tonight, he would have his own physical shortcomings to blame. He had been hiding too long, and when a man was cooped up, fearing to show his face to the street, he soon got soft — in a place where softness was as terminal as a disease.

The city was a bad place to be. Many of the locals had pulled out. They were up in 'the valley' and beyond, taking their kids and their old people, getting them out of the target zones. A month ago, Fleet had raided Hydralis almost every day. Industry was here, the big auto factories of Rand, Cyber-Zabou, Volvo and Weiss. Aircraft, engines, mainframes and the AI interfaces that made them work — everything was manufactured in the Hydralis area. This was the first city completed by the terraformer fleet, the first populated by humans. It remained the biggest city on the planet, with a population above six million and almost all of Omaru's industry. Fleet knew exactly what to target, to hurt.

Yet they had not destroyed Hydralis, and Leon Sherratt knew how much of the urban demolition was due to the fighting, missile overshoots, heavy vehicles going down hard in the industrial precincts. When a gunship bottomed out, even if the reactors did not spill, the devastation was the equal of anything wreaked by an artillery assault. Harlington and Southwark were wastelands. The Volvo assembly plant was a crater.

But Fleet had not inflicted the devastation it had expected in Hydralis, and if the officers commanding the blockade had hoped to beat the people into submission, they were disappointed. Omaru had not even begun to retaliate in earnest. Its citizens did not *want* to fight, yet they had shown their fangs to elements of the DeepSky Fleet, and they had drawn deep, arterial blood. Fleet backed off to lick its wounds.

The attacks came again — as they must: the Fleet blockade squadron was under orders countersigned in political offices in a city called Chicago, which Sherratt had never seen, never expected to see — but the raids were more cautious, infinitely more cunning. They feared the Hydralis militia. And they had reason to.

Fear was like a virus. Leon Sherratt felt it licking along his nerves, and swallowed on a dry throat. His palms burned after the climb, his legs trembled after the sprint. He was at liberty, but he wondered how many humans would be picked up by medevac and transferred directly to the morgue. Too many, he thought bitterly, and tonight their blood was on his own hands.

He had brought Fleet here. He had thought to vanish into the crowd, one more face among a thousand others, his biosigns lost in the tide of so many others that his ‘gibberish’ sensor readings would not give him away when the squaddies came.

They had come sooner than he expected. By his chrono it was just after 19:45 local time, and in this month of early summer the sky was the color of satsuma plums, with two moons up and the brightest points of the Rabelais Drift beginning to glitter like carnival lights in the north. From the west side of Mount Miorosu, out of the city lights, Hellgate was a pale, milky swathe in the sky, bright with superluminous, giant stars. The naked eye could see Nova 2631C, and with field glasses it was a visual spectacle.

Tonight he had no chance to even notice *El’arne*. The squad was still hovering 75 meters north of the Meiguo Hotel, and it was only a matter of minutes before their backup arrived. Another squad or a gunship — either way, he would be picked up. And if a gunship dropped in to fly topcover for the bastard squaddies, the autoguns would batter Arkady mall to rubble.

Leon Sherratt had to get out — and let *them* know he was leaving. Just as he had led them here like a fool, he had to lead them away again, fast. Too many people could die tonight, and he might still be taken. If the squaddies caught him, or killed him, it was all for nothing. The risk, and the cost of the blood spilled here, were too high.

Synthrock blared out of Désireux without pause. The volume in-

side the dance shop was so high, most of the clients were unaware of the riot. He recognized the vocal track. The lead singer for a band called Lux was screaming out a lyric about out-of-mind angelino 'rides,' and a boy called Rico. The song, if it could be dignified with the term, had charted across the colonies, where citybottom reverberated to the pungent subetherics of synth. Leon longed for the naive old steelrock of other decades, and for the complex cross-harmonies and quarter-tones of his own people's music.

It was too long since he had heard Resalq music, sung by native singers. The ancient music, discovered in the ruins on Jagreth and Velcastra, was being performed again, by humans now, but they got it wrong. Their voices could slither around the complex melodies, but their ears — accustomed to the fifteen-semitone scale — could barely even hear the Resalq quarter tones. A few bands were close enough to be bearable. One Celtish vocal quartet from the homeworlds was eerily close, but the heavy, relentless beat used to back their vocals set Sherratt on edge.

A twist of homesickness ambushed him as he leaned out from the alley once more, to get a visual bearing on the squad. He had been here too long. Omaru had a small, insular Resalq community, but they referred to themselves as 'gypsies.' They were nomads, footloose, like Dario and that *pred'yché* of his. Leon tried to remember the name, and then let it go. It meant nothing. The only thing that mattered now was to stop the shooting, stop the killing — and get out of Hydralis with his life and his data.

He knew the interior of Désireux well enough after several parties. In the front were the foyer and public facilities; then it was four levels of dance salons, and below them, the bar and the 'flops,' where patrons could sleep off the dream smoke which sizzled in the air of at least two of the salons. And above were the rooms where hustlers entertained their trade.

He needed a vidphone, quickly. His own phone was no good — he knew he was tapped. Fleet had traced him, isolated him out of a company of more than fifty individuals with access to the laboratory, and then they had cut him out of the pack the way a crippled deer was singled out by hunting wolves. Leon knew his phone was tapped, and he had hidden it an hour ago, left it open and receiving — 'the forecast for Greater Hydralis City, 14:00 to 20:00 hours, is for mild, changing conditions with winds from—'

The squaddies would have wasted precious minutes homing on the phone's signal, while Leon climbed the power conduit down the

inside of the lift shaft, from the third-level garages to the second sub-basement. It was the only way in or out of the lab, without being picked up by a surveillance camera, and even though he was a friend of the sovereign state of Omaru — even though the government of Hydralis had given him a smart card, passwords and AI recognition, he desperately avoided the cameras.

The system was *hacked*. It was lousy with virus-like spies, and as fast as the UOH particle physics lab cleaned them out, they were back. For the last three months Leon had lived on the edge, knowing the squaddies were never more than one step behind him. University of Omaru, Hydralis was a good place to hide. He was one more academic among a tribe of them, all thronging the campus, determined to keep to schedules while the colonial war erupted around them. Leon could pass for a post-grad student or one of the younger faculty members. He had the looks, and the qualifications to pull his weight in the particle physics lab, though he was not a physicist. Even a basic grasp, freshman level, of Resalq and Zunshu technology was enough to open doors at UOH, and once he was on the inside, campus security and faculty alike had made it so easy, he almost felt guilty.

Only Roy knew what he was. There was no way to fool Roy Arlott. He looked at Leon with the eyes of a lover — the first time in so long that Leon had looked into a lover's face, he could only surrender. Roy knew soon enough that Leon was *different*. The body geometry was a fraction 'off,' and the skin pigment, the exact shape of the pupil when it was fully contracted, even the body temperature. Roy was a linguist, not a physical scientist, but he was a highly intelligent man, and he knew Leon was not quite human.

The band bellowing out of Désireux changed, though the din remained the same. And Leon Sherratt was out of time. Roy Arlott's face whirled before his mind's eye as he took a breath, held it, and stepped out into the body of Arkady Mall.

The crowd had scattered. Many of the hucksters' stalls and kiosks had been ruined by the exchange of gunfire. Fruit, vegetables, junk jewelry, cheap cosmetics, body paints, vidcubes, were scattered in a trampled mess, while the traders had hurried under cover. Most of the city's buildings had shelters, strong-points where an earthquake or an artillery salvo might level the surface yet leave the strengthened basement intact.

Sherratt was almost alone as he deliberately stepped out into the open and turned his naked face to the squad flyer. Being alone, he attracted attention. They would scan him to be sure he was not ar-

mored, carrying a weapon which could knock down the flyer; or was he vidnews paparazzi, unarmed but still a target, because Fleet was getting bad press and freelance vidjockeys were the poison they lived with.

They knew his face — it was on file, though as yet they had no name to tag it with, much less a set of biosigns which would set Leon Sherratt apart. He gave the squaddies a measured four seconds to see him, image him, and try to get a scanner lock-on, and then he ran.

The alley was a dead-end filled with overflowing trashpacks and miniature whirlwinds of litter. He jumped the legs of a dooper who had passed out there, and went around the teens who were painting up a new round of lurid graffiti. They looked blankly at him as he dove by, headed for the service entrance where delivery drivers brought in supplies. Booze for the bar, cartridges for the dream smoke blowers, fresh food for the kitchens.

The cleaners also used the side entrance. The door was fouled with machines and chemicals, which broke several civil regulations — this door also served as a fire escape. In a panic, people would trip, fall, and be trampled. Sherratt kicked away the machines. They were sleeping drones, not even semi-intelligent, and they knew nothing as he pressed through a crush of cartons, stacked furniture, strewn coats and assorted baggage, to reach the inner door.

The sign pasted to it read *Private: staff only*. No one noticed as he appeared from the storeroom, and before him was the first of the floors, an arena filled with dancers, loud with synthrock, buzzing with dream smoke. The smoke had no effect on a Resalq, save to make him sneeze, but bass tracks hidden in the music, below the level of hearing, made his hackles rise and sweat spring from his pores. Hearing the same subetherics, humans became aroused.

Across the floor, revelers were clenched in twos, threes, bunches, gyrating to the heavy, audible beat. The heat and humidity were oppressive, and Sherratt was already sweating. In the strobing glare of the lights, paint smeared around the flanks and limbs of the dancers — most were naked, and the fluorescent warpaint, chic this year in the colonies, gave them a primal aspect. Exciting, disturbing, frightening.

The Companions were always the best dancers. Leon knew several of them, from nights spent here at private revels. Roy's group loved to boogie. The big redhead, Carlos, was on the near edge of the floor, working his body hard. Gold rings caught the strobes at his neck, wrists, breast and groin, fine chains winked against his skin as he spun, too absorbed in the performance to notice Sherratt.

Leon spared him only a glance, and his eyes moved on, looking for a way through the crush. The vidphones were on the other side, a rank of booths beside the bar. He saw an opening and launched himself into it. Dream smoke tingled in his nose, irritating his sinuses. Faces turned toward him with curious looks — what was he doing here, still in street clothes, wild eyed, driven?

Recognition sparked in some of the faces but Leon ignored them, pushing through, trying not to notice the odors of hot male bodies, sweated in heat, aroused by the synth. A man called his name, and though he knew the voice he ignored it and pressed on.

Two of the four vidphones were free, and as he reached the edge of the floor he hunted through his pockets — not for the smartcard which would have flagged his presence to the security computers in an instant, but for a five dollar coin. The squaddies already knew he had come in here: now let them work for their pay. If he made it too easy for them, he could be dead before he got out of Désireux.

As he ducked into the thick plastex hood the synth din abated enough for him to hear. He dropped the coin into the machine and stabbed numbers on the screen, a phonecode engraved in his memory. Not Roy's number, though he could quote that in his sleep. 8847 6635 was a number on the other side of Hydralis, out on the 'skirts, in the burbs beyond the factories, where people lived.

Only one question haunted him. Was Mitch home to pick up on the house line? It was too dangerous to call him on the road. If the machine at the house tried to forward the call, Leon would cancel at once. His fists clenched, nails raising welts in his palms, as he waited. If Mitch was out, Leon was not quite on his own, but the next few hours would be interesting. And then —

"6635, Garret." Like balm on a wound. Mitch had selected voice-only when he accepted the call, so the screen remained a kaleidoscope of colors, formless, sensual, suggesting half-imagined shapes before dissolving again.

