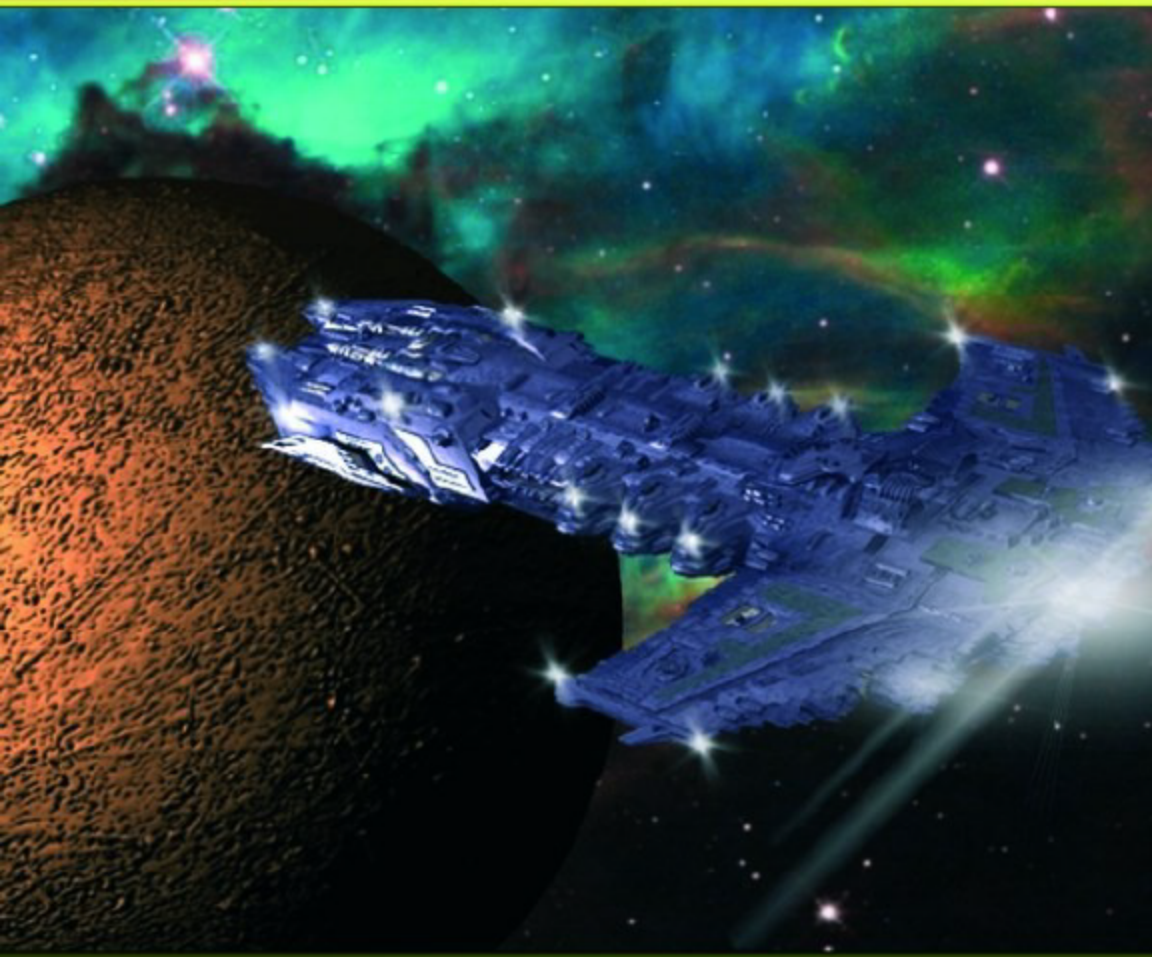


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HELLGATE

Flashpoint



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Hellgate #5
FLASHPOINT
MEL KEEGAN

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

HELLGATE: Flashpoint

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HELLGATE: Flashpoint

Chapter One

Salvage tug Wastrel
Halfway, Freespace

From space the colony was a dazzle of lights, a storm of comm noise, a confusion of ships of every type, headed in every direction without order or reason. Neil Travers had seen a great many cities with congested skies, chaotic traffic lanes, but Halfway was a Tactical ATC officer's nightmare.

For half an hour the *Wastrel's* pilots held off, waiting for a clear approach lane, until Richard Vaurien's patience had worn thin. He was leaning on the back of a vacant chair, cradling a coffee mug in both hands as he glared over Yuval Greenstein's shoulder at the tangle of Halfway. Travers had watched his patience steadily erode as they waited for any semblance of order around the ramshackle space city.

A ship the size of the *Wastrel* would make her own traffic lanes as other craft hurried out of her path, but forcing a way in was a swift way to make the locals resent her presence. For the third time, Curtis Marin – in the copilot's seat at Greenstein's right hand – called Halfway's rudimentary hangar authorities, and this time his voice was as harsh as his words were annoyed.

"Halfway control, this is the *Wastrel* – again. We're coming in, in five, with or without a coherent syllable from you morons. We already scanned that monstrosity you call a rink, and we see three docking ports that'll suit us just fine. If you're even remotely bothered which one we use, or don't, you better make some noise, because Rick Vaurien is ready to take his pick. And once this baby's docked on, she's not moving again till we bug out. If anyone is bothering to listen to this channel –"

So it took anger and harsh words to make the haphazard traffic control take an interest? Travers chuckled into his own coffee and traded rueful glances with Marin.

"Hold your water, *Wastrel*. Who the hell is this? Is Vaurien there?" The voice belonged to a woman, bass and husky.

"I've been waiting for a half hour," Vaurien said in the direction of the nearest comm pickup. "You think I've got nothing better to do with my life than kill time looking at the most butt-ugly pile of scrap iron in the Deep Sky? What do you want, a docking application in triplicate?"

He was glaring at Halfway as he spoke, and Travers could only agree with the observation. The colony had to be the ugliest agglomeration of mismatched spare parts he had ever seen. Two potato-shaped minor planets had been blasted hollow and tethered together, end to end, by driving the bows of an asteroid miner into one of them, and the stern into the other. The engine deck was buried in the gray-brown rock; the drive engines had been torn out, but the two Prometheus generators were still online, powering most of Halfway. And they were misbehaving, Travers saw. He was watching the monitors on the engineer's panel at his left hand. Storms of hard radiation showered constantly out of those generators, and Halfway's careless tech crews preferred to throw up rad-shields rather than service the powerplant.

The miner had become a conduit between the shelled-out worldlets – a kilometer long and pocked with the craters of scores of docking ports. The *Wastrel's* AI had scanned the whole unlikely mess from a safe distance, and reported around forty ships of every size and shape docked on. Some were enormous industrial hulls, and permanently docked. Their engines were shut down or even removed, and their cavernous hulls had long ago been gutted, converted to more living space for a colony which was not recognized as a colony, and yet continued to grow, to sprawl, even to thrive in its own way.

Up on top of the asteroid miner which had become the spine and conduit of Halfway were the three big docking pylons, loosely reserved for ships the size of the *Wastrel*. In fact, she was massive enough to dock on at the middle pylon and occlude the other two, and Vaurien was annoyed enough by now to do it.

The traffic controller with the whisky-hoarse voice cackled over the comm like a broody hen. "Damnit, Richard, you don't seem to be mellowing with age, do you?"

He made a face, while Travers disguised a snort of humor. "Should I be? Do I know you, lady?"

"Dunno if you'd deign to remember me, but I know you," she told him. "We dealt a few times, you knew me as Shiffiano ... Marak City, a long time ago. Turns out I might owe you one, Vaurien. I was about

to get shafted by a right, royal bastard. You busted up the deal before he could make a fool of me ... so hold your water for one minute while I clear you an access lane – and for chrissakes use 27, not 26. You take the dock in the middle, and there'll be a shitstorm when the *Baishan* gets home."

"Well, thank you, ma'am," Vaurien said acidly.

"Don't mention it." Shiffiano echoed his caustic tone of voice. "And while I'm doing you favors, you might want to look at your civvy comm band once in a while, if that sort of thing isn't too mundane for you."

The comm shut down with a muffled belch of static suppression and Marin glanced up at Vaurien. "She's right. There's a half dozen calls on hold, and you're not going to like who's calling. Thank gods Jazinsky isn't up here."

She was in the lab, as she had been since the *Wastrel* shipped out of Borushek eight days before, and to Travers's eyes she was looking ragged around the edges. The work never stopped, never paused. She and Tully Ingersol were wrestling with elements of the same work which possessed Mark and Dario Sherratt. The Zunshu technology was not yielding up its magic without a battle, and the fight was taking its toll out of them all. Given two years or five, the best labs and computers in the colonies, and unlimited funding, it would still have been the project of a lifetime. But time was as much an enemy as the Zunshu or the DeepSky Fleet, and Barb Jazinsky knew it.

The queued calls all carried the same ID, and Travers groaned as he saw it. They were coming in from the *Mako*, which meant Sergei van Donne had not only made it to Halfway ahead of Harrison Shapiro's covert mission, but he had his own interests here. And apparently he was prepared to draw a line in the sand and defend it.

The look on Vaurien's face would have soured a pitcher of milk. "What the hell does he want?" He dropped a hand on the pilot's beefy shoulder. "You heard the lady, Yuval. Dock us while I get a few more gray ones, wondering how Sergei's trying to screw me this time."

"You could always try asking the man," Marin said with caustic humor. "Just be sure to chain down anything you don't want to walk away on its own. I know he's been angling for your technology for years."

"He's tried to kill me twice," Vaurien muttered.

"Old scores to settle," Travers said quietly. "Sergei is the kind to harbor grudges ... speaking of which, Richard, don't flatter yourself too much. It could be Curtis and me he wants this time. We hurt him a

while ago, and he has to reckon we owe him the price of it." He looked down into Marin's hazel eyes as he spoke, saw them darken with memory.

The scene on the Oberon science platform, on the very fringes of the Rabelais Drift, haunted them both. Felix Cheng had died there – not blood kin to van Donne, but an old, trusted associate. And van Donne had walked away from the encounter with a bullet in him, a dislocated elbow, as well as deeper, keener wounds to his pride. He had been comprehensively beaten on Oberon, as he was beaten on the high slopes of Mont Katerine on Velcastra, and both times it had been Travers and Marin, on Vaurien's or Shapiro's business.

"Christ," Vaurien muttered, "we don't need the complication." He passed a hand before his eyes, and gestured at Marin. "All right, put him on. I can always tell him where to go."

The comm crackled and the AI, Etienne, played the last call in the queue. Sergei van Donne spoke with the same accent as Jazinsky, in a deeper voice issuing from a bigger chest. He was half Pakrani, taller and broader than Jazinsky, just as blond, with something of the same look about him. Framed in the threedee in the middle of the forward console, his face was a study in annoyance.

"You want to pick up, Vaurien? What, suddenly you're not talking to me? After we fought together at Ulrand? I'm hurt." The tone was taunting and the man's angular, striking face hardened. "Pick up, Richard. I know what you want here – and you're not going to get it. Not without me. And for one damn' moment, it turns out we want the same deal."

The threedee blanked, returning to the standby display of routine data, leaving Vaurien, Travers and Marin frowning at each other. "He wants the same deal?" Marin echoed. "He sure as hell isn't here for the Fleet prisoners who're standing on auction blocks round about now!"

"He ... might be," Vaurien mused. "Sergei will take a profit wherever he can find out, and he'll double-cross anybody, anywhere. He has a history of it. So maybe he took a contract a couple of days ago. Maybe somebody hired a mercenary crew to go get their kid out of hell. We might be on the same side. In which case Sergei might also know a lot we don't." The French accent thickened with frustration. "He's here ahead of us, he'll have done his share of snooping already ... and the prisoners are not the only reason we're here." He lifted a brow at Marin.

"Damn," Marin whispered as he swiveled the copilot's seat out from the console and stood. He gave Travers a dark look. "Boden Zwerner is the other reason we're here ... and van Donne's wanted to

put Zwerner in a hole in the ground for some time."

"And here we are," Travers finished. He finished his own coffee and held out his hand to take the empty mug from Vaurien. "You want a refill, while you talk to the man?"