"Mitch, it's me. Leon."

"Leon! Where in the hell are you, man? I called —"

"I'm in trouble," Leon said over the synth and Mitch Garret's voice. "You know a dance shop called Désireux?"

"What are you doing at Désireux?" Garret's voice rose sharply.

"Using a phone the bastards can't trace, and trying not to get killed!" Leon forced a breath to the bottom of his lungs. "I need a pickup, Mitch, or I'm not going to make it out."

"Christ." Garret skipped a beat. "Not from Désireux. There's too

many people, no place to put down, and there's already squaddies there, right?"

"A flyer over Arkady Mall. They'll be in here soon."

"How did they find you?" Mitch began. And then, "Later. Can you yet to Brady's?"

It was a restaurant on the south side, beyond the Weiss plant, not far from Mitch's place. Leon knew it. "Too far," he muttered. "I don't have wings or a groundie, and I'm running out of time. Can you make it to Camden Park?"

"I can't land there," Garret warned. "It's too open, too many people again. I'd draw a squad faster than you could whistle, if I try putting a truck down in the middle of a bunch of kids and old ladies. Come on, man, think!"

Think. Leon Sherratt clenched his eyes shut and rubbed his face hard. The synthrock was starting to deaden his frontal lobes and speak to the ancient reptile complex buried deep down, inside the Resalq brain. Senseless dread uncoiled through him like a ravel of tired party streamers.

And then he had it. "Touch and go," he said hoarsely, "don't land, just touch and go — C-Zab air park. Can you do it?"

Again Garret skipped a beat, and then he was back. "When?"

"Give me an hour," Leon panted. "You can *see* the C-Zab building from the Mall, but I have to shake these bastards for long enough to make the pickup, or I'll just drag you into this mess with me."

"And you'll be telling me what the fuck your mess is," Garret said tersely, "when I pull you out! An hour, Leon. Be there. I won't be able to hang around waiting for you — and if you bring the squaddies with you, I can't afford to be seen."

Mitch Garret was the link back to too many others, and if he were taken alive, drugged, 'interviewed' by Fleet's master interrogators, the price of Leon Sherratt's liberty would be too high.

The price could be Omaru. The end of the colonial wars before they properly began — the subjection of every colony in the Deep Sky ... and for the Zunshu, no opposition.

The vidphone clicked off from Garret's end, and Leon dragged his sweating palms over his chest. The linen shirt, with the green-copper crest of UOH on the breast pocket, was soaked. The thick braid into which he had roped his hair was heavy, annoying. Many times he longed to cut it, but it served a purpose. Many Resalq of his generation were not the same, and the diversion —

"Hey, Leon, man, you look like all hell."

A hand fell on his shoulder, making him jump. It was the big redhead, the Companion with the gold rings and blue-green body paint. The hair veiled Carlos's face, spilled around his shoulders, and the chameleon body paint changed color in the lights when he moved. He was local, bred and born in Hydralis and wasted here. With that face, the stature, the body form, the heavy genitals that could have been molded by the hand of a sculptor, he could have done well in uptown Sark, even Elstrom StarCity, Velcastra. More than once Leon had told him so, but Carlos only laughed. He was uneducated, with a broad accent from the wrong side of Hydralis, which would always imprison him here.

"You don't want to be with me, kid, not tonight." Leon's eyes were on the foyer, where patrons were still coming into Désireux though the club was already too packed for comfort. The squaddies could not be far away. "I have to get out of here." He heard the edge in his own voice.

Carlos tossed the long red hair back out of his eyes and looked over both shoulders. "Who's after you? You want I should get security? Désireux don't like it when their guests get hit on."

"No!" Leon held up both hands. "There's squaddies out there, Fleet bastards. They're looking for me, kid, and the less you know about it, the better. I just have to get the hell out."

"Fuckitall," Carlos said, half amused, "you don't do nothing by half. Git, man, while you can. Go out the back."

The back exits led around to the same alley where he had come in through the store room, and Leon was uncertain. If the squaddies knew this dance shop even a tenth as well as its patrons did, they would block the alley mouth, and when he tried to get back around to the mall he would run right into them. Leon cast about for options, furiously aware of the clock ticking in the back of his mind.

And all at once his time was up. The commotion in the foyer made Carlos spin, and as the shouting roared over the thundering synthrock, Sherratt took his chance.

He saw the squaddies over the heads of the dancers — three men and a woman, all of them Pakrani or Kuchini, in helmets and flak gear, visors down, searching the dance shop visually and on instruments.

As he had done in the street, he bobbed up out of concealment and showed his face just long enough for them to pinpoint him. And then Sherratt was gone like a jackrabbit. In ten paces he thanked whatever gods might be watching that he had let Roy Arlott drag him to idiotic faculty parties at Désireux.

If he had never been here before, the two Fleet MP squads would

have taken him, because the crush of dancers parted before them like a mob of sheep before the dogs. Some were screaming, others were yelling abuse, but they cleared the way for the squaddies to make good time across the floor, in the direction of the phone booths.

Long before they were there, Leon Sherratt was gone. Running crouched, he used the dancers for cover until he found his way through to the back. The stairs curved around the elevator shaft. The MPs would expect him to use the elevator, which would immediately tell them which floor he had punched for. Sherratt leaned into the one waiting car and selected level 9 — and then he fled up the stairs.

Thigh muscles which had cooled and stiffened after the sprint from the UOH transit station hurt with each step. He tuned out the pain, forcing himself on — but not to level 9. The squaddies would take one of the three lifts. They were lazy, Sherratt thought, accustomed to flying or riding wherever they were headed. It was a conditioned reflex after long service in uniform. These squad officers would be from some Middle Heavens world, possibly even from the homeworlds. Fleet was not foolish enough to assign Deep Sky citizens to trash their own homes, persecute their own people.

Level 7 was the parking garage, open to the air on both sides of the building, with the rooftops of Arkady Mall at least one floor below. Above the garage were four levels of luxury accommodation and a bistro right on the roof, with a pointless, ugly view of the industrial parks. No one in Hydralis seemed to notice that the factories seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. Industry was the life's blood of Omaru. It had made the world the richest in the Deep Sky, and the most densely populated — all of which made it a big, fat target for the Confederacy. The military service levy bit deeper and harder here, and at 'tax time' the fortune levied from Omaru would have settled the tax bill for any three other colonies.

It was natural for the colonial wars to begin here, Sherratt thought dizzily as he pushed his legs on, up, around the curving stairs. His right hand grabbed for the rail. He began to haul himself up as he passed the fourth level, and as he grasped the hollow steel he felt the resonance of the elevator going up right beside him.

With a blistering curse he sucked in a breath and pushed himself harder. He turned his wrist to see his chrono, and listened to the drumbeat of his heart. He was out of shape, and he was in deep trouble. He had been too long in hiding, spent too long going soft while he waited for Fleet security to search elsewhere for him.

Weeks had become a month, more, and at last he assumed they

would guess he had skipped, gotten out of Hydralis with the tidal surge of people taking their kids and old folk to the agricultural towns. He was certain Fleet must be searching for him in places like Troy and Larisa, and he played his hand.

Humans had a saying: everyone was allowed one mistake. Sherratt was sure he had made many more than that, and this one could be his last. He was fish-breathing as he dove into the cool, shifting and acrid air of the parking garage. He took a precious moment just to force air into his lungs, and then he dragged both hands over his sweating face and pushed on.

If someone had left a car unlocked —

Only a moron would leave a vehicle unlocked in this part of town, but Sherratt hunted up and down the ranks, trying a door here, a window there. He had no tools to break in and hotwire a car, but he might have gotten lucky: guys were often stoned before they arrived at Désireux, and forgot little things like security.

But it seemed his luck was spent tonight. All the luck he owned had been invested in getting out of the lab alive, making it into the elevator shaft via a service hatch, down and out through the subbasement.

Even now, no one at UOH would know what he had done, what he had taken, where he had hidden it. They would know soon enough what was gone, and as soon as the news was public, that Leon Sherratt had been killed by Fleet squaddies, or arrested, they would know *who* had taken the device.

Leon did not care — they could have it back, when Mark or Dario, or that human Mark was so fond of, Jazinsky, was finished with it. If Mark and Jazinsky were even half as smart as they believed they were, the government of Hydralis could have *fifty* of the things, fresh off the assembly line. But first they had to surrender one for study, and the devices were so rare, so precious, they might have been stuffed with gelemeralds.

No authority on Omaru was about to make one available to a stranger, an offworlder, unconnected with the university and the government. Sherratt was out of options.

His heart was slowing, he had his breath back, and he knew the Fleet squad would be turning the bistro upside down and shaking it. They would be in the kitchens, in the bathrooms, believing he had lost them. They would be frustrated and angry, and they would be vicious. The whole dance shop would be sealed, and the interrogations would go through till dawn: who had assisted the fugitive, who had hidden him, who knew him? People would die, others would rot in the prison

on Rashid, the second moon. Leon could easily be there with them, and the thought filled his veins with liquid fire.

He was breathing easier, though his legs shook and the blisters in his palms were bleeding; and again he was out of time, almost out of options. From the open mouth of the garage, on the north side, which faced away from Arkady Mall, he could see the top section of the CyberZabou building.

The company designed the AI human-machine interfaces for half of the mainframes from the homeworlds on out. The C-Zab building reared eighty floors above Camden Park, and the company occupied only twenty levels, close to the top. The bottom fifty floors were filled with arcades, retail, entertainment, and the top ten were executive apartments, high above the street — under the air park which was Leon's goal.

His way down from the garage was the fire escape, an old fashioned zigzag of bare metal against the wall, in the alcove housing the lift shaft. The night air was as cool as equatorial Hydralis would ever enjoy, and he poised on the threshold, searching for a blunt object. Cleaning drones had been here, not long before. The whole garage was almost too clean, but at last he saw what he wanted.

A champagne magnum — bearing the label of Hsian Sheng Wineries, Velcastra, and still smelling of white wine not yet gone rank — stood just inside the top of the fire escape. Someone had finished their party out here, in the cool and quiet of the evening. From the city rooftops you could watch the sternflares of ships departing Hydralis Field. The spaceport was on the horizon, but the big ships cut a line out over this part of the city. Kids came up to rooftop level to find cool air, get stoned and make out.

The broken blisters smarted as he lifted the magnum. The plastex almost slipped on the blood in his palm, but he twisted it, hefted it over his shoulder and hurled it, hard, into the canopy of the most expensive car in reach. The alarm exploded, hurting his ears, but Sherratt did not wait around to listen.

Two levels above, in the bistro, the squaddies would assume he had given them the slip a second time and tried to steal a car. His attempts had set off the alarm. The Fleet officers would be in the elevator moments later.

The fire escape was steep, the going was slow, but two floors lower he had access to the building's interior once more. His ears were still full of the electronic racket of the car alarm when he dove through the wide glass doors into the Orange Blossom cafe on level 5. The doors

shut out the alarm, but the synthrock reverberated through the whole framework of the building.

Faces turned toward him as he appeared from the fire escape but he ignored them all. The service lifts — the big freight elevators which served the kitchens — were off to the right, behind the meandering tables, with their ridiculous umbrellas, as if the Orange Blossom were in the open air, and it was not night outside.

His one prayer was that the freight lift would be available, and for the first time in almost two hours, he was in luck. He was inside at once, and punched for street level. The platform went down fast, being designed for cargo, not the comfort of human passengers, and it opened into the chill air and odd reek of the yards out back of Désireux.

Now he was gambling, but it was a good wager: he had been seen inside, he was known to have punched the elevator for level 9, and he was suspected to have tried to steal a car on level 7. His gamble was that all the squad officers had been called up to the garage, leaving the ground floor either unguarded, or only lightly covered.

Luck was holding together, and a thread of hope uncoiled through his chest as he saw the clear alley mouth. He was moving at once, and at the same corner where he had hidden to watch the flyer buzz the crowd, he ducked into concealment again, long enough to scan the mall visually in both directions.

The squad flyer and its backup — another identical craft, blunt-nosed, with the high tail and the cannons mounted in the belly — had landed in the ruined body of the mall. Two officers and a swarm of drones guarded the vehicles; the other four would be in the parking garage — if they had not played a hunch and taken the fire escape. Before long the Orange Blossom's patrons would be describing the wild-eyed fugitive who had bolted into the freight elevator, and he would have company.

In a way, he was counting on it. Sherratt sucked in a quick breath, bunched his muscles and launched himself. The mall was ten meters wide, and dead opposite was the YukiYume Arcade. It was still belching music though most of its patrons had dispersed with the arrival of the flyers. The arcade's wide entranceway was lit with dancing blue and white neon, and Sherratt made a dead run, not even breathing, into the glare and noise.

The security drones which swarmed around the flyers picked him up at once, but he was inside before they caught him up, and lost among the hundreds of people who had come here to get away from Hydralis's fierce equatorial heat.

To one side was the rink, a vast arena of ice where skaters circled endlessly and the technicians were programming the Zamboni to clean up the surface before the midnight hockey game. To the other side was the bar, O'Grady's, and the first of YukiYume's many VR dens.

Green marble stairs led down into the underworld of subbasements, and glass-bottomed lifts whisked patrons up through the honeycomb superstructure of the mall, which shared a common wall with the Meiguo Hotel. Leon did not know this part of Arkady as well as he knew the dance shop, but he had often killed a few hours here to escape the heat. If he closed his eyes, the chill of YukiYume reminded him of Riga, in the mountains far to the north of Sark.

The homesickness was back, full-force, as he headed past the stairs and into the maze. YukiYume was a labyrinth, with blind passages headed off, up and down, apparently at random. Arkady Mall was not designed by the terraformer fleet. It was built only fifty years before, to replace the area of the city which was razed by fire when a crippled heavy lifter lost its Aragos and smacked down short of the spaceport. The arcade wound itself around the back side of the ice arena, looped up and down like a series of switchbacks, and even people who knew it well could get turned around.

The worst thing Leon could do was run. The squaddy security drones would pick him out of the crowd in an instant if he moved too fast. He knew they were back there, sniffing, imaging, sorting, and when he saw the signage of a den he recognized, he stepped inside, under the animated logo proclaiming *Phantasm*.

It was part VR parlor, part sexshop — the line between the two often blurred into meaninglessness. The sharp smell of chimera was on the air here, tingling in his head, and the cavern was dark red, dark green, warmer than the arcade yet still twenty degrees cooler than the street. Life-sized holos of the house Companions shimmered in alcoves off to both sides of the doorway, advertising their wares.

Patrons could hire them for real, enjoy flesh, blood and bone, for high prices; or they could take the VR option, where fantasy encounters had been woven around the Companions. Sabel was ebony-black, with the stature of a Pakrani and the ripped physique of a man who lived in the gym. He was magnificent in scraps of silk and leather, with his mane of scarlet-streaked dreadlocks, and he knew it. Lex was a gold-skinned Lushi, buzzcut, tattooed from head to foot. His holo twisted and writhed to display the lean body of a dancer, the agility of an acrobat, and an arrogance which outmuscled Sabel's. Coraline was from some colony Leon did not know, with subtle engineering — or

else she was local to Hydralis, and her body had been reworked for the trade. The legs were too long to be natural, and those pneumatic breasts could not have suffered the tug of Omaru's gravity for long.

He bypassed them all, cutting a line into the waiting room and looking for one specific face. It was after seven. Danny should be at work by now, and he should be here. The lounge was occupied with the usual flock of hopeless, helpless late teens, two boys and a girl, waiting for a VR hookup. The tiny rooms in the back were all busy, with three more waiting their turn. Downstairs, the flesh and blood Companions, Sabel, Lex and Coraline, would be playing poker, drinking coffee, smoking bel-grass, waiting for a trick to show who could afford the real deal, not the VR sim. Some nights they had a long wait.

A bell on the low counter carried a sign: *Ring for service*. Leon thumped it hard enough to make the waiting kids jump, and an angry face thrust out of one of the hookup booths. "Hey, if you don't like waiting, you can get the fuck out of my — oh, it's you, Leon. Christ, you look like shit. What you need? Are you using? I didn't think that was your scene!"

As he spoke, Danny Shroeder was tugging Leon out of the lounge and into the back, the private area where the shop-sitters relaxed. The threedee was on, displaying some vidmovie. Danny had just muted the sound and left it running while he went to clean up the booth for the next client in line to fry his brains. Fresh VR jacks, a paper sheet over the couch, a water bottle with the seal intact, the remote lying on the pillow.

Framed in the threedee, two husky youths were entwined and heaving. One was bronze-skinned, the other pale as drifted snow, and both could have been churned out by the same personal trainer, in the same gym, on the same machines. Both boys were beautiful, but to Leon's exhausted eyes, something about them looked fake, while Danny Shroeder was infinitely more appealing.

He was short, pale because he worked in the arcade, with sunburn on his nose from some foray out and up, straggling brown hair that was still trying to grow out the service cut, and the soft hands of a guy who had done his entire five-year hitch in data processing. But Danny was *real*, and his plain, ordinary face was filled with concern as he pressed Leon into a chair and reached for a bottle of Green Douglas malt whiskey, 'the Deep Sky's best Irish.'

"Leon, for godsakes." He pressed a double into Sherratt's hands and perched on the arm of the chair as if he worried Leon would drop it.

"I'm okay, Danny," Leon said hoarsely. It was water he needed, not booze. "I've got squaddies behind me — they just shot up the mall. You can't hear it in here over the music from the rink."

"It was on security." Danny waved vaguely at the threedee. "Stay off the streets, it said. Action in progress, some kind of bullshit. I didn't look too close. That was you? Christ." He fidgeted with anxiety. "You, uh, didn't lead them here —?"

Sherratt gave him a reproachful look. "You know me better than that. They know I'm in YukiYume *somewhere*, but this place is an ant heap, and I'll go through too fast."

"Go where?" Danny demanded. "If there's squaddies behind you, and you're on foot —"

"I've got a pickup, 45 minutes, the C-Zab air park." Sherratt handed back the whiskey untouched. "You got any water, Danny? I've been running my ass off for the last hour, and I'm so far out of shape, if they don't take me I'll probably drop dead of a heart attack."

"Damn." Shroeder scrambled up and hurried into the lounge for a bottle from the cold cabinet. A voice spoke to him, under Leon's hearing, and he snapped back, "In a minute, *sir*, soon as I get it set up."

He was back then, snapping the cap off a plastex liter bottle. Leon took it from him and forced himself not to swallow the whole thing in one pull. It would only cramp his belly, and he had far to go. "I need a way out, Danny," he said between swallows. "Other side of YukiYume from Désireux, something that gives me a clear shot through to C-Zab."

Anyone who worked here, as Shroeder had, since he was released from his Fleet service, knew the arcade blindfolded. "Under the rink, through the service ways," Danny said without hesitation. "I know the codes to get the doors open, because my cousin works for the company that services the freezing gear for the rink. He comes down here, gets stoned out of his gourd, and I kind of cover for him while Sabel bounces him senseless." He flushed, which looked unhealthy on one so pale. "I'm not supposed to, you tell anyone, Leon, and my job goes whoosh, but for godsakes, it's only watching the machines, and I just did five years in data processing on the *Chicago*, I'm so far overqualified for Rod's job, it's not funny, and Rod doesn't get much chance to skull out and get done by somebody like Sabel too often, and —"

He was babbling because he was scared, and Leon also was watching the time, listening to the relentless tick of the clock in the back of his mind. "Not a word to a soul, Danny. The service ways come up where?"

Shroeder sucked in a breath. "In the alley between YukiYume's blind side and the Ressemeyer Complex, it's all parking garages and

trashpacks. When you get out the door, turn *right*, man, you got it? *Right*. Make a left and you're dead. You'll come out on Shackleton Square, in the open. Make a right, and take *every* right after that— I think there's three — and you come out on Argyll Plaza."

It was perfect. Sherratt knew Argyll Plaza well. There was a bistro there, with a view of Camden Park on one side, and the CyberZabou building towered over the park's west border. "Got it. And thanks, Danny. I owe you one."

"You owe me *three* for this," Shroeder corrected. "You know what you owe me. I've called you three times in the last week, you're never answering." He opened his arms, inviting an embrace.

"I've been busy." Leon swept him up, held him tightly and kissed him, though there was little time to linger. "I'll call you, Danny, when it's safe." He and Shroeder had not shared more than an hour of intimacy, stretched over months, and he knew Danny wanted more — he knew Roy would only be amused, or might even invite himself along. Roy was not the kind to settle down, or want the comfort of an enduring partnership, let alone the fidelity that went along with promises. Roy was not yet thirty years old, and though he thought he knew Sherratt's secrets, there were some he had never dreamed. Leon Sherratt was four times his age.

And he might be dead in minutes. He could not allow himself to be arrested. Much more than his own life was riding on this crazy scheme, and not for the first time he called himself a fool — though not for being involved. Not for talking his way into the particle physics lab at UOH, where Roy worked and could easily get him a job as a lab assistant — jobs were easy to get in Hydralis, since the Fleet raids began.

But Sherratt was no kind of professional thief. Getting into the lab was as easy as using Roy's smartcard. Roy did not even know, yet, that Leon had taken it; he should never have known. It should have been back in his wallet before he missed it, and Leon castigated himself viciously. He knew he should have been able to get out of the lab again with the borrowed device, without tripping the security system.

For minutes he had thought he was out, free, and he only realized a silent alarm must have triggered when he saw the drones buzzing around. They were outside the long windows, every meter of the way down the side of the lab building. The ways out were covered— he would be arrested as soon as he put his nose outside.

As he released Danny Shroeder he peered at his palms. The bleeding had stopped but they were full of raw flesh. He had skinned them going down the elevator service shaft, and his shoulders were begin-

ning to stiffen and ache after the unaccustomed physical effort. His legs were protesting just standing, and he chastised himself mercilessly for falling so far out of condition. But Fleet had imaged his face three months ago, and thereafter liberty meant hiding, because nowhere in Hydralis City was free of Fleet surveillance. The drones were everywhere, often too small to be seen. Some of them were no larger than his thumb, scattered like thistledown from the bigger viddrones which were quickly shot down by snipers like those in the mall.