"Yeah, why not?" Vaurien rubbed his face hard with both hands. "All right, Etienne, call the *Mako*. Tell van Donne I'm willing to talk."

The autochef in the rear corner of the pilots' cab was configured to suit humans, since the Resalq were not aboard. Travers was brimming the mugs when the AI whispered in its soft French accent, in a tone that soothed while the words stood a man's hair on end.

"I am being probed," it informed Vaurien. "A deep system scan has been launched from a location within Halfway."

"You're – what?" Vaurien was on his toes, fists clenched. "Are you reading van Donne, the *Mako*, on the other end of this probe?"

"No. The *Mako* is docked at Lock 19. The scan originates from a secured mainframe on Level 44, in the chassis previously identified as the *Rotterdam Explorer*. I am trying to establish the source, but Captain van Donne is not involved."

"Zwerner," Marin said in an acid undertone. "You could expect this, Richard. He has to know we're here ... he has to wonder why. Can't blame the man for trying his luck with a probe. You'd do the same."

"I would," Vaurien agreed brashly, "and I'd expect him to cuss a blue streak about it, so you'll forgive me if I do."

The following diatribe was in the native French, and Travers chuckled as he picked up a word here and there. Before Vaurien was done the threedee shifted to blue-green, signaling an incoming call.

"Captain van Donne for you," Etienne said calmly.

"And the probe?" Marin wondered.

"Still trying to identify the source," the AI reported, "but I have discovered most of Halfway infested with similar security measures, all of them issuing from Level 44 in the remains of the *Rotterdam Explorer*. Whoever is trying to probe me has subjected all of the colony to the same treatment. We might not be a specific target. We are merely *here*."

For a moment Vaurien was silent, and when he turned to take his mug from Travers his expression had darkened. "This is too weird." He gestured at the waiting threedee. "Halfway used to be the one place you could scuttle off to and be made welcome, even if you were a mass murderer, wanted by every colonial government. Now they've got the kind of security you'd expect to run into on a Fleet base? Something's wrong."

He was right. Travers felt the clench of his insides as the old animal instincts came online. "Careful, Richard. I know you want to get the prisoners of war out of here as much as Shapiro does – and I know you want to put Zwerner in a deep, unmarked grave. But it's getting risky, and there's too much more at stake right now."

"There is," Marin agreed, "but I'll give you short odds, bloody van Donne knows exactly what's going on." His brows quirked at Richard. "The man's on hold right now."

"*Merde*," Richard swore. "If we come out of this owing the bastard a favor, Barb is never going to let me live it down." And then without pausing for breath he addressed the AI. "Live feed, Etienne, level three encryption ... Sergei, you wanted to talk to me?"

He was exactly as Travers remembered him. White-blond, with pale blue Pakrani eyes and handsome features, but a hardness, a coldness, which rarely encouraged people to approach him. Sergei van Donne was one of a kind. What Travers knew about him was not much. He had served out his hitch on the *Chicago* and then re-enlisted, but when he was caught up in the corruption scandal which ripped through the command corps, he was cashiered out of Fleet and reappeared later on Halfway. He had flown with *Los Hachazos*, and even now he wore the old unit tattoo, the winged knife, on his left cheek.

"You're looking beat-up, Richard," he said baldly as Etienne stabilized the comm feed. "You want to try sleeping sometime."

"You called me to make small talk?" Vaurien demanded. "Don't waste my time. I didn't come here to dance with you."

"No? You wound me," van Donne said, one hand on his heart for mocking effect. "What did you come here for?"

"None of your business." Vaurien turned his back on the threedee. "You called me, Sergei. If you're trying to screw me, get on with it – you're welcome to *try*."

With a snort of humorless laughter, van Donne dropped the taunting banter. "Did I say I was trying to screw you?"

"You always try." Vaurien took a swig of coffee and passed the mug back to Travers. "Put a slug of the Irish in this, Neil. Thanks."

"Yeah, well, maybe not every time," van Donne was saying. "You here on business, Richard?" The blue eyes narrowed on Vaurien's back.

"Like I'd come to this pile of scrap iron of yours for the pleasure of it." Vaurien shared a wry look with Travers as whiskey poured generously into the mug.

"My pile of scrap iron –?" van Donne echoed. "Hardly mine. And even if I ever had a claim to part of it, not anymore."

Again, the hackles rose on Travers's nape. "Richard." His voice was barely a murmur, under the audio pickup.

Vaurien's brows rose, and he turned back to the threedee. "What's your business, Sergei? We're about three minutes from docking and I have better things to do than play word games with you."

For a moment van Donne was silent, and then he said, cryptically enough to make Travers more annoyed than curious, "*Flamenco Rosado*. An hour."

The threedee darkened as he cut the feed, and routine shipboard data replaced the man's face. Travers saw the proximity warnings, the countdowns in seconds, meters and inertial characteristics, as the *Wastrel* approached her pylon, but Yuval Greenstein and Etienne were handling the docking in a curiously symbiotic dance of living human brain and millions of tonnes of semi-sentient ship. Travers ignored the data and looked from Marin to Vaurien and back again.

"*Flamenco Rosado*? Is that some kind of Pakrani insult?"

"It's a club," Vaurien mused. "I know it ... and I guess he knows I know it! If anyone wants to put sense to this, we better meet the man."

Marin's face was etched with suspicion. "Don't tell me you're going to trust him!"

"Never in a thousand years," Vaurien said dryly, "but I've known Sergei for a long time. As usual he's up to something. And it has something to do with me." He set one hand on Travers's shoulder as the AI whispered through the last five seconds of the docking procedure, and a deep, bass chime rang through the *Wastrel*'s hull. "I want you with me. Both of you. Contrary to popular belief, I don't actually have eyes in the back of my head. For those, I trust you. An hour, so he said. I better give Barb the joyous news. You know she'll want to be there."

"If she is, there'll be blood," Marin warned.

The proposition inspired the first genuine smile Travers had seen on Vaurien's face in a long time, and Richard was still chuckling as he stepped out of the pilots' cab. Marin turned his eyes to the gods as he helped himself to coffee and gave the mug a liberal dash of the whiskey.

"*Flamenco Rosado*. It sounds a little lurid. I've no doubt Halfway will live up to its reputation."

Travers's big arms draped about him from behind, drew him into an embrace and held him, back to chest. "Dancing boys in pink jockstraps? Don't knock it – well, not before you've tried it."

"And you've tried it?" Marin leaned back heavily against him. "Or are you trying to tell me you're not getting enough?"

"After last night?" Travers whispered against his ear. "Well, I can handle a little more, but ... seriously, it sounds like a Fleet furlough club. I saw the insides of way too many of them. You didn't?"

"I was studying most of the time." Marin set aside the mug and turned into his arms. "Furlough came up, and you'd more likely find me somewhere quiet, jacked in and reading." He shrugged off the ambition which had driven his early years. "If I'd stayed in Fleet, I'd have been the XO of a carrier by now, and I shudder to confess, there was a time I thought that's what I was working for."

"Thank gods you changed direction," Travers said honestly. He leaned down the hand's span that separated them in height, and set his mouth on Marin's.

The eight day voyage out from Borushek was the longest break they had enjoyed since the assignment to Omaru, and the rest had gone a long way to healing old wounds. They were in better physical condition, and Bill Grant was quite satisfied with the results of tests which never stopped. A little flesh had begun to accumulate on Marin's bones, and it suited him. Travers approved. It was a rare pleasure to have the hard, solid curves of a healthy young body to hold onto, and he might have said so, but Greenstein chose that moment to unlink from the system.

The pilot left Etienne to monitor the ship and negotiate with Halfway's much more primitive AI. The mainframe from a freighter had been installed as the brains of the colony, and it was barely adequate for the task. Etienne was idling, waiting for it to spare a moment of its precious processor time.

Here, there was no customs routine, no immigration to clear or quarantine procedures to be observed. Halfway was so far beyond an authority recognized by any colonial government, there were no actual laws enforcing the weapons one could carry, the substances one could bring in and out, the characteristics of the hustlers in the bars and clubs around the rink. And if a dead body should be discovered in the shadows, it was put on ice until someone claimed it if there was space, and jettisoned if there was not.

"Be advised," Etienne said quietly into the loop, "the attempted deep system scan of this vessel has resumed."

Travers lifted his head from a kiss that had begun in the vicinity of Marin's throat and ended in a leisurely sharing of breath. "You have the source yet?"

"The mainframe is on Halfway, but it is not the colony's own AI," Etienne reported.

"The scan won't be hacking through your firewall, though," Marin mused, "so whoever launched it must be getting mad enough to spit. Brief Richard ... and do *not* let the bastards in, Etienne."

"Captain Vaurien has already been briefed, and my firewalls are quite secure." The AI's voice was enviably calm. "Docking procedures are complete. Drive engines are shut down. Technical crews are standing down. Computer core activities are reassigned to the laboratory."

It meant, Jazinsky had just commandeered every spare erg of processor power and memory Etienne could find, and Travers was unsurprised. The work she was doing was so far over his head, he could grasp only the concepts. She, Mark Sherratt and Tonio Teniko were inventing, or reinventing the science day by day, and they were scrambling both for time and for answers.

The Zunshu technology was slippery, elusive as a wraith, dancing on the periphery of any understanding humans or Resalq yet possessed. But like the will-o'-the-wisp it would lead them into forbidden waters where great prices would be paid for learning, and great rewards might be earned for courage.

The notion brought Mick Vidal to Travers's mind, and he felt the grief of loss keenly. Marin frowned at him, too close to him to be unaware of the twist of emotion, but Travers shook his head and laid one fingertip on Marin's lips to forestall the question.

"If we're going clubbing," Marin said instead, in a caustic tone, "we probably want to get changed."

He made a good point. If they were going to walk into *Flamenco Rosado*, face to face with van Donne, heavily but not obviously armed, the normal style of dress aboard the *Wastrel* was hardly suitable. Travers was comfortable in black silk slacks and a teeshirt several sizes too large; Marin was barefoot, in Tai Chi pants and a pale blue webshirt that displayed more of his torso than it concealed. In uptown Sark the dress would have been seductively chic. In the snakepits of Halfway, it was just dangerous.

Two Zamphir 40s, the heavier Chiyoda machine pistol and a palmgun lay in the gun cases in the bottom of the closet in their quarters. Marin set them out on the workstation by the threedee, checked them over with complete professionalism, while Travers threw a selection of clothes across the bed. For himself, the soft blue-jeans, the leather jacket, full enough through the shoulders to conceal several weapons. For Marin, the black denim and red leather jacket, still seductively chic, but much more practical than the uptown faux variety.

He was looking good, Travers thought as he watched Curtis dress. The therapy after Omaru had been a trial for them both, but the color was back in his face, his muscles were hard, his spine was straight, and in bed he was the lover Travers remembered. He was sliding one of the matched pair of Zamphirs into the holster against his left ribs when he looked up, met Travers's eyes in the long dressing mirror, and lifted a brow in question.

"Just admiring you," Travers told him honestly. "I'm allowed."

"You're allowed." Marin turned toward him, set a hand on his chest. "Don't take your eyes off van Donne. I don't trust him not to take a crack at Richard while he has the chance."

"Or at us," Travers added. He caught Marin's hand, lifted it and kissed the palm. "You think he isn't still smarting after Oberon? I would be, and van Donne isn't the kind to forgive or forget."

The red leather jacket settled over the Zamphir and Marin slipped the palmgun into the holster at the small of his back. "*Flamenco Rosado*," he said, on his way to the door. "How long since you indulged in a little nightlife?"

The question intrigued Travers. It was so long since Harrison Shapiro's schedule had allowed them downtime, he could barely recall the last time he walked into a club for simple recreation. He and Marin could hardly complain, because Shapiro had spread himself so thin and was working so hard, he had only the most tenuous contact with the lover he had met on Uland. Jon Kim must be constantly on Shapiro's mind, Travers thought, but at least the man was out and running.

In the confusion after the Battle of Uland, Kim had grabbed his cash, cards and the dogs, packed a bag and fled before he could be arrested. Too many innocent people were being picked up. Few would be executed or imprisoned for long terms, but for Jon Kim to prove himself innocent of complicity would take months or years, and resources he did not possess. It was easier to subtract himself from the political muddle, and sheer luck had put Mick Vidal in Shapiro's office when he called.