His one chance to get his hands on a device had come tonight, and it might not come again. Some specialist from the Winslow-Mao Institute had come in, running the blockade with a mercenary crew, or gunrunners. It could be done, but the danger was terrible. The man from Winslow-Mao had run the gauntlet, but Sherratt was bleak about his chances of understanding the device well enough to duplicate the technology.

Without any shadow of doubt, that device was either ancient Resalq — or it was Zunshu, and Leon was too young to know. What a physicist from Velcastra was expected to make of it, he could not imagine. It should be Jazinsky studying it, and his own *e'quero*, even his brother, who was a cryptocyberneticist. But the shot through the blockade was too dangerous to risk them. Mark Sherratt and Barb Jazinsky would never be allowed to do it, even if they were insane enough to volunteer, and Leon prayed they were not.

The humans had another timeworn saying, which he had never understood, much less appreciated. If Mohammed would not go to the mountain — whoever, or whatever 'Mohammed' was — then the mountain would have to be fetched to him, or it.

And since there was no way Mark or Jazinsky would ever be on this side of the blockade, the device was going to have to go to them, whether the government of Omaru in general and the faculty of UOH liked it, or not. There were times when Leon Sherratt thought it would be easier to physically move a mountain.

If he died tonight, the ancient device was so expertly hidden, it was not likely to be found for more than a year. And if Leon did perish tonight, he would take its secret with him — and any real hope the Deep Sky had of victory in the colonial wars.

"I have to go, Danny," he said huskily. Wide blue eyes blinked up at him, and he dropped a kiss between them. "I don't want to get you in trouble, and there's squaddies out there, not far enough away. Codes?"

"Call me," Shroeder whispered as he scrawled a nine-digit se-

quence on the back of a scrap of printer flimsy, and tucked it into Leon's breast pocket, under the UOH crest. "Promise you'll call me."

"I will." Leon was already moving. "When it's safe — you don't want to be close to me, not now."

"I ... know," Danny said awkwardly. He was no taller than Leon's shoulder, his cologne was too sweet for Sherratt's liking, and he was just twenty-three years old. Often, Leon thought of him as a child, but humans were deceptive. "Look, get the hell out, will you?" Danny said tersely. "Run, be safe, and — pick up the goddamn' phone one of these times!"

Five years in Fleet, even in the data processing department buried in the heart of a super-carrier, gave a man a certain toughness. Sherratt touched Danny's face with his fingertips and stepped back. "Yessir, Sergeant Shroeder." At the curtain which separated the office from the lounge out front, he turned back. "Keep your ears open. Trust nothing, till you hear from me."

He was gone then, doubling back toward the rink, and his eyes skipped from passage to doorway to window, watching for the drone that would put a shot in him, the vidcam that would image his face. He moved no faster than the other patrons of YukiYume, who meandered between the ice arena, the dream shops, dance shops and, on the lower levels, the sexshops, dens where the trade was rough. The way back to the rink seemed much longer than the route he had taken to Phantasm, but he was still alone as he stepped into a dogleg in the passage.

On one side was the closet where the cleaning drones were housed; on the other, a blind door with no handle, no window, no signage, just a keypad. He fished the scrap of paper from his pocket, keyed in the nine digits and held his breath.

The door slid to the right, and the lights kicked on automatically inside. A waft of freezing, dank air, smelling strongly of mildew, hit him in the face. It stank like a boat neglected too long, but he stepped right into it, grateful for Danny's wastrel cousin and his penchant for a little upmarket dope and a big downtown Companion.

He thumped the door release from the inside to close it, and gave thanks again: the owners of YukiYume were penny-pinching. The lock was cheap, not any kind of smart lock that would demand a user ID before opening, and record who had used it. Nothing would lead the squaddies back to Danny or Phantasm.

A plain plascrete tunnel led down on a steep angle, and he knew he was under the rink moments later. Music roared overhead and the ceiling rumbled constantly with the mass of the skaters. The air down

here was not much above freezing, and he jogged to keep warm.

The passage ran under the short axis of the rink, under the grandstands on the other side, and he jogged by the garage where the Zamboni was kept when it was not in use. It was up top tonight, getting a tune-up before the big game. As he hit the up-ramp, headed for the alley Danny had described, he looked at his chrono.

He was on pace to make the pickup, with fifteen minutes left to stay alive and at liberty, and find his way to the C-Zab air park. Sherratt's pulse rate picked up as he pounded to the top of the ramp. He took a breath and hit the door release.

The alley was deep in shadow and the air was like soup, blood-heat and thick with humidity. Two lamps lit the way, and the only other light sources were at the exits of Ressmeyer's parking garage. To his right was a street, and he must go that way. To his left the alley opened directly onto Shackleton Square, with the big bronze Tribute to the Pioneers, and twenty dusty eucalypts, jacarandas, acacias.

The air seemed quiet but he paused to listen. He heard none of the telltale whine of servos and the *pish-pish* sound of the maneuvering jets of small drones. Time was wasting, and he let the service door close behind him. He pushed out of the well of shadow, headed away from the tree-lined square, and as he reached the corner by the trashpacks he hunted for a landmark to get his bearings.

He could see the top of the CyberZabou building, and Danny knew this place like his own backyard. If Sherratt kept on bearing right, ducking from one dusty, gray alley to the next, he would find himself in the plaza opposite Camden Park. His whole body felt as if he had been held down and pounded, but the adrenaline rush of being out, at liberty, and close to the end, overrode pain and exhaustion.

His lungs panted the heavy air and his ears were open, scanning every moment for the sound of drones. They *must* be there somewhere behind. He did not believe he could outrun or outfox them, yet he was still moving, still alone, when his nose picked up the aromas of coffee and cinnamon.

Before him were the wide spaces of Camden Park, bright with the colored lights and decorations — it was Proclamation Day tomorrow. Obliquely opposite the Cafe Titania was the Cyber-Zabou building, rearing over the park like a chrome and armorglass monolith. Sherratt dragged both hands over his sweated face and peered at his chrono.

The street was a dazzle of lights, with four lanes of sporadic ground traffic and endless streamers of cars headed into the air park, high overhead. A gaggle of factory techs loitered on the sidewalk, heading

for the park, and he tagged behind them as they dodged across.

Under a canopy of eucalypts that smelt strongly of tomcats, he clung to the shadows and slunk north, toward the C-Zab tower. He was still looking for drones, and the hum of insects in the night air made his flesh crawl. His hackles were up as he hugged the last shadow, opposite the bright ground-level windows of Zabou Arcade.

He was alone here — if he could make it into the mouth of the arcade, the swarm of humanity would swallow him again. If he ran, a security drone might pick him out of the confusion of traffic and pedestrians headed into the theaters and dance shops; if he meandered, he might give the machines too long to image him, cross-reference and get a positive ident. He took a breath and ran.

Traffic was thicker around the arcade mouth, but it was mostly stop-and-drops — taxis, aircabs touching town momentarily, gyrobikes milling around the head of the ramp to the basement personal parking. Halfway across the road, he *knew* he had been picked up. It was a feeling of tingling in the spine, when a drone imaged him. Resalq nerves could feel it, while humans were oblivious once they grew out of childhood.

This drone was either unarmed or programmed not to shoot into a crowd. Sherratt was still at liberty as he pushed into the throngs on the sidewalk, and he ducked down among the revelers. Insults wafted after him but he kept moving, shoving, and then he was in the arcade.

Bright lights, music and the chill draft of a/c enveloped him. Pressed into the doorway of a dreamshop, where the air smelt faintly musky with gryphon and chimera, he froze and used his eyeballs, his ears, for twenty agonizing seconds. The viddrone had lost him in the crush, and he hoped the machine was local. It might have been one of Zabou's own security units, monitoring the crowd for potential trouble. It would be trading signals with its AI even as he stood in the dreamshop doorway, but the C-Zab AI did not concern Sherratt.

What troubled him was the very real probability that C-Zab's AI was hacked, and Fleet would have its own AI aboard a prowling, stealthed gunship, listening in to C-Zab's e-traffic. Sherratt's eyes smarted with sweat as he blinked at his chrono. He was in the building, but at the wrong end of it. He had eight minutes to get to the air park, find the park-and-ride, and be visible for Mitch Garret. Mitch would not wait more than twenty seconds — he could not afford to.

And when he was gone, Sherratt's chances of getting out were close to zero. Missing the pickup amounted to ritual suicide, and his heart beat hard at his ribs as he cast about for the elevators.

A queue had formed up, ten deep and five wide. The upper levels were filled with theaters, cinemas, VR palaces, the salons where up-town patrons amused themselves. While the population of Hydralis decimated itself as families fled the battleground, and then decimated itself again as workers in 'unessential industries' pulled out, every business found itself competing for trade. Some had closed their doors already, but most were surviving on offers of *de luxe* service at firesale rates. The Zabou crowd was rougher than usual, Sherratt noticed as he threaded into the lines waiting for the elevators and slouched down to look like one of their number.

There was a citybottom element here tonight, while this building's usual clientele was well-heeled, and headed down from the air park rather than up from the street. Leon was not about to complain. With his disheveled appearance and haunted face, he would have been picked out of the normal C-Zab crowd immediately. Tonight, he almost blended in.

He waited through four cycles before he could get into an elevator, and then the car stopped on almost every floor. He was headed directly to the air park, and crammed into the back, against the brushed-steel wall, where the resonance of the Arago field under the car made his teeth chatter.

Fatigue had begun to make him shake, and he knew the adrenaline surge was spent. The crisis energy which had driven him this far was exhausted, and there was nothing left. A squaddy would pop something now. He would snort a bubble of mai-boogey to kickstart his body again. Sherratt had nothing, and in any case the drugs on which some humans relied did little for the Resalq.

His eyes were on the time, and as the car passed level 40 he was aware of a heavy, sinking feeling in the pit of his belly. It was taking too long, Mitch Garret would have gone by the time he reached the air park. Futile, acid tears of frustration stung his eyes and his fists clenched, raising fresh blood in his palms.

And then the car emptied out all at once on 42, and as the last passenger hurried out he caught a glimpse of the show posters at the theater opposite. A new production was opening tonight, something bright and loud, sensual and ridiculous, which would make the people of Hydralis forget the war for a few hours. Everyone was headed to the same venue.

Alone in the car, Sherratt stabbed the air park button several times and fought down his panic breathing. He had not believed he owned another drop of adrenaline, but something hit his blood like speed. His

heart was pounding again, his legs trembling with the senseless need to run, when the car opened.

The air park was the size of a football field, cooler because it was high above Hydralis, stinking with exhaust and hot engines, busy with cars and cabs hustling in every direction. For a moment disorientation made his head spin. He swallowed on a surge of bile and spun about, hunting for orientation.

Beside the lift was a bright holochart of the air park with a winking 'you are here' flag. He sucked in a breath of the acrid air as he forced his mind clear to study it. The park-and-ride was to his left, forty meters from the elevators, and right on the perimeter of the building, where it was marked with blue and green running lights. He pushed off from the holo display. He was on time, give or take a minute or two either way.

The park was well monitored and he did not run to the west parapet. He stood up straight, hands thrust into his pockets, and sauntered, which would draw no attention from C-Zab's security AI. But as he drew closer to the park-and-ride his eyes were wide, scanning the sky to the south, which was the approach lane for the short-stop park.

Cars streamed in by ones and twos. He did not recognize any, and at last, leaning on the guard rail at the parapet, high above the street, he began to look for faces instead. Not for the first time, he was grateful for the structure of Resalq eyes. He was naturally as far-sighted as a sharp shooter, and well able to see drivers, rather than just cars.

He caught sight of Mitch Garret as a mustard yellow Marshall truck dropped into the approach lane and tagged onto the ant lines. The signage along the quick-stop park flashed, *Do not stop engines!* Cars and cabs feathered down on storming repulsion, cruised into semicircular bays to pick up or drop off passengers, and lifted off directly out of the bays. Nine bays were available, and incoming vehicles stopped on the threshold, waiting in an Arago hover for a green light.

Two places back, behind a cab and a grocery-getter overloaded with kids, Mitch had seen him. He raised a hand, and as the cab moved in, he brought the Marshall truck up behind the family. Someone down the parking rank was struggling with parcels, rearranging their cargo trunk over and over, and Leon felt his insides clench as Mitch waited in line, longer and longer.

The old couple were still fiddling with their bags — they must have been old enough to have come out with the First Fleet, Leon thought, and who should know damned well how to pack a trunk. They were still arguing over the back of a classic Rand FancyDancer when the taxi

pulled out, and a commercial delivery van tailed it out of the airpark.

The truck dropped in fast, almost jumping the green light. Mitch tweaked it through sixty degrees to fit the bay, and the canopy popped with a hiss of air pressure. The Rand began to wallow on a howl of repulsion, and Leon saw Mitch's black curly head lean over. He was yelling through the engine noise. Leon could not hear a word, but he knew it must be encouragements to get up and *move*.

He had just doubled over to duck in under the canopy when a shot went by his left cheek close enough to scorch his skin, and this time he did hear what Garret was bellowing at him.

"I said, *get down!* Leon, get out of the way! Leon!"

Another shot went over his head close enough to almost disturb his hair, and Sherratt dove into the hot repulsion storm. His shoulder hit the plascrete and he swore vividly as he rolled, almost under the truck with the repulsion scorching his face, drying out his eyes. He flung up his arms to protect his head, and caught a bare glimpse as a drone was picked up by the third round from Garret's weapon. The football-sized machine was flung into the parapet's crash barriers, spitting showers of magnesium-bright sparks.

"Get in!" Garret yelled. "Leon, where are you, man? *Gotta go!*"

Half blind, gasping in pain and wondering if his shoulder was out, Sherratt dragged himself off the plascrete. He flung himself into the left side of the Rand's big cab and rasped at Garret, "Move!"

The truck was off at once, and Mitch Garret broke every rule in the book. Leaving the building, cars were compelled by law to tag into the ant lines and make altitude away from the CyberZabou tower. Garret hopped over the crash barriers and dropped like a stone to the mid-point of the massive building. As the truck fell, he brought the nose around onto a heading up Broadway, and before the vehicle had leveled out he gunned it into the canyon-like street.

For almost a minute he hopped streets — Broadway to Macao to Grenasche to Rabelais — putting five kilometers between them and the C-Zab building, and only then did he drop down onto the entry ramp for the six-lane Spaceport Clearway, and thread into the ground traffic.

On the dash before him the instruments were active. Many more instruments than were normal in a civilian truck. Sherratt cleared his throat, hugged his shoulder, and asked hoarsely,

"Did they image us?"

"Of course they bloody imaged us," Mitch said tersely. "But they're welcome to. There's got to be forty thousand identical trucks on Omaru, and it's wearing false plates. They run a make on this crate,

they'll find out it's a ten year old, four-door groundie belonging to a little old lady in Fukushima. And no, there's nobody behind us. I've lost them." As if saying it aloud gave him license to relax, Garret leaned back into the seat, flicked on the autodrive, and set his head back. "Christ, Leon, what the hell are you doing? You're supposed to be keeping a profile so low, you're looking up at the worms!"

"I left a message." Leon was rummaging in the back, among the discarded packets, bottles, cans, looking for anything with liquid left. He found a half-empty flask of the local cola, and though he usually considered it a bare notch under poison, he drained it in one swallow.

"I didn't get any message." Mitch's brown eyes were skimming the instruments again, but his voice was level. The anger of adrenaline and fear was settling, and he gave Sherratt a worried look. "You're hurt."

"I feel like I've been worked over," Leon admitted, and mocked himself a little. "I'm in no condition to be doing this, but it was tonight or not at all. They've got a specialist from Velcastra coming in to look at one of the things. Roy told me they were setting up the labs, and I know my way around — I used to work there, remember?"

"Yeah, you worked there till you got yourself in the Fleet image bank," Garret said harshly, and then made apologetic noises. "Sorry, man. You gave me a scare. You, uh, you get the thing?"

Sherratt had pulled the band from his hair and was raking the fingers of his left hand through it, massaging his scalp. "I got it. Don't ask any more, Mitch. What you don't know —"

"The bastards can't beat out of me," Garret finished. "Where are you hurt? Let me take a look at you."

But Sherratt fended him off for the moment. "When we get where we're going. Speaking of which, where *are* we going?" He was peering out, trying to recognize a landmark, get his bearings.

"Avi's place," Garret told him, eyes on the instruments again. "We'll be there in ten. I'm taking the next exit off this ratline, then we're in the air."

"Good enough." Leon settled back in the seat, hugging himself and wondering how bad it was all going to hurt in the morning. He had pulled muscles he had never known he had, and his palms were slick with blood, full of dirt. The shoulder was not as bad as he had feared, but he favored it as he tried to find a way to rest, and watched the lights of Hydralis stream by the canopy.

Mauve and white neon marked out the exit ramp. Mitch swung onto it and opened up the Aragos. The truck lifted straight up, but rather than joining the traffic lanes he kept low, and cut across the river,

with its chains of barges, and the vast dark area of the marshes. Beacons and marker lights glittered from Ship Creek. Beyond, the ocean was silver-green under two moons.

Exhaustion had a way of anesthetizing a man. Sherratt was conscious of every injury, but he had passed beyond the point of caring about them when Garret dropped the truck down into the wide yards of Avi Hersch's property. They were almost out of Hydralis, in the area of the old dockyards, where little had changed in a hundred years and the war had done no real damage, since there was nothing here to interest Fleet.

The Hersch property was old, rambling, with sheds and outbuildings straggling over most of a hectare. Avi used some of them, but most had stood empty for years. His trade was crash repairs; a few of the sheds were filled with salvaged vehicles and parts. Another was a workshop where mechanics and apprentices labored on call. They kept no fixed hours, Leon remembered; when there was a job, Avi called them. They could work around the clock for a month and then sleep in the sun for weeks.

At this hour, when they should have been off-shift, tools screamed in the workshop, meaning a rush job was in. Lights spilled out under the roller doors and music jangled out of a boombox without a hint of melody, harmony or lyric. Sherratt closed his ears to it and hoisted himself out of the seat as the truck rocked to a stop at the back verandah of Avi's house.

Mitch Garret was a big guy, with the muscles and sinews built by heavy work. He drove a towtruck for Avi, on the same deal as the kids who torched, welded and painted. Sherratt was taller, heavier — the Resalq sometimes passed as Pakrani or Kuchini — but Garret would always be stronger. His grandparents were genetically redesigned, and the gene strands had only partially dissolved in the second generation. Mitch still wore the old Maori tattoos on both forearms, taking pride in a heritage his parents had only half remembered.

He took Sherratt's good arm across his shoulders and lifted most of Leon's weight. Ahead of them, the house was cream colored in the moonlight, with a coat of fresh paint over age-old plaster. The roof was new, after the storms last season, and lights shone from three windows. Moths fluttered against insect screens, and as Garret drew close he called ahead to Avi Hersch.

The back door swung inward, and the screen outward. One of the dogs scooted out, froze as he saw Garret and Leon, and gave a surly growl. On the doorstep, Avi Hersch called the animal back, and a

moment later the dog recognized Mitch, if not Leon. Its tail wagged once before it vanished into the shadows.

“What the hell happened?” Avi’s voice was light, husky, with the local Hydralis accent. He had been born only a few kilometers from here, and after a tour with Fleet and a few years working for Stevenage and Regan de la Court in the mines on Cimarosa and Kathleen, he had returned to Omaru with a decent cash pad, and put the money into crash repairs. He stepped down from the door and his silhouette, against the light, told a story that was common enough in the city this year.

His left arm was missing, above the elbow, and he limped badly on the patched-together remains of his left leg. Like many thousands of others, he was caught in the Fleet raids, medevaced out to one of the field units, and from there to any hospital in the hemisphere that could take the case load on the day of the assault.

That night, three months ago, six thousand people were killed, eleven thousand more were badly injured, and five billion colonial dollars’ damage was done, all in just under fourteen minutes. The fires rampaged across three sectors, Fukushima, Michigan, Valencia, and on into Shackleton before they were stopped. The Bowman-Hong plant was reduced to a single toxic crater, and with it went Omaru’s short-term ability to build Murchison fighter-interceptors and the Shrike missile system. Manufacture was shifted to Belgrade, in the southern hemisphere, but production was stalled for three months. For weeks more, fresh aircraft and missiles were slow to fill the gaps in a colonial defense force which routinely challenged Fleet — won, and expected to win. Mercenary blockade runners made up the difference.

The Omaru militia pilots hovered somewhere between insane, suicidal, indomitable and brilliant. Sherratt was never sure which, but no one doubted their courage. Crews aboard the Fleet ships unlucky enough to be assigned duty on the blockade had learned many bitter lessons.

A glance at Sherratt, and Avi Hersch knew exactly what had happened. He was sixty years old, with collar-long, raven’s wing hair just staring to march back from his brow, bronze skin, brown eyes, and features which had been beautiful in his youth and were still handsome as time began to encroach. Leon liked him a great deal. Avi had a deep maturity that, to a Resalq, was as attractive as a lovely face or fine body. He was in the familiar black jeans, a white shirt with the right sleeve rolled up about a muscular forearm and the empty left sleeve pinned to the shoulder.

With a soft curse, Avi flicked away the butt of a cigarette and stood aside to let Garret manhandle Leon up into the house. The smell of supper greeted him, and oddly, Sherratt was hungry as well as thirsty. A half pitcher of some local light ale stood on the dining table in the open end of the kitchen, and leftover steak and vegetables were cold on the counter. CNS whispered out of the threedee in the hall, stories of the blockade and Fleet's attempted incursions into other parts of Omaru. Leon knew the house quite well. The darkened living room opened off the other side of the kitchen; a passageway led left, from the hall, to several bedrooms, one of which was a cluttered office. Avi had the house to himself tonight, but others had been here until recently; a cluster of glasses stood on the counter, waiting to be loaded into the dishwasher.

All this, Sherratt absorbed without even looking up, before he lowered himself onto a straight-backed kitchen chair and blinked at the malachite green tiles under his sneakers. The door slammed, shutting out the racket of tools and music from the workshop.

"You look like shit," Hersch observed. "Mitch, get the kit."

"Bathroom?" Garret guessed.

"Cupboard under the sink. And get a pail of hot water," Hersch added. He pulled up a second chair and sat, knee to knee with Leon. "You want to tell me what happened?" When Sherratt answered only with a grunt, he went on, "Then let me guess. You made your run, you got caught ...?"