As far as Travers knew, Kim was still en route to Velcastra on a tramp freighter which could take months to get there. But when he got into any Velcastran port he had a number to call – Daku contacts who would get him out of harm's way. Shapiro must fret every day about Kim, yet he never allowed so much as a frown to show.

Until this war was over, individuals and personal relationships would come second or last. Travers was thinking of the few days he and Marin had spent in Elstrom City, when they had met Robert

Chandra Liang to inform him of the death of Sergeant Roy Neville, when Barb Jazinsky's strident voice cut across the memories.

"Think again, Richard," she was saying as she and Vaurien, Marin and Travers converged in the loading bay just inside the docking rings.

"I'm serious, Barb." Vaurien was tall, broad, angular, in black from head to foot with two sidearms Travers could actually see, which meant he was carrying another two more surreptitiously. "You're far too valuable to just walk into some Halfway club, where a bullet could put an end to you. The work you're doing is critical. If Shapiro were here –"

"Harrison Shapiro is not my commanding officer, Richard, and neither are you. I'm not military, and you're my partner, not my superior." She was in a pale yellow skinsuit, a bronze silk jacket, and the white-blond hair was clasped back. She had just walked out of the lab, but Travers saw the outline of a sidearm under the jacket.

Vaurien was exasperated. "This is pure self indulgence. You can't afford to put yourself at risk."

"Who says I'm at risk?" Jazinsky demanded. "You, Neil, Curtis, all carrying enough firepower to start a small war, and the *Wastrel* right here, close as a yell. If you're worried, task a few security drones. Just tell Etienne to keep them out of Sergei's face, or you'll get him pissed enough to forget why he wants to talk to us."

"Me," Vaurien corrected. "He said he wanted to talk to *me*."

"Same difference," she retorted. "You, me, this ship, this tech – it's all the same to Sergei. And for what it's worth, you're no more safe than I am. Probably less."

"But the colonial war, and the bloody Zunshu war, don't pivot around me," Vaurien said tersely. "Stay aboard, Barb."

She hesitated for one moment and then stepped out through the docking rings. "If Sergei wants to talk to you – or me! – it means he needs something. He's not going to shoot on sight, and I want to look him right in those cold, calculating eyes of his when he says what he wants." She looked back over her shoulder. "*Flamenco Rosado*."

"Well ... shit," Vaurien sighed, and hung one long arm over Travers's shoulders as they followed. "Security assignment, Neil."

"You mean, tag, we're it?" Travers allowed a chuckle. "So, what is this club, anyway?"

"Just a club. Down six decks, closer to the bottom of the rink. As you go down, it gets colder, darker, harder. This is your first time out here in Halfway, isn't it?" Travers answered with a nod. "Then get your bearings." Richard pointed to left and right. "The big rocks ... that's

your Brightlights, your uptown. That's where you find the big money, the elite, the best of everything. Here on the old *Rotterdam Explorer*, you're close to the bottom end, and the lower you go, the rougher it gets. This is the rink. Ten or twelve big ships docked together, gutted, claims staked on their space. The whole place is a maze. Nobody knows how many people live where, doing what – living, dying, who cares? This is Halfway. But up in Brightlights, now ... well, you'll see."

He had led them to a big service elevator, and Jazinsky punched for a car headed down. The old ship was cavernous, and so comprehensively gutted that a cold wind stirred restlessly through it. Travers could almost believe he was close to an alleyway, just off a street in the citybottom of some major town like Sark or Elstrom. From the inside, it was hard to believe that all of Halfway was artificial, hulls, platforms and mined-out asteroids, welded together into a single whole which nobody owned or commanded. Halfway simply *was*.

The service elevators did not seem to have been serviced in an eon. This one ground and shook, trembling on an Arago cushion which brought Travers's heart into his mouth twice in less than two hundred meters, between the dorsal docking pylons and the mid-body deck where *Flamenco Rosado* and several clubs like it were nestled cheek by jowl with the utilities conduits. Power, air, water and data threaded their way through the old asteroid miner, from the rock at the bow to the one at the stern. Few people seemed to notice, much less to care, that enough current to flash-fry half the colony's population was carried via ancient, unserviced mains, just inside a patched, taped-over fascia.

"These people are crazy," Marin muttered as the lift's cage doors opened onto a cold, dim, breezy promenade.

Music issuing from several clubs overlapped into gibberish, and the bass rhythm of the air pumps underscored the din, a heavy vibration through the legs and spine. The sub-etherics got into a man's bones, reached his glands and wreaked havoc there. Travers swore softly as he fell into step with Marin and Vaurien, a pace behind Jazinsky.

She knew where she was headed. The club van Donne preferred was at the end of the half-lit promenade. Neon strobed out through its doors; noise barely classifying as music issued from within. Little wonder van Donne had chosen the place. It was so chaotic, human senses were confused. The instincts of the predator were useless here.

Three meters short of the frontage, Vaurien set light fingers on Jazinsky's arm and produced a handy. She stood back to let him scan

the interior, and Travers gave a low whistle as he peered over Richard's shoulder at the display.

"The place is fairly toxic," Vaurien said disgustedly. "There's airborne levels of gryphon, chimera, angelino, that would be two, three times over the limit on Borushek or Velcastra. I'm reading thirty or so individuals. All of them armed ... some of them carrying heavy-duty pieces. Five look stoned or drunk, or both ... one's face down in the back, dying. Six more are too busy screwing to even notice we're walking in. Comm signals bouncing between three of these idiots and various ships docked around the rink. They're drinking something strong, young and ... indeterminate. Probably manufactured on the premises. God knows what it is, but take pity on your liver! And then there's the EM field leaks from the mains, and the background rad-count, which is way over anything you'd find acceptable on any ship of yours or mine – and that's the same all over Halfway."

"You see van Donne?" Marin wondered.

"Oh, yes." Vaurien fine-tuned the handy. "He's easy to pick out. He's the only guy in the club with enough body mass to be Sergei. There's some big guys here, but no other Pakrani, Kuchini, or the hybrids like Sergei." He turned the handy to share data. "Holstered gun, another in his right boot. A knife in his left boot, another in his left back pocket. Comm in his left breast pocket – and it's open, transmitting."

"Which means someone's monitoring him," Travers mused. "He's sitting on his own, you notice."

"Which doesn't mean he doesn't have a half dozen friends hovering close by." Jazinsky reached in below her jacket and eased the sidearm in its holster. "The first thing I want to do is look for faces. If I recognize more than two in this fleapit, we're gone. Richard?"

"Yes." Vaurien slid the handy back into the inside pocket of his jacket and glanced at Travers and Marin. "Security is your business. Shapiro's come to trust the pair of you before he trusts anybody with the *possible* exception of that beau of his – what's his name?"

"Jon Kim," Marin said, sighing. "And yes, he trusts Kim. The two of them work well together, and Kim connected with Harrison Shapiro by choice, not because he was press ganged, like Neil and me!"

"Press ganged or not," Vaurien said acidly, "Shapiro trusts you because you're the best there is, and that's good enough for me."

Marin made negative noises. "But we've never set foot in this madhouse before. We don't know the faces Barb's talking about."

"I do." Vaurien gave the club a dark look, and flexed his fingers deliberately before heading on inside.

Flamenco Rosado was bubblegum pink, from the floor to the bar, the prefabricated walls, even the furniture. Travers had never realized how hideous the color could be. Enormous plastex flamingos stood guard to either side of the door; the walls were hand-painted with unlikely frescoes in which obnoxiously pink fowl entwined in courtship dances with long-limbed, willowy humans of all genders. The art seemed to make no sense, until the human lungs had taken in three, four breaths of the hazardous mix of chemicals on the air, and then any kind of sensuality became reasonable. If a scrawny guy with his whole body painted pink wanted to dance with waterfowl, who was going to tell him no?

Inside, the music was loud enough to rupture the eardrums. Travers saw the pained look on Marin's face, the compressed mouth. Curtis was acutely aware of the airborne drugs, the overload of sound, the low light levels and strobing neon, all of which could be used as weapons.

This was dangerous, and Travers had set a hand on Vaurien's arm, about to tell him enough was enough, when Jazinsky shouted over the music,

"I'm seeing three faces I know, Richard, and Sergei's is one of them. I also see his copilot, pretty little Rafe Byrne himself – too good for Sergei, if you were asking me, but there's no accounting for taste. And if that isn't Fernie Wang's man, Ramon, I need my eyes checked."

"You don't," Vaurien said against her ear, to make himself heard over the noise. "That's Ramon. Which tells you Fernie Wang won't be too far away. The *Krait* is here, as well as the *Mako*." His eyes were still moving, roving around the rest of the club's patrons, but he was satisfied.

And Sergei van Donne had seen them. He was sitting in the far corner with his back against the most solid wall and his eyes on the door. The *Mako's* copilot, Byrne, was on the club's left, apparently lounging by the bar but also intent on the door, and Fernando Wang's company shooter, Ramon, was opposite, standing back in the shadows by the low podium where a live band would perform, half-hidden by the artistes' threedee posters, right hand already in the left side of his green silk jacket.

Carefully, with exaggerated slowness, van Donne rose to his feet. He held his hands well away from his sides and gave Vaurien a nod of acknowledgment. Without being asked, Travers turned slightly to cover Ramon and Marin had a direct line on Rafe Byrne. It was easy to pick them out. They were the only people aside from van Donne who

were watching the door; they were on their toes, alert – sober; and they were far more attractive than the Companions working this club.

With a word to his comm, van Donne brought his people in, and as Byrne and Ramon drifted back to the corner farthest from the doors, Vaurien followed. Jazinsky gave Byrne a nod of greeting. She knew him from somewhere, Travers realized. But it was Ramon who thrust one hand at Vaurien to shake. He was a striking figure, not much taller than Tonio Teniko, but worlds different. Small stature had turned Ramon deadly; he carried a pair of big guns, wore his raven hair in a long sleek cape, and the rings in both his ears were gelemerald, priceless. He did not have Tonio's incredible looks, but he was one of the exotics; he could have named his own price as a Companion, a courtesan. Ramon preferred to be deadly with hands, feet and weapons, and earn even more on the security staff of men like Wang.

"Richard, always a pleasure," he was saying in a thick Velcastran accent. "You want to tell me, yet, what happened to the *Wings of Freedom*? I been trying to call Paul Wymark ... no joy. And I've been missing the pleasures of him in every port from Sark to Marak."

"Not yet, Ramon," Jazinsky said over the noise. "When the time is right, Paul will be glad to sit down and tell you himself. In fact, he'll expect to be wined, dined and humped on the story for months."

Ramon's sable eyes narrowed. "It's something big. Bigger than the shindig you guys organized at Ulland."

"Far bigger," Vaurien affirmed pleasantly, "and if you don't get your nose out, kiddo, you're likely to get it slammed in a door."

For a moment the shooter blinked up at him, and then he laughed. "Message received and understood, man. Hey, Jazinsky, you're lookin' good enough to eat ... and unless I miss my guess, you're not getting' any."

"I'm too busy to even notice," she admitted, though she was focused on van Donne by now.

The copilot had returned to Sergei's shoulder – Rafe Byrne, not thirty years old yet, with ebony hair and vast ice-green eyes, pale skin, and a deceptively reed-slender body. Rafe had the wiry strength of the endurance athlete. And if he was in the sack with van Donne, Travers thought, he would need it. Sergei was much bigger, much stronger, as alpha a male as Travers had ever seen on a carrier crewdeck. He had snaked an arm around Byrne's narrow waist and pulled him in close, perhaps as a gesture: see, we're all chilled here.

"Vaurien." He looked Richard up and down rudely. "You look like you need to get some sleep. And Jazinsky, with the shadows under

the eyes and the knuckles rubbed raw on the heavy bag. Been beating on something, trying to relax?"

"Perceptive," she allowed. "Get on with it, Sergei. I don't have time for you to waste."

His nostril flared as he looked on, past her, and recognized Travers and Marin. "And if it isn't Harrison Shapiro's little lapdogs in person. Captain Travers, Captain Marin."

"Major," Travers corrected with a hint of smugness.

"Likewise." Marin folded his arms on his black linen shirt. "And we're guessing you're here for blood ... not ours, for a change."