"Didn't get caught," Leon said as he reached for the pitcher of beer.

He got a hand to it, and Avi saw the blood in his palms. "Christ, what have you been doing, you maniac? Mitch!"

"Right here." Garret stuck his head back into the kitchen. "You wanted a pail of hot water, it's filling."

Hersch had taken Leon's right hand in his own, turned it palm-up, and now he swore over it. "I know cable burns when I see them, Lee."

"I had to climb down. Don't ask," Sherratt brought the pitcher to his lips, left handed, and drank deeply.

Mock patient, Hersch let him finish and then demanded his left hand. Leon gave it to him, and when Garret returned with a pail, Hersch poured a lot of polidine into the water. "Put your hands in, soak them. Christ, you're an idiot."

"But I got what I went for ... got out, and didn't get picked up," Sherratt said defensively. "Avi, for godsakes, we've talked about this. You know what's at stake. Who was going to do it, if not me?"

"Yeah, I know." Avi pulled his one hand back through the dark

hair which fell heavily over his brow. "Mitch, get the lights on, overhead, and look in my desk drawer. Get the big magnifying glass. Then come back here and hold it for me." He had pushed the plates out of the way and laid the first aid kit open on the table at his elbow.

The polidine smarted, and the sharp pain woke Leon out of a growing stupor. His hands felt too big, stiff as paddles, and when he lifted them from the water he was not surprised to see how they had swollen. The sounds of rummaging in a room along the hallway told him where Mitch was, what he was doing, and then he was back, with a circuit board magnifier. The lens carried its own lights, and as they turned on Sherratt looked away.

His hands lay palm-up on the table, and for several minutes Avi poked and pulled with a needle and tweezers, sterilized with the polidine. Leon held his lip between his teeth till Hersch was done, and then watched, heavy-eyed, as his hands were slathered in ointment, and Mitch taped them.

The roll of tape dropped back into the kit box and Avi sat back and looked critically at him. "What else?"

Mute, rebellious, Leon worked his shoulder around and shook his head. "It's all right. I took a hit, but it's fine now."

"Mitch, get the shirt off him," Hersch growled.

"I said I'm fine," Leon protested, but Garret ignored him. The damp linen shirt dropped onto his lap, and he endured probing fingers until even Hersch was satisfied. "Like I told you," Leon muttered, "I'm all right. And I need a favor, Avi. I have to make a call."

"My house lines aren't monitored. Yet," Hersch began.

"No." Clumsy with the taped hands, Sherratt was fiddling with the shirt. "I have to call out."

"Give me that." Garret swiped the shirt out of his hands, shook it out and held it for him.

"How far out?" Hersch's eyes narrowed on him.

"Borushek." Sherratt looked down at his hands as if he had never seen them before. The fingers were turning an odd shade of mauve or blue as bruises rose, and the palms were burning. "I have to call —" No good to say, 'my father,' no matter if it was the right term to use, which it was not. "A specialist," he said lamely.

"UOH has a specialist," Garret told Hersch. "Somebody they brought in through the blockade from Velcastra."

"They're wasting their time." Sherratt was terse with frustration. "There's maybe ten people in the Deep Sky who're even remotely qualified to study that thing, and three of them are my own family."

Mark, Dario, and his partner, Tor. It's a very short list, to which I'd add Jazinsky, if there was any point in dropping names around here."

"You're dead certain," Garret observed.

Sherratt gave him a dark look. "You know where I'm from. I grew up in their community. I read their language, and I've told you it's not as dead as a lot of people think."

"We've seen you do it," Avi said softly. He cocked his head at Sherratt with the familiar quizzical expression. "Who the hell are you, Leon? *What* are you? You're an agent, aren't you? But who're you with?"

"Daku," Mitch growled. It had been his first guess in the days after Sherratt made contact with their militia group, and it was still his best.

"I've told you, no." Leon's voice carried no sting. "But I suppose you could call me an agent."

"You mean there's more weird shit going on in the Deep Sky than the Daku." Avi indulged himself in a dry chuckle. "You got that right! And you want to call out. Borushek." He looked up over Leon's head at Mitch. "I don't want to call out from any transmitter on the property here. Fleet's getting way too close. You know their AIs are eavesdropping on every squeak out of our transmitters, broadband, tachyon, everything."

He made a good point, but Sherratt had not forgotten. Very little on Omaru went unwatched, unheard, and the bigger the organization, the more surveillance it drew. Government, industry and military offices anywhere on the planet were the juiciest targets, and in the early days of the war it was discovered, watertight security was impossible.

The first raids into the Hydralis region were the simplest for Fleet. Their targets were the manufacturing plants — Murchison, Arago, Rand — which built war machines, weapons, drones. Next, centers of government, comm hubs, data relays, the conduits for any comm signals, and in particular the tachyon band. Omaru had little hardware left that could call out, and what e-space transmitters had survived the opening rounds of the war had been *mobile*, and moved too fast for Fleet to catch them.

They were on ships, and those ships were still moving, never left in the same location for more than a few hours. The secret of survival when one lived under the vidcam eyes of drones, was to be mobile, unpredictable, and diffuse. With the old world, homeworld thinking, the commanders on the blockade were still struggling to grasp this. They seemed to expect the government of Omaru to gather in one place and sit tight, waiting to be blasted out of existence, or arrested. The Grand Senate complex in downtown Hydralis had vanished in a pall of

greasy blue-gray smoke in the first raid, which also destroyed the local Arago factory. But the government complex had been empty.

On Omaru, lately, 'government' was almost the wrong word. How did one govern a province, much less a continent or a whole colony world, when every word and erg of data transmitted were the property of the enemy a nanosecond later?

There were ways, but Fleet had not yet imagined them. For some moments Leon Sherratt and Avi Hersch studied each other with a dark, bleak kind of humor, before Hersch ambled away into the hall, and Sherratt heard keys patter on the threedee pad. He was making a call, and Leon looked up into Mitch Garret's dark brown eyes as they listened.

Garret had rolled up his sleeves, and the Maori tattoos stood out, dark blue, green and red, against the bronze of his skin. His face was shadowed in the light from overhead, making him look older than he was, and as Avi's call was accepted, Leon saw stress lines appear about his mouth.

No part of this was a game, and every moment of it was filled with danger that curdled Sherratt's belly. They could easily die — tonight, an hour from now, all of them. If the stakes were not so high, none of them would be here, involved in this insanity.

"It's Hersch Crash Repairs," Avi said to the threedee in a neutral tone. "is Mister Tarrant there?"

"This is Alec Tarrant." The voice was familiar, with a quality of steel and grit.

"Your job's ready to go, Mister Tarrant," Avi told him. "You asked us to let you know, soon as the work was finished. It just tested out fine. You can come over and pick it up right now, if you're free."

It was code, but nothing Fleet's AI would recognize. Signals like these were worked out on paper between 'units' of the militia. The military — the pilots, aircraft techs, support crews — were everywhere, scattered from citybottom to the bright lights of the uptown burbs, not merely in Hydralis but on every part of Omaru.

Encryption was pointless. If Fleet could not hack the message, the very failure told them it was a new level of encryption, to protect critical transmissions, which told them something was on, or brewing. Their reaction was to raid every signal source they *thought* their AIs *might* have picked up in the last thirty days. Multiple strikes put the militia squadron back in the air, and choked Hydralis with fresh smoke.

"I'll come right over," Tarrant said evenly. "What's the damage?"

"Six-four-eight." More code, telling Tarrant in broad terms what

the local security situation was, and what might be needed. "Less than we'd thought. We managed to salvage some of the old rig. See you in an hour?"

"Two," Tarrant corrected, and hung up.

Footsteps scuffed on the tiles, and Hersch was back. "You heard what the man said. Two hours. You need to get some rest, Leon. Can you eat? I got plenty of leftovers."

Sherratt took a deep breath, felt out his insides, and nodded. "I need to call Roy, too. You mind ...?"

"Help yourself." Avi gestured over his shoulder at the hall, where the house's old threedee stood, doing service as a vidphone and news machine. "Mitch, you want to eat? Why don't you flash the steaks and make some fresh coffee. There's a nine-pack of Wangs in the back."

Careful of every movement, Sherratt pushed up from the chair. His legs were stiff; both Achilles tendons felt like white-hot steel rods embedded in his ankles, and he was sore through the arms and shoulders. But only his palms were visibly injured, and with luck, he thought, he could fake it.

He should have known better. Avi Hersch had been two weeks in the hospital, fighting to survive. Medical care was always thin on the ground after any of the battles. The night Hersch was torn apart by shrapnel spat out of a smoking squaddy flyer as it plowed into a building, more than a thousand people in that office tower alone were wounded, half that many killed outright. The city's emergency facilities were over-stretched. Some of the injured died waiting for treatment, and the survivors — like Avi himself — remained crippled long after the event.

He should have had a biocyber prosthesis by this time, Leon thought bitterly. Anyplace else in the colonies, Avi would have been fixed up in a few weeks, and in a year or so he would have collected a cloned arm. He could afford the process; money was not the issue.

Resources were the problem. Omaru had too little which was being made to stretch too far, and Fleet was hurting them — not badly enough to stop the war, nor even to win; but enough to wound people, individuals like Avi Hersch, who might remain crippled for a long time to come, and the casualties who died before they even made it to surgery.

"You're hurting," Hersch said quietly as Sherratt walked out into the hall and punched Roy's number. "What's the problem, Lee?"

"Muscles, tendons, you name it, it hurts," Sherratt said sourly, hating to make the admission. "I'm not in any condition to do what I

just did, and I'll pay the price for it, all right?" He heard the defensive note in his own voice and sighed as he waited for Roy to answer. "I'm sorry. I'm just ... sick and tired of myself tonight."

"No reason to be." Hersch joined him in the hall, while Garret fussed with the steaks. "You went into the lab, took what we need, made it out in one piece, stashed the thing ... stayed one step ahead of the bastards, and you're here to tell the story. You asking me? I'd say you did good."

"Yeah?" Leon mocked himself with a lopsided grin. "So why do I feel like crap?"

"You want something to take?" Avi offered.

It was a difficult question, since most analgesics and peps which worked for humans did little for the Resalq. "You got any remiol?" Leon asked quietly.

"You don't want to be tranking out," Hersch warned.

There was no way to tell him, remiol was an analgesic in the Resalq body. It was a heavy tranquilizer in humans. "I'm just strung up," Sherratt said evasively. "All it'll do is get my oars back in the water."

Hersch looked far from convinced, but he disappeared down the house's lateral passageway, in the direction of the bathroom, and before he returned the threedee cleared and Roy's face appeared.

"It's me," Leon said redundantly.

"I can see that." Roy peered out of the holo display. "Christ, you look — what's happened?"

"Oh, I got beat up," Sherratt told him, and it was not too much a lie. "I made it to Avi's. Can you come over?"

"You got what? Did you say beat up?" Roy's voice sharpened. "Where? Damn it, Lee, where'd you go to get worked over?"

"Just get over here," Sherratt said tiredly. "I'll tell you." Or, as much of the story as he could afford to tell. "Roy?"

"I'll be there in twenty. Fifteen," Roy corrected. "I'll run a few stop lights. Go sit down, Lee, you look terrible."