It was the first time they had actually seen van Donne since the scene on the Oberon science platform, and Travers studied the man closely. The military buzz cut had grown out, but the effect of the longer hair was to make him look even harder. The pale blue eyes were like flint as he glared at Vaurien, and it seemed to Travers that he was still wrestling with some decision, perhaps whether to trust them – or to involve them.

And then he stepped aside, beckoned them to follow, and vanished through a door to the right of the table where several glasses and an ashtray attested to how long he had been waiting for them. Vaurien shared a glance with Travers and Marin, and slid the handy from his pocket once more. If they were walking into an ambush, it would pick up the heat signatures of people, the chemical reek of drugs or explosives, the resonance of metals, weapons.

Travers leaned closer to see, but it was just a room. To left and right of it, other rooms were occupied. Figures were locked together, undulating in unmistakable, beating rhythms. The scanner reported thermal hotspots and the toxicity of chemical clouds, the chimera and angelino.

The room was black, save for its mirrors, and empty save for the butcher block bed. Dim lights bobbed away into the corners, red, gold, purple, casting grotesque shadows. Rings and chains hung from the ceiling; the air was sweet-rotten with the odor of spent gryphon. Sergei ignored it all, turned to face Vaurien, and waited till the door slid over, shutting out enough of the noise for a man to hear himself think.

Without being invited, Byrne and Ramon sprawled on the bed to watch, listen. Their job was done, but Travers saw at once, they were privy to van Donne's business. Vaurien leaned on the closed door; Jazinsky surveyed herself disgustingly in the mirror and then deliberately ignored her reflection.

"You want to deal?" Vaurien invited. "We're here. What's on the

table, Sergei? Make it quick. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I want to get the hell out of this dive before I pick up fleas."

A thin smile widened van Donne's mouth. "What brings you back to Halfway, Richard?"

"None of your business," Vaurien said levelly.

"Isn't it?" van Donne was hot in the closeness of the room. A sheen of sweat had broken out on his skin, and he shrugged out of the jacket, threw it onto the bed.

The man's hard, muscular physique, with the thick arms and sculpted pecs, reminded Travers of the late Roy Neville; but van Donne actually had handsome bone structure, good features. In a fair bout between them, Travers would have given absolutely even odds. And off duty, out of uniform? All he knew of Neville was that he was a bastard who liked to hurt, as many newcomers to the crewdeck learned. What he knew of van Donne was even less, but Rafe Byrne seemed none the worse for wear, and Ramon was watching van Donne with hot, dark eyes.

"There's two things that ought to draw you to this place like flies to dead meat," van Donne was saying. "One of those two things, I don't give a shit about. If you or Shapiro or Mark Sherratt want to get sentimental about a bunch of Middle Heavens grunts shipped out of Ulrand and sold off as goods and chattels, that's your crusade. Me? I see the bastards for what they are. Trigger-happy goons with Confederate allegiance. You know what they used to call them, way back when? *Warprizes*. They're for the buying and selling, and they're going to cover some of the price we paid at Ulrand in blood."

"We?" Vaurien echoed.

"Crews and clans out of Halfway," van Donne said harshly. "A lot of us were killed. You used to be a Freespacer yourself, Vaurien. You'd have called yourself part of 'we' before you went legit. Soon as you signed with Shapiro, you lost your right to call yourself a Freespacer." His fair brows quirked in Jazinsky's direction. "Is that it? You're here for the *Shanghai* prisoners? A bunch of live cargo? Rafe and me, we've been betting this is what brings you back to Halfway."

Vaurien's temper was simmering. Travers saw it in his face, heard it in his voice. "It's a large part of what brings us here ... and although you don't give a shit about human lives, you could still turn a profit out of it. Information is worth money. You point us in the right direction, Sergei, you can get paid. This is the deal you threw on the table?"

Surprise ambushed van Donne for a moment. "No, but I'll play the hand, if you want to deal it to me," he mused. "You need intel on

the *Shanghai* prisoners, I can get you there. I didn't get the chance to grab myself a piece of that action – I was too busy setting salvage beacons and keeping the hell out of the way of the big guns. But Fernie Wang picked up a whole bunch, at least twenty I know of."

"Then, Wang knows where they went," Travers began.

But van Donne made negative gestures. "Fernie wouldn't soil his fair hands with the trade, even if he had the time to deal, which he didn't. The prisoners went straight to an agent. Right, Ramon?"

"Yeah. An agent on Ulrand," Ramon said doubtfully. "A Freespace-er, not an Ulrish merchant. He headed out fast with the whole cargo, like a freight consolidator." He frowned at Vaurien. "Your live cargo came to Halfway, no doubt about it. But tracking it down won't be so easy. You want intel you can trust. You need a contact."

"And nobody on Halfway trusts you anymore," van Donne said with rich satisfaction. "So you need me, don't you? Well, now. That makes things interesting."

"Fascinating," Vaurien agreed caustically. "So, Sergei, we do business. Set a price and let's get it done."

Once again, van Donne made dismissive gestures. "Sure, we'll deal. But I don't want your money, or Shapiro's."

"Then, what do you want?" Jazinsky wondered. "If you're angling for our tech, you can forget it."

He shot her an ice-cold, lopsided and humorless grin. "When I want your tech, lady, I'll steal it."

"You'll try."

"Whatever." He took a step closer to Vaurien. "I want Zwerner. I want Boden Zwerner jettisoned in a bodybag. That's what I'm doing, kicking my heels on Halfway. Wasting my time – because you can't get within a hundred meters of Zwerner. I know. I've tried."

The silence between them was punctuated by the heavy beat of music from the bar. The atmosphere in the tiny room crackled with electricity. Travers's pulse rate picked up, and with a glance at Marin he saw the wide eyes, compressed lips, intense interest.

The Boden Zwerner assignment had been given to Curtis specifically. The contract was Shapiro's, but Mark Sherratt would accept no payment for it. Dendra Shemiji would perform this execution as a service to the whole Deep Sky. Zwerner should be well aware his life would be forfeit if his involvement in the CL-389 incident were ever uncovered – he might even be aware, via his own covert channels, that Dendra Shemiji had returned the data.

Even Byrne and Ramon sat up now. Both had a vested interest in

van Donne – one was already in his bed, the other wanted to be, which made Sergei's business their business. For several elastic moments Vaurien seemed to freeze, weighing every syllable van Donne had said. And then he turned slowly toward Curtis Marin.

"Your play, I believe," he offered, and stepped aside.

"Marin?" Now van Donne's pale eyes narrowed. "You came here to kill Zwerner, the way you went into Mawson to kill that bastard, Reece Clyma? Damn, that's rich. Dendra bloody Shemiji! Whose contract? Shapiro? Well, fuck me rigid." He looked down at Rafe with an odd, ironic smile. "What odds would you have put on it – me and Shapiro on the same team."

Only Travers would have known how swiftly Marin's hackles had risen. He was on his guard, alert to every nuance of van Donne's expression, every twitch of his muscles, while Curtis's own face betrayed nothing. "You want Zwerner dead? You'll have to stand in line, van Donne. The man has so many enemies, it's a wonder he's still alive." He cocked his head at van Donne. "You said you tried your luck. No joy?"

"You're kidding around, right?" The mercenary accorded Marin a piercing glare. "I just told you, you can't get near the man. Well, I can't. But Dendra Shemiji's a whole 'nother ballgame." He flicked a glance at Vaurien. "I'll tell you this much for nothing: Zwerner knows I'm here, and he must know what I want, because he's taken two cracks at me since the *Mako* docked on, and he's been close both times."

Vaurien's lips compressed. "How close?"

In answer, van Donne turned around, lifted up the pale gold teeshirt to display his back, and Travers gave a low whistle. The scar was finger-thick, from his side to his spine, level with the bottom of the shoulder blade. It had not been well treated. Someone with rudimentary knowledge had used the right tools, tissue welding without finesse. Unless he intended to wear the scar like some badge of honor, van Donne would need cosmetic work.

"The first time, it was concussion and a crushed arm," van Donne was saying sourly. "A demolition charge, down in the cargo bays off the east side of the rink. I barely made it out with my brains intact. The second time they didn't get fancy. Heavy cal, short range. I was lucky."

"He was close to dead," Rafe Byrne said quietly, in an accent still resonant with a trace of the Irish. He stood, peered so closely and critically at the scar that the repairs were obviously his own handiwork, and then he deliberately smoothed the shirt down over van Donne's wide back.

"You pulled him out?" Travers was guessing Byrne had to be first generation out from Earth. He was colonial by an accident of fate, yet he had found his way out beyond the frontier, where the Deep Sky unraveled into regions uncharted – or at least uncharted by humans. Mark Sherratt's people had been out here a thousand years before the first human.

Sergei slid an arm around Byrne and pulled him in close. "I never came so close to *gone* before." His brows arched at Travers and Marin. "You two clowns on Oberon? Not even in the same neighborhood. Last thing I knew, I was face down, bleeding out. This kid hauls me into cover, calls for help, and when Fernie Wang's people look like they're going to stand back and watch me die, he grabs the med kit and does the job himself."

"Fernie," Ramon said in amused tone, "wants the *Mako*."

"Fernie," Sergei said mock pleasantly, "can go fuck himself. He'll get the *Mako* when I'm cold and dead, and I'm not ready to roll over yet." He pinned Marin with blue eyes like gimlets. "So, Dendra Shemiji. You're here for Zwerner?"

And Marin nodded slowly. "I'm here for Zwerner."

"And you can bet Zwerner is watching us right now," Jazinsky added. "We were probed on the way in, Sergei. Somebody was trying to get into every system we have, even before we docked. Zwerner?"

The white-blond head nodded. "He's been expecting to be hit. He's an evil bastard, he's not stupid."

"And you know where he is." Marin's brows arched. "Don't you? You want to share data in exchange for one good, clean shot at the man."

A brash grin widened van Donne's mouth. "You're psychic. Yeah, I know where he is, not that it does me any good. But you buggers – you have the resources of Dendra Shemiji, and the best tech this side of the frontier, and the power of the *Wastrel*. You could reach him."

The truth was, the *Wastrel* could take Halfway to pieces, spar by spar, rock by rock, if no one cared about the vast loss of life in the bid to take Zwerner. Halfway was curiously delicate, with its daisy-chain of docked hulks, and the complete disregard of this community for even the most basic maintenance work. Perhaps van Donne would not have cared about the loss of life, if the *Wastrel* took Halfway apart. Travers was unsure. Sergei was an odd character. He was a Freespace, intensely proud of it, and he might just as easily place as high a value on Freespace lives as he placed no value at all on the *Shanghai* 'live cargo' of conscripts from the Middle Heavens and Near Sky.

"So." Sergei released Byrne and thrust both hands into the pockets

of the black matte slacks, which stretched the fabric taut across his groin and drew Travers's eyes in idle speculation. "You want to trade data? I can show you exactly where Zwerner is – where he's been for almost three months now. And he's had that long to get himself dug in like a bug."

"You can tell us," Vaurien began.

But van Donne answered with a grunt. "I'll show you. I want in, and I don't trust you. You'll get the data you want and cut me out."

"Would we do that?" Jazinsky demanded fatuously.

"Yeah, you bloody would," van Donne snorted. "Besides which, there's way too much to tell. He'd been here long enough to have installed his own surveillance. Drones, autoguns, gas, field projectors, the works. If there was a way through his maze, I'd know about it. You bastards can put tech up against tech. Cut through. I can save you a lot of time and trouble. But I want in." He looked levelly at Vaurien now. "What about it, Richard? Whaddaya say to partnering up for the duration, like we did at Ulrand?"

"At Ulrand?" Vaurien echoed. "You were a goddamn' privateer, you were never there when anybody needed you, and as soon as you had your claims staked, you were gone."

"And you expected me to put myself in the Fleet firing line to save your ass?" Sergei barked a chuckle.

"Asako Rodman might have expected you to be there and cover her ass," Jazinsky said tartly. "The *Harlequin* took so much damage, she's still dry-docked at Ulrand."

He gave her a pained look. "Rodman's a big girl. She can cover her own fat ass, and the last I heard of the *Harlequin*, she's being patched over with pieces hacked off Fleet wrecks. Guns, hull armor, generators. She's going to come back as some weird-ass hybrid, half warship. Rodman's got nothing to complain about. Me? I took more than my share of Fleet pilots at Ulrand, and I got the hell out with my crew and my ship whole."

Vaurien exhaled through his teeth. "All right, Sergei, we'll play this your way. You'll be safer on the *Wastrel*, anyway. Zwerner's got to be waiting for another shot at you, and you know what they say."

"Third time lucky," van Donne growled. "I know."

"And then we deal," Travers added. "Remember the prisoners? The warprizes, if you want to use the term. You said you can steer us in the right direction, for a price. You want to make some calls?"

"You're joking, right?" Sergei looked at Byrne, and laughed. "You say word *one* on the air in this place, and Zwerner's listening. You want

to talk to anybody, you go there, buy him a beer, look him in the eyeballs." He swiped up his jacket but did not put it on. "And, yeah, I'll deal. You get what you want, Travers ... so do I."

With an expression of some relief, Vaurien was already moving. "Are we out of this place, while I still have my eardrums?"

"We're out," van Donne agreed. "This might be a shithole, but it's one of the few places you can't be jumped, and there's so much EM crap, it busts up surveillance. There's two drones that I know about monitoring me, but with the EM and the background noise, all Boden Zwerner knows about right now is that Vaurien and his people met me and mine. He'll stew in his own juices, wondering what's going down."

"And then he'll take another shot at you," Marin observed.

At the door, van Donne stopped and gestured Ramon to go ahead of him. "Why do you think Fernie Wang's contract shooter is shadowing me? I mean, besides the fact he wants me to shag his little ass raw."

The door slid open a half meter. Ramon was flat against it, a gun in each hand, eyes wide, almost feral, as he scanned the obnoxiously pink bar and stage area. The noise levels ramped up at once, and Vaurien raised his voice to get over them.

"You've buddied up with Wang? I'm surprised."

"I've flown with Fernie a few times," van Donne admitted, "when there was a profit in it. There's times when I hate the man's guts, but he can be useful, and he wants a piece of Zwerner almost as much as I do." He gestured at the deck. "The *Krait's* docked down on J Deck, berth 87, right on the edge of the rink. Fernie likes it cold and dark and stinking. Makes it easier to get away with murder – literally." He lifted a brow at Ramon as the door opened wider and the shooter slid out. "The kid's on loan, but he's damned good. If he's half as good in the sack as he is at his job, I might keep him."

"Rafe doesn't mind?" Jazinsky wondered. "What about it, Rafe? You want Ramon aboard?"

The Irish was piquant in Byrne's light voice, and he gave Jazinsky a wink. "I ... like variety, if you get my drift."

She chuckled, and the humor was genuine. "Meaning, you like getting on top as well, and your chances of slapping a saddle on Sergei are slim to none."

"Close. Just drop the slim part," Byrne affirmed with an eloquent shrug. "Ramon's okay. Like Sergei said, he's damn' good. He's wasted on Fernie's crew. Christ, who'd want a berth on the *Krait*?"

The remark struck close to home, and Travers was thinking about Jo Queneau as he stepped out ahead of Vaurien and Jazinsky. Marin

was behind them, and Richard was panning the handy to and fro, looking for the drones van Donne had mentioned.

He found them as they moved out of the club, and pointed – one was high up, among the dead fluorescent tubes; the other was concealed behind the dumpsters outside the narrow door of a pocket-sized diner. The reek of week-old garbage competed with the heavy odors of sizzling oil and frying meat.

"There's your drones, Sergei," Vaurien said tersely. "You might want to delete them, let Zwerner know we know he's keeping tabs on us."

"Be my guest," van Donne invited. "I've blown away dozens of these things. Five minutes later a couple more show up. In the end, it's cheaper to save your ammunition."

"Neil?" Vaurien turned in Travers's direction.

"Take them, make the statement," Travers said promptly. "Make Zwerner aware van Donne has allies."

"Is that wise?" Jazinsky wondered.

"He's already seen us meet." Marin drew the Zamphir and primed it. He was gazing up, wide-eyed in the half-light, looking for the first drone. "He'll be fully aware of the probe into his business, which is the reason he pulled out to Halfway, where he's harder to reach. He tried to probe Etienne before we docked – and failed. So we have to be high on his list of suspects. He knows we're on Shapiro's team ... I'd say he already knows why we're here, and –" he paused to squeeze the trigger once, and was rewarded by a small explosion, a shower of magnesium bright sparks, a fist-sized chunk of wreckage which fell heavily to the deck, still glowing red-hot.

"And what we need," Travers went on as he slithered along the wall, closer to the reeking dumpsters, "is a way to force his hand. Maybe flush him out. Panic him, so he doesn't feel safe even sitting inside his fortress." He snapped off a single shot, and the dumpsters jiggled with the force of the explosion which killed the second drone. He turned back to the group as he slid away the sidearm. "Now he knows what he's up against, and he's going to make the next move."

"Jesus," van Donne breathed. "You're insane."

"Who, us?" Marin joined Travers, shoulder to shoulder with him. "What tipped you off?" He touched the comm clipped to his lapel. "Etienne, status?"

The calm AI voice was surreal in these surroundings. "Level four signal activity issuing from the source of the deep system probe. Comm locators place five recipients all over Halfway. Only one is in your

sector. Suggest vigilance. Armed caution is warranted."

Marin surveyed van Donne critically. "Tells us three things. One, we got Zwerner's attention. Two, he takes us seriously enough to jump right out of his skin. Three, he has only five operatives deployed at one time, which means he has less than twenty available, probably closer to ten. And those numbers are manageable."

"Especially since you can subtract one in about two minutes," Travers said in an acid tone. "Etienne, update."

"One thermal signature, identified by the comm unit receiving the level four encrypted signal, converging on your position," Etienne informed him. "Position, cargo elevator access corridor, intersecting with the promenade thirty meters ahead of your position. Estimated time to intercept, seventy seconds."

"Stay put," Travers said quietly to Vaurien. He gave Ramon an interested look. "Everybody says you're one of the best, kid. Do what you do ... secure this position, nothing gets through, nobody gets hurt."

Ramon made a face. "You sure you're a major? You sound like a freakin' platoon sergeant."

The observation was accurate enough to inspire genuine humor, and Travers gave the kid a brash grin. "It's a long story. Curtis?"

They were moving then, holding to the deep blue pools of shadow in the dark wells where the overhead fluoros were dead. Opposite the juncture of the promenade and the cargo access corridor was the recessed doorway of a dealer in scrap machinery. Every conceivable item was stacked inside and out, from the most antiquated rubbish Mawson would have rejected to military items recently salvaged at Ulrand, most of which were broken but repairable.

Without a word, Travers and Marin ducked into the cover of the stacked machinery and listened as Etienne whispered over the loop. "Ten seconds. Five ... three ... standby."

The shooter was not long out of Fleet. The presentation was still all crewdeck bravado, from the unit tattoos to the buzz cut hair, the mock-cammo pants and jacket and the indeterminate gender. Travers had no idea if Zwerner's shooter was male or female. Too much muscle and too many tattoos confused the kid's profile. All he was sure of was that it was a kid in his or her early twenties, with a big-cal Chiyoda pistol in one hand and a palmgun in the other.

The shooter slithered to the end of the corridor, pressed flat against the wall and peered around, hunting visually for the group. Marin was muttering in annoyance as he swung the Zamphir down into line and snapped off a shot. The round smacked into the meat and

muscle of one big thigh and the shooter spun, grunted, as he or she sprawled on the deck.

"Etienne," Marin said sharply. "Four more comm idents in the field. Where, doing what?"

"Too far from your position to be germane," Etienne murmured. "I will track them and report."

Satisfied, Travers stood up from the cover of the stack of junk and watched as Marin strode closer to the shooter. A second round punched into the kid's other leg; two more, delicately placed, incapacitated both arms. The limbs were perfectly repairable, but the neural damage would take several days to properly heal after surgery. This one was out of commission for so long, the action would be over before the medics let him get back up on his feet.

With a muttered curse, Marin leaned down over the kid, threw open the cammo jacket and deliberately confiscated three other assorted guns as well as the Chiyoda and the sneak gun. The young face was twisted in pain, teeth bared, eyes red as much with fury as with agony. Marin passed two of the weapons to Travers and thrust the others into his jacket pockets. Before he straightened, he addressed the comm in the kid's shirt pocket.

He knew it would be open. Radio monitoring was standard procedure. "Mister Zwerner," he said levelly, "you'd best send a crew down here to pick up your wounded. And if you continue to take casual potshots at this company, the next one will require a bodybag." He stood then. "Neil?"

Travers whispered to his own comm. "Move it. Everybody out. The way's clear ahead, right back to the elevators. Fall back to the *Wastrel*. Etienne, are you monitoring Halfway utility systems?"

"Constantly."

"Do you have override capabilities?"

"Of course," Etienne said patiently.

"Then override command of the elevator between here and the dorsal docks," Travers told it. He lifted a brow at Marin. "We don't want any nasty surprises on the way home ... and if Zwerner's been here so long he literally owns the place, he could have a finger up everything."

"Sneaky." Marin favored him with a smile. "You're learning. These are Dendra Shemiji tricks. Never split your knuckles when you can think spirals around the buggers."

For months now, while he and Marin had been recovering from the ordeal in the smashed, radiotoxic underground below the Univer-

sity of Omaru, Hydralis, Travers had been reading Mark Sherratt's texts, watching vids, reviewing old mission reports. In sims, he had been trying his hand at the Resalq martial arts, and a few words of the language had begun to stick in his mind. He knew that Dendra Shemiji meant 'the silence of knives,' or, more literally, 'knife silent.' He knew that 'dendra' was a *class* of knife, specifically the long knife, or even sword. *Denlun* was cutlery; *denepu* was the whole family of carving knives. He knew that 'shemiji' was a *type* of silence. *Shemebre'elar* was the soft quiet before a storm broke. *Shemvin* was 'the quiet of the soul,' the Resalq term for meditation. *Shemiji* was the silence of utter extinction. *Iji* meant 'nothing,' in the context of 'the hollow emptiness left when everything is gone.'

The Resalq way was so old, so deep, Travers often despaired of making sense of more than a fraction of it. After ten years of living and working with them, studying with Mark Sherratt and literally being adopted into his family – perhaps even to fill some void left by Leon's departure – Marin was still not fluent in the language. But the Resalq triple-think came naturally to him now, while Travers still envied his knowledge of a system of martial arts which had been ancient before humans landed a pilot on their own moon.

With Etienne remote-commanding the elevators in this quadrant of Halfway, Zwerner could not reach them on the ride back up to the *Wastrel's* dorsal berth, but before Marin hit the door release he petitioned the AI again.

"The docking facility is clear," Etienne reported. "I am still tracking the operatives associated by comm ID with the individual, Zwerner, but they have converged on their injured. Encrypted comm traffic continues to pass between them and a secure mainframe in Halfway. Encryption levels have been increased to level five."

"Doors open. Do we have access to the content of the traffic?" Travers asked.

"Yes, but the gist is unclear," Etienne warned. "Their use of unit-specific code words complicates the sense of their signals."

The docking rings were cold, windy, dim. Travers swept the area with a single disapproving look, and went ahead to the *Wastrel's* hatch. Marin hung behind the group, and with a glance back, Travers knew what he was doing. He had pried an inspection hatch off the panel at the right of the freight elevator. He was rigging up a manual override, setting keycodes for one more level of security.

The wide, silver-green hatch slid open with a soft shush of equalizing air pressures. Jazinsky went right ahead, but Vaurien blocked the

way before van Donne and his people could follow. His face was side-lit by the red emergency lamps, weirdly shadowed, forbidding, as he gave van Donne a glare that might have withered him.

"You're a guest on my ship, Sergei, and you're under my protection here. I'll thank you to mind your manners. If I find one mote of dust out of place, you're on your own. We can get to Zwerner without you, and you'll hear about it on whatever this heap of scrap uses for a data circuit."

Sergei produced a hurt look. "Richard, yet again I'm wounded."

"You will be," Vaurien promised, "if Etienne reports anything missing or tampered with. You're under surveillance, the three of you."