"Thanks." Sherratt was still looking into the threedee when Roy hung up, and only then became aware of Avi, a pace behind him, with a pill bottle and a small glass balanced in the palm of his hand. The pills were pale blue pinheads. He swallowed two with half the water, and gestured at the threedee. "Roy's —"

"Coming over. I heard." Avi thrust the bottle into his pocket and held his one hand out for the glass. "Go and eat. You know what remiol does to an empty belly. What will you tell Roy?"

It was a fair question, and as yet Leon was less than sure. The less

Roy knew, the safer it would be for everyone. Yet Roy was far from stupid. He had given Leon his connection to UOH, and secured him the job there, as a lab technician; for months he had known Leon was on the run — but many people were. If Fleet even suspected a person of being involved with the militia, they disappeared off the street.

Thousands had vanished without trace, and if they reappeared again at all, they showed up as numbers, inmates of the prison on Rashid. No one shipped to Rashid had been sent back yet. No one back home expected their colleagues, friends and family to be returned until after the war, the trials, and the prison sentences awarded to the survivors of Rashid, whom the Confederacy judged traitors.

Roy knew Leon had been hiding out, but on Omaru this year, it only painted Sherratt as the hero. He knew Leon was with a militia group — he knew *something* was on, something big enough to be worth the risk. And he knew several members of the militia group gathered at Avi Hersch's place. When he was here, he was always anxious, as if he were curious but did not want to see or hear anything about militia business.

Tired right through to the bone marrow, Sherratt settled back in the chair at the kitchen table, and Mitch Garret slid a plate in front of him. The steak was thick and rare, the salad was fresh, the bread was yesterday's reheated. Sherratt was almost too tired to chew, but as soon as he began to eat the hunger gnawed at his insides, and he ate a lot.

Across the table, Mitch watched him critically but made no comment, and as Avi turned the volume up on the threedee they both gave their attention to CNS. Independent journalists from many news services were insystem. Fleet liked to call the reports bogus, inflated and irresponsible, but as far as Sherratt knew, the independents were telling only the truth.

A retaliatory strike had been made on the bauxite mines in the east, at Sonoma. Two miners — machines the size of small towns — had been destroyed, and the open pit bauxite lodes were not expected to produce again. The miners could not be repaired; new ones would have to be built, and Fleet had already destroyed the Junken-Silva-Kumano plant in the south, where they were made.

The strike on Sonoma was payback, Sherratt knew — everyone knew. Just yesterday, the Fleet cruiser *Tethys* was gutted, and over six hundred people killed or injured. She had been making a foray well inside the orbit of the smallest moon, Bahrain, and whatever chimpanzee was in command of the blockade this month should have known it was no place to be.

Fleet might get away with a fighter-interceptor patrol around the moons and smelters, on the very inner skirts of the blockade, but if they tried to move one of the big ships in closer, it had to be read as a major threat, major challenge. A warship in orbit over Omaru would shift the balances too far, and Fleet knew it.

Were they pushing? On whose orders? Leon could not believe Fleet Borushek would issue the order which would trigger the final battle, for the outcome was so uncertain. A victory to Fleet surely meant Omaru as a world must be reduced to wreckage, with a toxic atmosphere, a nuclear winter setting in, a vast charred wasteland where Hydralis had been. No colonial office would touch off that battle. The order would have to come from Earth.

And a victory to Omaru would mean the super-carrier *Kiev* was smashed to drifting debris, and the blockade contingent with her, at a cost of sixty thousand human lives and more than three trillion colonial dollars in hardware. The figures swam in Sherratt's tired brain like tadpoles, formless, almost meaningless, as he ate.

And somewhere, buried deep in the heart of Fleet there was a tiny germ of uncertainty, there must be: could Omaru do it? Could they take the *Kiev*? How?

The *Tethys* was open to space on all decks today, radiotoxic, too dangerous even for a crew of sophisticated drones. She had been towed back to the blockade by remote-piloted tugs and would be salvaged, cut up and fed to the smelters at Albeniz or Cimarosa. She had blundered into the minefield which was disguised as asteroid debris left over from the Goldman-Pataki workings. Spent fuel elements from the smelters were dumped there by the tonne, crackling hot, moored, waiting for processing, and they whited-out sensors.

No one aboard the *Tethys* ever knew the hot, sizzling haze of rubble was seeded with drone warheads. There were no real brains aboard the drones, just a ganglion with a single function: wait for a passing engine signature, blow the one-shot maneuvering rocket, aim for the superhot stern tubes, and detonate.

And today Fleet hit Sonoma in a kind of gruesome payback ritual which could not go on much longer. The revenge for Sonoma would hurt Fleet badly. Vengeance had to stop while there was something left to fight over, Sherratt thought, and he was painfully aware of his place in the scheme.

Each militia unit was like one ant in the nest, and the gestalt creature was so massive, so finely divided, Fleet could never hope to understand it. Messages filtered down to the worker ants only slowly,

but Alec Tarrant's group had known for weeks, Omaru was almost ready to throw down the gauntlet.

"Hello, Lee."

Sherratt had been so consumed by his thoughts and the remiol, he had not heard Roy Arlott step into the house. He seemed to blink awake, shake a scarlet mist out of his head, and when he twisted away from the table he found Roy behind him, wearing a rueful smile on a worried face.

He had come from home, not work, and was in the familiar loud shirt and shorts, rope thongs on his feet, cowrie shell bracelets on both wrists, his hair roped back in salt-damp dreadlocks. The long white-blond hair contrasted oddly against the bronze of his skin, and he still smelt like the ocean.

"Hey." Roy held out his hands, and Leon took them carefully, mindful of his taped palms. "You want to tell me?"

"Thanks for coming. I, uh, got into a scrape." He looked around for Garret and Hersch, but they had gone. He heard voices at the other end of the house, caught something about shipments and weapons. Roy must be able to hear it too, but he had the knack of closing his ears.

"A scrape, was it?" Roy pulled up a chair and frowned over Leon's hands. "Do I ask what went on?"

"I'd be grateful if you didn't." Leon leaned forward, rested his head against Roy's and closed his eyes. "All you have to know is, it's done, and I'm in one piece."

"You call this one piece?" Roy's grip tightened a fraction on Sherratt's hands, inspiring a soft curse. "Sorry." He lifted his chin and landed a kiss on Leon's cheek. "How bad?"

"Not very. Give me a couple of days. Most of the damage was my own fault, for letting myself get soft." Leon sat up with a wince and chose his words with great care. "Alec's coming over. I'm calling out."

"Out of system?" Roy's brows rose. "Calling home?"

"You knew the day would come." Leon stood very carefully, and gestured into the living room. "We need to talk."

"Do we?" Roy sounded almost as tired as Leon felt, but he followed, sat beside him on the stuffed green leather couch and took Leon's hands in his lap. "We've said it all, Lee. There's nothing left, is there?"

One lamp had turned on, low and amber. "There's *this*." Sherratt rolled his head on the leather padding to look into Roy's face. Fine bones, high cheekbones, gave him an almost classical look, as if he should have been a dancer, a painter. In fact, he was a linguist; some-

times, a poet. He had come through his Fleet hitch with his nose unbroken, and why he had returned to Hydralis, Leon could not understand. He had the brains and looks to have gone to Velcastra or Jagreth, gotten out of this pit.

"There's *what*?" Roy asked. He gave Leon a small shake. "Did you take something? You're sounding weird."

"Just painkillers." Leon stirred with an effort. "I told you, I'm calling out, Roy. You always knew I would, when I was done here. I didn't come to Hydralis for the good of my health."

"No shit?" Roy faked a laugh. Beneath it, he was bruised. "So you're leaving."

"Not tonight. It's a pickup I'm calling out for."

"From Borushek?" Roy hazarded.

"Not strictly ... a community there. Someone'll come for me."

"Through the blockade?" Roy sounded doubtful.

Leon took a deep breath and hunted for patience. "They run the blockade all the time, Roy. Smugglers, wreckers, black marketeers. You know how it's done, we all do. You cut a track in from Hellgate, you make a slingshot right through the Drift, and drop out inside the blockade."

Roy's fair head was nodding, but his lower lip was caught between his teeth. "Dangerous."

"So is living on Omaru this year," Leon added, more harshly than he had intended. "It's getting close, Roy. It's going to end soon, one way or another, and you don't want to be here when it does."

The blue-green eyes were the color of the ocean Roy loved so much. He had a house just above the beach at Silver Sands and his a/c was on the blink. On days like this, when the tropical heat settled over Hydralis like a shroud, he spent half the time in the water. "Where else would I be?" Roy asked darkly. "Every one of us knows Fleet could burn the atmosphere right off this planet, but who's got someplace else to be?"

"You do," Sherratt told him. "I want you with me."

"Borushek?" Roy's fair brows arched.

"If you want to be there." Leon leaned over and kissed him, savoring the opportunity, lingering over it. He tongued across Roy's lips, tasting sea salt, and when Roy moved closer, ignored the protests of his abused body and leaned into an embrace. "I'm not kidding, Roy," he whispered against the warm, salt-damp dreadlocks. "I want you beside me. If Borushek's no good for you, there's other places."

Roy's fine-boned hands spanned Leon's thighs. "I'd be an idiot to turn you down. Still, it makes me feel ... weird." He paused, as if to

think, with his face pressed to Sherratt's neck. "Like I'm running out on her. On Omaru."

"You've already played your part," Leon told him ruefully. "You got me into UOH. When the shooting war's over, I'll be able to tell you what it was all about. Just don't ask me yet."

"All right." Roy leaned back and looked into his face. "You look bad. How can I help?"

"I just need to rest," Sherratt growled. "Lie down with me awhile. Alec Tarrant's on his way over. I'll get my call out, and then ... stay with me tonight."

"Here?" Roy glanced around at Avi Hersch's living room.

"There's a couple of bedrooms, guys often stay over. Avi's got space." Leon summoned the wraith of a smile. "I'm not going to be much use to you tonight."

"Did I come over here looking for a fuck?" Roy chided. "Let me take care of you, Lee. Just *once*, will you stop being the agent — or whatever the hell you are — and just let me take care of you."

"You got yourself a deal," Sherratt said dryly, and let every bone and muscle go limp. "I could use a drink."

"Whiskey, brandy? I'll see what Avi's got."

"Water," Leon corrected, mocking himself. "Some agent, huh?"

The exhaustion and remiol had begun to catch up with him, and minutes later Roy plucked the glass out of his hand before it could fall. Leon was half-aware as Roy sat beside him, head on his shoulder, and the scent of the ocean in his nose as he began to drowse fetched dreams of white coral sands, baby surf that broke a hundred meters out on the reef, and the black gulls of Frazer Island wheeling overhead. It was Borushek, the south continent, where industry and population had yet to encroach; but Roy was there. He was laughing at something, in his cownie shells and white-blond dreadlocks, naked in the shade of the Cocos Islands palms. Leon reached for him and they went down in the sand. It was soft as a silk sheet over a feather bed, and cool, while Roy's skin was sun-hot, and he knew what Leon wanted. He mounted the big shaft carefully, for it was thick, hard, demanding; and then he was riding, straight-backed, thrilling Leon with terrible pleasure. His face was turned to the sky, and his voice was husky as he whispered,

"Lee. Lee, wake up, they're here. Tarrant just landed."