"You gonna be watching when I take a leak?" van Donne speculated. "I didn't figure you for a voyeur. If you wanted to check out the merchandise, all you had to do was ask."

Without another word, Vaurien stood aside and let them pass. Ramon and Byrne were a pace behind the bigger, broader van Donne, and Travers gave a soundless chuckle as Marin joined them in the hatch.

"I never thought I'd see the day," Marin admitted. "The last time you had van Donne aboard, he tried to make off with any tech that wasn't bolted to the deck, and Jazinsky offered to break all four of his limbs."

"Times change," Travers said philosophically, "for us all. Sergei needs us, and he can save us a lot of time and work. As for the kids, Jazinsky knows Rafe Byrne from somewhere, and Ramon is looking for a better deal. He's not going to rub you the wrong way, Richard."

"The deal Ramon wants," Marin said amusedly, "is anything that gets him between van Donne's sheets, even if it means giving Byrne what he wants! I set the override on the elevator. We're secure there. And if van Donne has even half the intel he thinks he does, we'll have our pipeline to Zwerner."

"Which leaves me chasing the *Shanghai* survivors," Vaurien finished. He stepped into the warmer, brighter interior of his ship, and the hatch slid over. "All right, let's see what Sergei has to offer."

"Is anyone but me hungry?" Travers wondered plaintively. His head had begun to clear as his system cycled out the rubbish they had all been breathing in the club, leaving him aware of his belly. The after-effects of gryphon and chimera were always the same. The last time he and Curtis had been subjected to these mild toxins, they were in the custody of Colonel Alec Tarrant's resistance cell. He had wild memories of that VR session, and from the glitter in Curtis's eyes, he was recalling the same scenes.

Chapter Two

The schematics of Halfway displayed in the vast threedee, five meters wide, filling the body of Jazinsky's lab. Etienne had launched a flock of popup drones, scanned and modeled Halfway, while van Donne's company organized themselves in quarters between Vaurien's own and the stateroom which had become home to Travers and Marin. Ramon was wearing a smug expression, while Byrne watched the younger man with overt speculation.

Their flirting amused Marin, and he felt the tickle of fascination, the spike in his hormone levels, which might have been the gryphon and chimera, or the sub-etherics down on the lower levels – or it might have been the pheromones generated by van Donne's companions. Whatever it was, he found himself studying his own partner, seeing Neil Travers with a stranger's eyes, and looking at his chrono, wondering when he could engineer an hour of downtime.

The autochef in Jazinsky's lab was set up to cater to her own tastes. The food was hot enough to take the roof off Marin's mouth, but at least it was human. He had eaten enough Resalq cuisine to inure him to almost anything. Ramon seemed actually to like the Pakrani spices, and to van Donne they were as native as to Jazinsky herself. But Rafe Byrne grumbled bitterly until the ship's Weimann specialist, Tully Ingersol, showed him the 'chef in the back of the crew lounge. Minutes later Byrne returned to Jazinsky's lab with a sausage and onions on a bun, and a schooner of beer, which earned him the derision of both crews.

Wading in the threedee display, Vaurien chewed absently on seafood and noodles as he followed the paths of Halfway's power, air, water and waste conduits. The old *Rotterdam Explorer* was little more than a hollow cylinder. Of the original fittings, only the generators remained. The bows had been laid wide open, peeled back like a banana skin and fused into the planetoid, and twenty meters ahead of the wide-scale conversion job, Halfway changed.

People like Boden Zwerner had invested a great deal in Halfway, for their own comfort and security. The rad-shields were fine-tuned and overlapped; the air cycling systems worked properly; the lights were all functional. Toxicity and noise levels were low, while temperature, humidity and light levels were under constant revision. Live plants grew there; music played at volumes which did not perforate the eardrums. And the accommodations were plush, the entertainments lavish – the docking ports private and secure.

The bow-end community had been nicknamed Xanadu years before, when the modifications began, and the name was accurate. Fifteen decks of opulence were stacked one atop another, and Zwerner commanded the top three. His own docking ports opened there; his corporate army patrolled the deck directly below, and his household was installed in fortress-like security.

"Does he ever come out?" Travers asked shrewdly. He was sitting on the end of a workbench, feet on a stool, hands cradling a bowl of chicken and rice.

"Occasionally," van Donne said through a mouthful of food. He was in Jazinsky's recliner, boots crossed on the workspace before him. "But when he does, it's only to saunter down to a club, or play squash with his own bodyguards."

"For what it's worth," Vaurien observed from his place at the workbench where he was leaning with both elbows on the cluttered surface, "he's made himself a prisoner."

"It ain't worth much." Travers gestured with his fork at the schematic. "He's living like an emperor in there. He'll have the best of everything, from food to Companions to VR, whatever he wants."

"And," van Donne said sourly, "scuttlebutt out of Marak City says he's *consolidating*. Meaning, the bastard's rolling every asset he ever possessed into one godalmighty chunk of cash, gems, resources –"

"He's pulling out," Marin mused without waiting for van Donne to finish. "He's probably fitting out a ship. Next stop, the homeworlds, where he's far beyond the reach of anybody but Dendra Shemiji. And he'll be making the usual mistake, assuming Dendra Shemiji doesn't, or can't, operate that far away."

The big Pakrani twisted in his chair to look up and back at Marin. "Not true?"

Marin glanced at him, and then back at the schematics. "Need to know, van Donne. And you don't."

"Well, shit, I'll just take that as a 'yes,'" van Donne said acidly. "But if that mother slips past me – us – here, pulling off a hit when he's

gotten himself a mansion on Earth or Mars will be one helluva lot harder. He's already surrounded by a goddamn' army here. Once he gets in among the homeworlds, he'll have Tactical, military, corporate, government, all protecting him. I'm going to get one shot at this, and then I might as well write it off and learn to live with the fact he fucked me over royally."

"We," Travers corrected, "are going to get one shot."

"What's the story with you and Zwerner?" Marin prompted. "I mean, the full, real version. I know the gossip, and if there's anything I've learned, it's never to trust spacer rink gossip." He lifted one brow at van Donne. "So Zwerner screwed you. He's screwed everybody, and he and his homeworlds cronies came damn' close to destroying most of Omaru."

"I know. CL-389," van Donne sad quietly. "I heard the whole thing. There's not much I don't get to know through the Hydralis underground. I used to run the Fleet blockade so often, I had my own stashes in the outer system, among the abandoned smelters. Would it surprise you to know I've done business with Alec Tarrant?"

The supply pipeline from Reece Clyma at Reagan de la Courte to Colonel Alec Tarrant in Hydralis had gone by way of van Donne, and Marin was unimpressed. "If you short changed Tarrant, when this war ends and he can get out of Omaru, I wouldn't be you."

"He doesn't have a bone to pick with me," van Donne said tartly. "And as for Boden Zwerner – I don't think he has a friend left in the Deep Sky. He has goons and whores, but kin and friends?" The blond head shook. "He could buy his way into the homeworlds, probably even Earth itself, but he's not going to get the chance." He glanced up at Marin. "So, Dendra Shemiji. I've been looking for a way to get to him for months. What do you see that I don't?"

It was a good question, and Marin took it seriously. The schematics were heavily annotated with van Donne's information, and he had also been watching Zwerner for long enough to know his schedule, his movements. Sergei had tried to find access for either a human or a drone, through the loading dock, the servants' gates, the technicians' inspection hatches, the air ducts, incoming water pipes and wiring conduits, power couplers, waste water pipes.

"No joy," he said as he fed the last forkload of food into his mouth. "Ramon, get me a beer, will you, kid? So, Mister Professional Expert, what's your plan?"

Without inflection of tone or expression Marin mused, "I'll take him tomorrow, if you guys have gotten a lead on the *Shanghai* prison-

ers. If you need extra time, tell me how long. I don't want to pull the plug on Zwerner before you have what you need, because this whole place is going to go so ape, we might have to bust out of here, and we don't have the resources to get too fancy – or complacent."

Every head in the lab had turned to stare at him. Even van Donne was so speechless, the smart remarks died unspoken for a long, elastic minute. At last it was Ramon who said, in that thick Velcastran accent, "You're shittin' us, right?"

"No." Marin gave the younger man a cool look. "It's so obvious, it's slapping you in the face, you're just not seeing it ... you've become too used to getting what you need by brute force." He tapped his temple. "Not sneaky enough by half, kiddo. Neil, I need to go look at a bunch of messages that have been queued since yesterday ... do you have a few minutes?"

The look on Travers's face made him long for a handy. He would have liked to show Neil the picture of himself, open mouthed and gaping. On Jagreth, they called it 'catching bugs.' Vaurien was only chuckling. He had known Mark Sherratt far too long to doubt a syllable Marin had said, and Jazinsky accepted the bald statement without comment.

"If you need me, I'll be in our quarters," Marin said lightly, and stepped out. "Neil?"

Travers was a pace behind him. Safely out of earshot of van Donne and his partners, he demanded softly, "That was a joke, wasn't it? You're just winding the buggers up because they're funnier that way?"

"No." Marin gave him a sultry look over one shoulder. "I'll take him tomorrow, or at the moment you specify, if a day nosing around Halfway doesn't get you the intel on the prisoners."

They were in the open doorway to their stateroom when Travers's hand on his arm held him back. "You going to tell me, or do I have to bribe the info out of you?"

For the first time in what seemed a lifetime, Marin laughed quietly, and the humor was genuine. He beckoned Travers in, and hit the door release. It was closed, locked, when he sat back on the edge of the wide bed, propped himself on both palms, and gave Travers an amused look.

"You saw the schematics. You can't sneak in or break in. It's sealed up tight. Which means Boden Zwerner lives in the dread of assassination – execution! – as well as the expectation of attempts. So, if you can neither sneak nor break in ...?"

Travers's brows rose. "He has to come out."

"Or he has to invite me to come in," Marin added. "Now, I could probably romance him till he issued the invitation, but I'm not going to. The place is crawling with his goons, as Sergei said. I *itemize* him, which is simple enough; then I have to itemize twenty more, to get out of there alive." He shook his head dismissively, and looked Travers over with deep appreciation. "It would get too complicated, messy, hazardous. Therefore, the man will come out tomorrow."

"You're dead certain of that." Travers was well aware of Marin's mood. Faint color flushed his cheeks and his eyes had darkened. He came closer, standing between Marin's widespread knees at the edge of the bed.

"With a major radiation spill from the power conduits on the level right below, it'll be his own idea to get up and go," Marin said cynically. "And before you ask, no, I'm not going to rupture the mains and contaminate half the colony! But I *am* going to send a drone in there with a hazmat lock-box, and instructions to open it when we're ready to move; and in about an hour's time, I'm going to ask Jazinsky to put an AI into the Halfway mainframe.

"When we're good and ready, the drone releases just enough radiotoxic garbage to give Zwerner's sensors the tipoff that it's the real deal, and Halfway's own peabrain little AI will raise the alarm. Everyone and his dog will be bugging out. All we have to do is pinpoint Zwerner's ship, and pick him off as he leaves. I don't want to have the *Wastrel* do it – I don't want anything tying Richard into the event any more closely than he already is. We could arm the Capricorn, but she doesn't have enough hull armor to make the idea attractive, if there were an alternative. And there is. Sergei already bought into this, which means we can take Zwerner with the *Mako*, and leave Richard the hell out of the whole deal. Nice, neat, tidy."

"Damn," Travers whispered as he sank to his knees at the bedside and laid both forearms along Marin's thighs. "Sergei could have done it himself – if he had the brains to think it through. And an AI specialist. And a spare drone or two he could trust. He looked up into Marin's face. "So when are you going to put him out of his misery, tell him how it's going down?"

"Same time as I ask Barb to put an AI into the Halfway mainframe." Marin stretched under the sheer luxury of Travers's hands, which had begun to caress him, undress him. He sprawled back over the bed and watched Neil with lazy preoccupation.

"Now, what pushed your buttons this time?" Travers wondered as he pulled off the soft Tai Chi pants. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"Watching Ramon and Byrne flirt," Marin admitted. "They're fancy dancing their way around each other and van Donne. And Ramon's going to get what he's been wanting, unless I miss my guess."

"Which got you ... interested," Travers observed, preoccupied with the hot, hard flesh he had discovered. "Just lucky for you, there's someone to take care of this for you." And the dark head bowed to the task he had set himself.

Liquid pleasure engulfed Marin. The alchemy of it transformed his bones into jelly, and his fingers threaded into Travers's hair, massaging his scalp, finding the erogenous zones. Neil groaned, deep and bass, as his body responded to the ancient skills, and he was only half aware of what Marin was doing. In time he would learn these skills too. The Resalq knew every trick, every act of sensual magic, and the pressure points were not very different in humans, though the response was not at all the same.

A Resalq lover could court the male or the female nature of his partner – the qualities a human recognized as male and female were both integral to the Resalq. Humans were different, more difficult to woo, more unpredictable. Marin wondered which side of Neil would awaken as he massaged the pressure points around skull, neck, face, slipped his hands down around the big shoulders and began again.

The hot, wet heaven of Neil's mouth left him; his skin prickled in reaction, and he took a quick breath as Travers moved up over him. He was not surprised to find his spine folded, his legs draped artlessly across Neil's shoulders. He smelt the sweet scent of the lube they used, felt its coolness on Neil's long fingers as they slipped into him. He looked up into Travers's intent face as he positioned himself, one knee on the bed, one foot braced on the deck. And then the sudden fullness, heat and intense pleasure banished every thought from Marin's mind.

With fingers like talons in Travers's shoulders, he held on – unable to move much, and not needing to. Neil was as strong as he had ever been, or stronger. Since Omaru they had both spent countless hours in the gym, and while the hard physical work only made Marin more slender as it turned his sinews to steel hawsers, it packed dense, heavy muscle onto Neil's body. He was strong enough to have been daunting, if Curtis had not known him for so long.

But he had never been wary of Travers, nor reluctant to arouse him. The weeks of impotence and sickness after Omaru were just a bad memory now, which Marin chose not to recall. Instead, he focused on the big, robust body in his arms, filled with the vitality of a magnificent young animal, driven by the healthy lust Marin had invited, and tempered by love.

Growling with effort and desire, Neil drove him hard, and at last Marin let his head fall back, closed his eyes, barely breathing as he concentrated on every sensation. He knew to the instant when Neil was about to come, and he needed only a few touches of his own hand to trigger his own coming.

They were tangled on the bed, a long time later, when the comm chimed. Without even opening his eyes Marin said,

"This better be good."

It was Vaurien. "Did I interrupt something?"

"No," Marin admitted. "We're done ... what is it, Richard?"

"The other half of this job." Vaurien paused. "We need to pay a visit to J Deck."

The reference meant nothing to Marin for a moment, and then he remembered the schematics. J was the bottom deck, the very bottom of Halfway's docking rink, where the *Krait* and the *Mako* were berthed. "Tell Sergei to bring his ship up to one of the topside docks. As it happens, we can use the *Mako*."

"I'll tell him," Vaurien agreed, "but Fernie Wang is happy as a pig in shit down there. He's not going to move the *Krait*."

In the vicinity of Marin's right shoulder, Travers groaned. "We have a use for Fernando Wang? In the name of God, what?"

Vaurien chuckled. "It's like this. Sergei knows another guy on Wang's crew, some deadhead, name of Talantov. Turns out this Talantov spends his downtime skulling in a den on J, some dive called Gemini that's going to make *Flamenco Rosado* look like a class act. Talantov's been talking to Ramon about this dealer he knows from Gemini ... give you three guesses what the lowlife deals in."

"Live cargo. Labor for the Freespace colonies," Travers breathed.

"Got it in one," Vaurien affirmed. "Etienne's monitoring comm in and out of Halfway, and it's a dumb idea to say a syllable on the air, encrypted or not. I want to track down this Talantov personally, use him to get hold of the dealer ... and then it ought to come down to money or blood. He either sells the intel or you can beat it out of him."

"Me?" Travers demanded. "Why does it always come down to me, when you want rough stuff --"

"How do you know I was talking to you?" Vaurien asked sweetly. "If it came to extracting information at the edge of a razor, I'd have to guess Dendra Shemiji would know how it works."

Marin sat up with a deep yawn. "Nothing so crude, Richard – but I take your point. With any luck the intel will be on the table with a pricetag attached." He stretched every joint, every sinew, and looked

down at the long, muscular sprawl of Travers's body. "When do you want us there?"

"Soon," Vaurien mused. "I want to nail the data fast, before any part of the status quo can change. Which also gives you your shot at Zwerner tomorrow. You said you can use the *Mako*?"

"And a favor from Barb." Marin got his feet under him with another yawn, and threw open the closet. "We'll be right there, Richard."

Not quite on a whim, he lifted out the kevlex vest, and without a word, dropped it on over his head before he dressed.

"We expecting to get shot at?" Travers asked quietly.

"Maybe." Marin glanced thoughtfully at him. "Zwerner's almost killed van Donne twice. He has to know we're on Halfway ... and if van Donne knows I executed Reece Cyma, the news might have reached Zwerner. For all we know, he might also be aware of who got through his security at the Palmeral. It all comes back to me. Us. Dendra Shemiji."

"Which makes us targets as surely as van Donne." Travers reached into the closet and lifted out the larger kevlex vest.

Pleased he was going to wear it without being argued into it, Marin watched him set the smart seals, so the kevlex-titanium mesh formed up about his torso and abdomen like a close second skin of black armor. Travers regarded his reflection in the long mirror with a cynical expression.

"What?" Marin wondered.

"I'll be glad when this bloody war is history," Travers said with raw honesty, "and it's just you and me, and a horse property in some backwoods place nobody every heard of. Time and space to live your life without spending half of it healing up and the other half trying not to get busted up all over again."

"We'll get there," Marin promised. He took Travers's smooth face between both palms for a moment, kissed his mouth, and watched the blue eyes smile at him with so much they might never say. "If they didn't get us at Omaru, the rest should be easy. Still," he mused as he stepped back to watch Travers finish dressing, "I'd like to get the paperwork organized. Just in case. If you're going to be my legal heir, so you can inherit under Jagrethean law --"

"We'll need to handfast, to make it impossible for the Jagrethean authorities to invalidate the bequest. I know." Travers shoved his feet into the soft black boots and settled his denims over them. He shrugged into the shoulder holster for the Zamphir and snatched up the jacket he had dropped by the bed almost an hour before. "Talk to Richard and Mark. Set the date."

Something inside Curtis Marin gave a curious lurch. "You're serious?"

"Of course." Travers leaned over and pecked his cheek with a kiss. "But I'm not just marrying you for your money. That part of it – the inheritance thing, and this weird Jagrethean colonial law of yours – is all your business. I'm just getting hitched because I found somebody to care about, and I want to be with him." He paused with a frown. "Like Shapiro, I suppose, stumbling right into Jon Kim by accident. It's been a long time since his wife was killed. You ever read his file? Vaurien has it. Jazinsky hacked Shapiro's system a few hours after he jumped us on Saraine!"

Lauren Russell-Shapiro had been gone for a long time, and it was no more than blind luck that threw Harrison Shapiro into the company of the Ulrish Environment Minister – the same blind luck that made Jon Kim not only work well with Shapiro, but also find the older man fascinating.

"By now Kim ought to be getting close to Velcastra, even on a tramp that's taking the back-loop route," Marin mused.

"Better hope he is," Travers decided. "There's no way back to Ulland for him, and the whole Deep Sky is getting dangerous. This one's Shapiro's problem, loverboy – and he probably relishes it. You and me? Getting hitched is the least of our worries. It's only to keep your weird Jagrethean law happy. We'd be together anyway, here, there, Three Rivers, what would it matter?"

He hit the door release and was out of the stateroom on those words, as if he did not realize the enormity of what he had said. Marin smiled after him, mulling the words over again, liking the sound of them. It was so simple, in Travers's logic. Someone to care about, to be with. Neil was prepared to accept the feelings between them for what they were, without micro-analyzing them, taking them apart and putting them through some process of scrutinization after which they would never be the same again.

"Good enough," he decided as he picked up his jacket.

"What is?" Travers wondered.

"I'll talk to Richard and Mark," Marin told him. "Set a date."

Travers looked back over one shoulder. "Don't forget to brief me. You might need me to show up on the day."

Vaurien was leaning on the bulkhead beside the service elevator, listening to Ramon, who spoke in a bare undertone as if he thought the walls might be audio bugged. Richard gave Travers an exasperated look and raised a hand to stop Ramon.

"Save it kid. Neil, they're prepping the Capricorn. We're going to take it down and dock on J, close enough to Wang's berth and this club Ramon's telling me about to scan the whole zone and clear it. I'm done taking chances."

As he spoke, the comm whispered with van Donne's voice, a terse announcement that the spaceplane was on launch standby. Marin was surprised. "You trust van Donne and Byrne in your hangars?"

"Tully's with them, and they don't know it, but Etienne's got tracers on them," Richard told him. "They can't make a move without me knowing about it."

"And me?" Ramon wondered. "Your AI has a tracer on me too?"

"Oh, yes." Vaurien dropped one large hand on the smaller man's shoulder. "Forgive me if I don't trust you. It's nothing personal."

"You've done nothing yet to make him trust you," Travers said to Ramon as Vaurien thumbed for the lift. "And if you're running with Sergei, he's twice as likely to be suspicious. You know the history they share."

The shooter tossed back the cape of blue-black hair and regarded Vaurien with a darkly speculative expression. "I know about it. Sergei tells it differently."

"I imagine he does." Richard's tone was bland. "Doesn't mean he's remembering it like it happened."

"And you are," Ramon retorted.

"Between us, Barb, Tully and myself have a pretty good grasp on the reality of being infiltrated, spied on, robbed blind, played for fools." Richard paused as the wide cargo doors opened, and stepped into the car. "If you don't believe me, ask Paul Wymark the next time you see him."

Wymark was the Arago specialist aboard the *Wings of Freedom*, and Marin knew Ramon was itching to know what had happened to the ship. It would be weeks or months before she pulled out of the Rabelais Drift, put her nose outside the absolute seclusion of Alshie'nya, and Wymark would be at liberty to tell some fraction of the work he had been doing. Lai'a was back there, already refitting after the battle at Ulrand.

The mission for which the old *Intrepid* had been resurrected was imminent. The moment the Colonial War was over, and won, Harrison Shapiro would be free to divide his attention between his Ulrish partner, handsome young Jon Kim – who should be well on his way to Velcastra, invisible in the political arena – and the shift of power in the Deep Sky. On that day, with Shapiro exploring the first personal rela-

tionship he had permitted himself in far too long, Mark Sherratt would be glad to focus his interest elsewhere.

Hellgate. *Elarne*.

The sound of the Resalq word made Marin shiver. He stepped into the service lift after Vaurien, leaned against the brushed steel wall with Travers, and listened to the pulse beat in his ears as he thought of Lai'a, and the greater purpose for which it was designed.

"Sergei likes to paint you the villain," Ramon was saying to Vaurien, and Marin forced himself to listen, to anchor himself in the present.

"No, really?" Richard mocked as the elevator dropped down the four decks to the smaller hangars. "I guess it's easier to rationalize putting a bullet in somebody when you've decided he's your enemy."

"You put a bullet in him, too," Ramon said pointedly.

"I put three in him," Richard corrected. "Self defense. Barb Jazinsky offered to send him home in a box, and you'd better believe she can do it."

"I do. I saw the fight, back in Marak City." Ramon chuckled. "She's a thing of beauty, isn't she? Byrne says she's as good in the sack as in the lab. They have a little bit of *history*, as you called it."

Richard looked tired. Marin watched him close his eyes for a moment and then force himself to wake up. He pulled his shoulders back, worked his neck around to ease the stiffness in his muscles. "What Barb does on her own time is her business. And she doesn't have a lot of her own time, lately. None of us does. If you have Sergei's ear, you might tell him to mind his manners. No one has much patience left. We're only pulling on the same team to get this job done fast, and get the hell out."

For a moment Ramon studied Vaurien in silence. "Sergei says the same thing. If he'd been able to take Zwerner without you, we'd have been gone before you got here. This is all about last chance bullshit."