"What?" Sherratt woke too fast and winced as his shoulders and legs protested being asked to move at all.

He was still on the couch in the living room, with a half-full water glass beside him, and Roy was right. The Arago whine of an incoming

heavy vehicle was still blowing down to silence. He heard the hiss of a canopy releasing and the creak as it went up, then voices he knew. Alec Tarrant had not come alone — he trusted no one, nothing. Sherratt knew the voice which called out to Avi, on the front of the house. It was Martin Cimino, and Leon relaxed again. Cimino had been at Tarrant's right hand since the blockade closed down and the raids began. You soon learned who you could depend on, and Cimino was one of the best.

"It's good to see you, Alec," Hersch was saying. "I know it's short notice, but Leon called a few hours ago. I guess you'd know more about this than I do."

"Maybe," Tarrant's steely voice admitted. "Where is he?"

"Living room." They were right outside the front windows, casting shadows on the closed blinds.

"Keep an eye out, Martin," Tarrant said quietly to Cimino.

"We expecting trouble?" Avi wanted to know.

"We always do." Cimino's voice was quiet, husky, with the accent of Velcastra.

"Which is probably why we're still alive," Tarrant added.

The front door swung inward and the lights came up. Avi was a pace ahead of Tarrant, and Sherratt pushed up to his feet. Tarrant was original homeworlds stock like Avi, no trace of genetic reworking in him. He was fifty, stocky, with short-cropped red hair beginning to show strands of silver, and fans of lines about his eyes, which were as dark blue as Roy's were pale. His skin was fair, freckled, and diamond studs sparkled in both lobes. The big shoulders wore a light linen jacket which did not quite disguise the harness of a sidearm, and Tarrant wore the linen slacks that were common in Hydralis year-round.

He looked Leon up and down critically but forewent the obvious comments, and instead arched both brows in question. Sherratt nodded once, and Tarrant grinned, showing white teeth.

"Well, now," he drawled in an odd accent that seemed to come from everywhere, and nowhere, "I expect half of the DeepSky Fleet will be looking for you."

"Three quarters," Sherratt corrected. "Time to vanish, Colonel, while I can. I need to call out."

Tarrant considered the proposition for a moment. "You have the device with you?"

But Leon made negative gestures. "I know exactly where it is. At this moment I'm the only person in the cosmos who does, and that's why it's safe. I need a pickup, Colonel, unless you can get me a ride

with some lunatic blockade runner who's insystem right now —?"

"You're out of luck," Tarrant told him wryly. "I assume you have someone specific to call?"

"Someone," Leon agreed, thinking of Mark, Dario, Tor.

"You staying here?"

Leon looked at Avi, and Hersch nodded.

The militia colonel hesitated a moment longer and then stepped aside. "Grab your things. You want to come along, Avi?"

But Hersch had just plopped into the spot on the couch where Sherratt had been, and was massaging the stump of his left arm as if it ached. "Not this time. The less I know, and ... so on. You need another gun? Mitch would ride along."

"It wouldn't hurt." At the window, Tarrant had lifted aside one corner of the blind and was watching Garret and Cimino.

They were talking in undertones by the car, and Sherratt smelt the sweet odor of bel-grass. He touched Roy's cheek gently. "Wait for me. It shouldn't take long."

"I'll be here," Roy whispered.

The second bedroom had been converted to a home office, and the safe was built into the floor. Leon grunted as he stooped to lift aside the rug and dropped his hand onto the palm reader. The safe knew ten or twelve palmprints, and for him it opened at once. He rummaged in the recess beneath for a single blue-cased datacube he had left there weeks before.

The safe growled shut and as he kicked the rug back into place he heard Tarrant in the front yard, telling Mitch to take whatever he wanted from the trunk. Meaning, Colt, Chiyoda, Zamfir, Garret's choice. Tarrant never went anywhere without expecting a standup fight, and the big Rand Agudo was armored. Roy had helped himself to a beer and was watching CNS, some media postmortem of the Sonoma incident. On the threshold, Leon leaned over to kiss and cupped the smaller man's smooth face in his taped palm for a moment.

"Be here," he whispered.

Roy answered only with a nod, and as Sherratt stepped outside the door clicked shut behind him.

The night air was cooler. The moons were down, the stars very bright this far from the city, and he paused to gaze at Hellgate. It was a bright place in the sky, sparkling with the supergiant stars and pale with the swirl of the nebula, 2631C. Knowing what it was, what drove it and what used it made him shiver.

Like Saraine, Omaru was too close. Even Borushek was too close to

be safe, but Omaru was perched as precariously as Saraine, and unlike Saraine, Omaru was noisy, dirty, obnoxious with industry, as if the humans were deliberately trying to advertise their presence. Only the sheer size of the *Mare Resalq* and the mechanism of random chance had kept them safe so far, and meanwhile the blockade was out there, somewhere over his head — the DeepSky Fleet, the Terran Confederacy, picking a fight in a house that was already on fire.

Abruptly, Sherratt's skin was prickling and his hackles rising. He wanted out. Now, tonight, if he could have gotten a ride. But the mercenary ship that had brought the physicist through from Velcastra had already gone, and he was back to Plan A: call out.

Tall as a Pakrani, slender as a Lushi, blond as Roy, with eyes as dark brown as Avi's, Martin Cimino watched Sherratt come out of the house. He greeted Leon with a nod, but did not offer his hand. Mitch was already in the Rand, and was examining a handgun in the pool of the cab light. Leon slid into the back with him, and as Cimino climbed into the front Tarrant hit the igniters.

Powerful Aragos lifted the armored Rand, and Sherratt watched the house fall away below. Neither he nor Mitch asked where Tarrant was headed. They did not need to know, and the less any individual knew, the better it suited the militia. Often, the only security was ignorance.

The Rand was headed out fast, leaving Hydralis behind, and soon Sherratt was in alien territory. He had been on Omaru for more than a year but what he knew of the planet was mostly the city. Even town lights were sparse when the Rand began to lose altitude, and he looked over the side, trying to pick out landmarks in the starlight. He saw a tangle of girders, conduit, broken plascrete, and Tarrant said, answering unasked questions,

"It's an old industrial site, abandoned more than forty years ago. First Fleet crap. One day they'll bother to clean it up. Makes a good hiding place. It's not so easy to pick a ship out of this mess, especially when it doesn't want to be seen."

But Tarrant apparently knew where it was. He was homing on a set of coordinates, and as the Rand dropped in steadily over a wasteland where the night air whimpered through a webwork of girders, Sherratt saw a single red marker light.

Even close up, he could not see the ship clearly. It was in the shadows, black on black, its surface matte, its ports secured. The Rand had touched down when a hatch opened and white light spilled from within. Tarrant stepped into the shifting air, took a moment to turn a

three-sixty, and said softly to Garret and Cimino, "Stay put here, and watch."

Wherever 'here' was, Sherratt thought bleakly as he followed the militia colonel to the hatch in the ship's side, and in. It slid shut with a quiet whine of servos, and he found himself embraced by chill air, bright lights, the smell of food, the endless chatter of comm from the blockade. The crew were eavesdropping on the Fleet loop.

The ship was small, which gave it the advantage. It was easy to move, easy to hide, yet big enough to be Weimann-enabled. A face looked out of the cockpit; Sherratt did not recognize the woman. He saw only that she was Pakrani, young, with the unit tattoos of some squadron, which had not yet been removed from her face and hands. She looked him over but never offered her name, and Tarrant said only, "Take a smoke with Cimino, will you? We need to make a call."

No questions. No information shared. The Pakrani woman moved like a big, lithe animal. She headed out of the cockpit, back along the body of the ship, and out. Someone else was in the rear — Leon heard the clatter of tools, a soft curse, the whine of a misbehaving machine — but Tarrant had stepped into the cockpit, and he followed.

The copilot's seat swiveled out, and Sherratt sat. Before him was an unfamiliar panel, but most onboard decks were similar. He dropped the datacube into the reader, and was aware of Tarrant at his shoulder as the comm systems came active.

"Soon as we transmit, this ship has to get up and move," Tarrant said conversationally, "so make it short and sweet."

"It's a recording," Leon said tersely. "I made it weeks ago. Level 7 encryption ... I don't care if Fleet picks it up. All it tells them is how little they understand."

"They'll know something's doing," Tarrant added bitterly. "They'll hit us again."

"So hit them back, hurt them," Sherratt muttered. The comm system was reading, and a light blipped in the middle of the panel. He had only to thumb it to make the transmission. "You know more than I do, Colonel. You're five links higher up the chain of command than I am. You *know* how many aces Omaru's hiding up its sleeve. You know as well as I do, Omaru can hurt Fleet so badly, Fleet doesn't want to know about it ... except the Confederacy suspects. It's why they don't come in and finish you."

Sherratt thumbed the key, and the comm began to send. The tachyon arrays powered up with a growl, and up on the back of the ship a panel opened. The transmitters extended like the barrel of a

weapon. They were aimed at Beacon 116, which would bounce the signal through the DeepSky data conduit — Borushek was on the far side of Hellgate, its star could not be seen from Omaru, even though Leon could hunch down in the seat and look directly at it through the forward viewport.

“You know there’s a risk,” Tarrant said pointedly.

The comm relays circling Hellgate like beads in a necklace were often targeted by the wreckers, the mercenaries, Freespacers. Sometimes the data conduit broke down; messages were lost. Even if they got through, the time-lag for an e-space signal between Omaru and Borushek, around the skirts of Hellgate, was almost eight days, which was the reason Fleet employed couriers. Sherratt was too tired to think about it.

“So if it doesn’t get there I’ll send it again,” he rasped as he popped the cube out of the reader and back into his pocket. “Done.”

“Then, let’s *git*,” Tarrant suggested, “before there’s a gunship on top of us. You know the bastards are eavesdropping.”

Sherratt swiveled the chair out and grunted as his legs took his weight. Tarrant lifted one brow at him, but Leon shook his head minutely. “Have a little faith, Colonel.”

“Faith?” Tarrant echoed, on his way back to the hatch. “Faith in what, exactly?”

The question probed to the very roots of the Deep Sky. The hatch slid open to the night air, and Leon gazed up into the mist of Hellgate. “*Ven il’tharas, El’arne, laes irvoia.*” Tarrant was looking at him, narrow eyed, waiting. Sherratt only shook his head. “It’s an old axiom, Colonel.”

“I don’t recognize the language,” Tarrant observed.

“No.” For the first time in days Sherratt smiled. “You wouldn’t.” And he did not offer to translate as he made his way back to the Rand.

The big, silent Pakrani pilot was aboard at once, and only moments after Tarrant had the Rand airborne, the ship was powering up too. It was done, and at last some nerve inside Leon switched off. His eyes closed as the Rand headed fast for the south — not headed toward Hydralis and Avi’s place, but into a haphazard, almost random pattern that would take them as far afield as Valetta and Harlem before it doubled back for home.

Home. The thought haunted Leon Sherratt as it had haunted every Resalq through a thousand years, and for a time he watched Hellgate slide by the canopy of the Rand. *Home* was not a thing, not a place; it was an ideal or a dream, something to aspire to, live for ... die for.

The Rand was still headed south when he slithered into sleep.

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