With an obvious effort, Vaurien pushed away from the wall and straightened his spine. "So, what's the story with Sergei and this bastard, Zwerner? We never even heard the name before CL-389, but Sergei's obviously known him for long enough, and closely enough, to owe him a kill shot – or think he does."

"He does," Ramon said quietly as the lift opened onto the cold, windy hangar level.

The whine of the machine shops, the rumble through the deck of heavy equipment, reached them, but the passages leading to the fabrication bays were closed off. Sergei would have been eager to peek into them, see what kind of work had Vaurien at full stretch, but the doors

were code sealed, and the keycodes were privileged information.

The hangars were harshly lit, in strips of blue and mauve neon which made a man look leprous, hollow eyed. The deck was blue-black steel, and the vast hangar doors, mounted in the deck itself, were outlined in yellow chevrons. Red spinners were revolving before the lift opened, and Etienne's voice murmured over the loop, constant warnings that Hanger 4 was on alert. In the middle of the deck, bathed in floodlights, the Yamazake Capricorn stood in a haze of heat from its own engines. The sterntubes still glowed from the testfiring not two minutes before. The side 'lock was open, and Marin saw faces in the cockpit – Sergei, Byrne, and Tully Ingersol, who gave Vaurien a wave as he saw them coming.

"Three years ago, Zwerner was legit." Ramon checked both his sidearms as they walked out to the Capricorn. "He's from way back in the Middle Heavens, so I heard, and I got the scuttlebutt right from the horse's ass, citybottom, rinkside, Marak City. He made big, big money in freight logistics. Then he invested the whole shebang in homeworlds industry – shipyards, what else? Fleet construction contracts. Think about this: a yokel colonial boy with his eyes set on owning half of Earth, or Mars, if he couldn't manage the Big E."

"Audacious," Marin observed. "So what the hell brought him out to Marak? It's not exactly the brightest part of the Deep Sky."

Ramon chortled with something very like glee. "He was busted. Tax evasion! Soon as he started earning big, big money out of his investments in Fleet construction back in the homeworlds, he comes to the attention of the Confederate government. He gets audited, and – guess what? They dig back through five or seven years, and they come up with a big, fat discrepancy. Now, Zwerner swore up and down there was never any such discrepancy, and it was all invention." Ramon's slim shoulders lifted in an elaborate shrug. "Could be he was telling the truth. I never liked *Earthers* ... present company excepted, Richard."

"Thanks," Vaurien growled. "And you're probably right about the audit. If you have enemies, and you want to hurt them badly and stay on the high side of the law, fiddling a tax audit is the easiest way." His face creased in derision and distaste. "I never cared much for *Earthers* either. What do you think I'm doing way out here, putting my neck on the line for the freedom of the colonies?" He came to rest at the Capricorn's open 'lock. "So Zwerner copped a fine so heavy, it crippled him – and, what? He went rogue?"

"Understandable," Travers said thoughtfully. "And I guess the

rest of it starts to fall into place. He's an ambitious, social climbing Middle Heavens yokel who wants to be homeworlds nobility, so when he goes rogue it's colonials who get shafted. And when some senator's office way back on Earth had him set up the CL-389 deal, he grabbed the chance."

"And now he's *consolidating*," Marin went on, "raking it all into one pile, ready to pull out. Next stop Earth, where he'll expect to get protection because they owe him. What we need is the data, even a hint of the data, connecting Zwerner back to Senator Rutherford. And you know the only mouth it's going to come from is Zwerner's own."

"Or Rutherford's own," Travers said pointedly. "Speaking of whom, where is the bold Charleston Aimes Rutherford?"

"In custody on Ulrand, buried so deep, he's *ungetatable*," Vaurien stepped up into the Capricorn and stood back to watch the others board. "So how did Sergei wind up wanting Zwerner dead? Another double-cross?"

"A deal that went so wrong, people died," Ramon said soberly. "Sergei lost two in the same bust-up. Both partners, both lovers. Christ, it'd be like me and Rafe flying with him for years, and then —" He snapped his fingers. "Both of us gone in one hit. Sergei's wanted blood for a long time, and this is his last chance." He looked from Marin to Travers and back. "It'd be like Richard losing the two of you in one hit, and maybe Jazinsky too. Fuck, there'd be blood!"

"There would." Vaurien palmed the 'lock control, and the hatch slid shut, armed, pressurized. "Zwerner's time has come, Ramon. Stop fretting about him."

"Me? I'm not fretting," Ramon protested, making his way forward. He plopped into a couch and spread his arms on the back of it.

"Then, tell Sergei to stop fretting about the man," Travers advised.

He and Marin were right behind Vaurien as he stepped into the cockpit. The light levels were low; most illumination issued from the instrument surfaces. Rafe Byrne was lounging behind van Donne, who sat in the pilot's seat. Ingersol was busy, fine-tuning some deficiency in the Arago configuration only he could see. He looked up as Vaurien appeared, and tapped the combug in his right ear.

"We're good to shove off, boss ... and I'm reading all quiet and clear on J, around 87, which is the *Krait*. The *Mako's* locked up tight. Etienne reports no sign of the ID traces he's been following."

"All right." Richard slid a 'bug into his own ear. "Ops room, this is *Wastrel* 101. Opening Hangar 4."

The voice responding belonged to Piotr Cassales, the tug's senior

pilot. "Copy that ... and I'm watching your back, Rick."

Without comment, van Donne slid out of the pilot's seat, and Marin took his place. The hangar was already blowing down to close to zero pressure, and as the red spinner turned blue the doors in the belly of the big ship opened. Marin nudged up the repulsion, throttled forward a whisker and put the nose down.

The Capricorn dropped out of the hangar and skimmed the ventral surface of the *Wastrel* for a half kilometer, before he rolled her over and headed down the battered gray side of the old *Rotterdam Explorer*. Docking rings had been tack-welded onto the hull in odd places; pylons jutted at unpredictable angles, giving the Halfway rink the look of a mutated porcupine.

The belly of the ancient ship was a mass of comm arrays and docking adaptors, added seemingly at random over the space of many decades. Marin had never seen anything so chaotic, and he was about to ask how anyone told one berth from another, when he noticed the rudimentary beacon system. Each berth was marked with an auto transmitter, calling its identity on the low civilian frequencies every ten seconds. Low-tech was the answer to everything at Halfway.

He found 87 a moment later. It was the pylon right beside the wide, garish signage proclaiming 'Gemini cargo dock only.' The *Krait* was berthed less than fifty meters from the club, and tucked in another fifty meters along the belly of the *Explorer* was a hull he recognized from an encounter on the high slopes of Mont Katherine.

The *Mako* had taken some serious damage at Ulrand. She was patched over, serviceable, but still showing the carbonization of close calls, and the pockmarks of hits which had punched through her Arago screens and were stopped by her physical armor. He might have commented on the ship's condition, but van Donne said quietly,

"She needs some more drydock time, but she'll do. If we'd sat in Marak, drinking tequila and listening to hard-luck stories about the prisoners of war, waiting for repairs, we'd have missed Zwerner."

And he was parched for blood. Marin glanced up at the man, and then at Travers. Neil's brows rose in speculation, but before either of them could speak Rafe Byrne said,

"There's 89, close as you want to be. Dock her on while we give Fernie a call. Ramon?"

"Yeah, you're right." Ramon leaned over Marin's left shoulder to adjust the comm. "If there's one thing Fernie hates, it's surprises."

The *Krait* was an ugly ship, Marin thought, but she was powerful far beyond her size, and the girth of the engines, the bulk of the armor,

did not make for svelte dimensions or sleek lines. The ship had earned a bad reputation, and according to Vaurien, it was deserved. Fernando Wang was not a man to cross.

Docked at 87, the *Krait* was big enough to occlude 88, and 89 was the next available pylon. Etienne inquired softly if Marin wanted it to undertake docking procedures, but he declined. Flying a ship with his own hands, eyes and brains was one of life's pleasures, and he was not about to surrender it to an AI.

As he rolled the Capricorn over to present her docking collar to the adapter on the top side of the pylon, Fernie Wang himself appeared in the threedee. Marin spared him a glance and then returned his attention to the flight systems while Ramon said,

"Yeah, Fernie, we're coming in, man. Turns out you're going to come up owing Rick a favor or two. You might want to buy the dude a drink. You want to meet us in the club? We're looking for Kolya."

In the dense purple shadows in the threedee, Wang's face was a macabre twist of disgust. "Kolya's skulled out, as usual. If you're hoping to get anything coherent out of him, you better give him an hour. Come over to the *Krait*. I've got a bottle of something very old, very rare. If I owe Rick Vaurien, like you say I do, the least I can do is hand him a real drink instead of the rotgut he'll get at Gemini."

"Sure, man, we'll be there in a few," Ramon told him.

Behind Marin's seat, Vaurien groaned just loudly enough for Marin to hear him. "You were trying to stay off the *Krait*?" Curtis guessed.

"And apparently not succeeding," Vaurien said acidly.

"Not somewhere you like to be?" Travers ducked down to a level with Marin's shoulder to see Wang's ship, which was upside down to their perspective, and drifting in the left-side viewports.

"Give you a tip," Richard offered. "Wipe your boots on the way out." He glanced at his chrono, and then at Ramon. "An hour, right?"

The shooter seemed amused. "That works for me. Gives me a chance to grab my shit and shove it in a bag."

"Which is what you really wanted." Travers chuckled. "You got yourself a ride with van Donne?"

"And I *do* mean a ride," Ramon said with a blissful expression.

"Yeah, I thought you were walking funny," Ingersol muttered.

"Jealousy is unbecoming," Ramon told him, and forestalled an argument by heading back to join van Donne and Byrne.

"Onward and –" Marin paused as the docking clamps locked on, the collar pressurized, and the indicators shifted to green "– upward.

And we're docked, Richard. Any time you're ready."

This was the very keel of the *Rotterdam Explorer*, as far from the Xanadu heights of Halfway as they could get and still be in the Freespace colony. The old belly compartments, holds and hangars, were dark, icy. Vaurien knew the place well enough to shrug into his burgundy leather jacket and zip it before they left the Capricorn.

The cold prickled Marin's skin; the chemical taint of the air burned his sinuses a little as they made their way from the docking adaptor and into a wasteland of abandoned crates and barrels, drifts of litter which had blown against the bulkheads and set like *papier mache* in the intermittent drizzle of condensation which ran down the walls.

"Oh, nice," Travers breathed. "Very salubrious."

"Where the rats hang out," Marin added. "No offence, Ramon."

"None taken." Ramon rubbed his hands together to chafe warmth into them. "I'll be glad to get the hell out ... this is Fernie's idea of the place to be, not mine."

They walked fifty meters through dense, blue darkness, where the only light issued from infrequent marker lamps, half of which were long ago burned out and never replaced. The lights marked out 88, which was cold, dead, and the *Krait's* berth was the next, thirty meters further from the Capricorn, and close enough to the club, Gemini, for Marin's ears to be picking up the first bass of what passed for music here.

The ship's floodlights were on in Wang's dock, casting harsh white neon across corroded bulkheads and mounds of trash dumped by ships across the years. A security drone was on sentry duty at the docking ring, a squat little barrel with twenty assorted sensor probes and weapons. Ramon went ahead, showed his face to the machine, and a voice Marin had heard only via the threedee floated out of the *Krait*.

"Come aboard," Fernando Wang invited. "Richard, Sergei, how bizarre to see you both at the same time, in the same place, and nobody bleeding. Rafe, you're looking good. And you are ...?"

He was looking at Travers and Marin, two faces he had not seen before, and Marin saw the trace of automatic suspicion in his eyes before Vaurien could get between them and make cursory introductions.

"Neil Travers, Curtis Marin," he said shortly. "They're flying with me right now, but before you get the intel from some other source, you ought to know Curtis is on assignment. Dendra Shemiji."

Surprise widened Wang's dark eyes. He was Travers's height and Marin's weight, slender to the point of thinness, with deliberately

unruly red-blond hair and ice green eyes. The hair looked fake to Marin, and the eye color was definitely the result of contacts which augmented human vision, boosting it into the realm of the machine. Wang was far from handsome, but he had a grace about him, an angular way of moving which matched the high cheekbones, the hard line of his jaw.

Like Richard, he was an Earther. Unlike Vaurien, he had headed out to the Deep Sky with Tactical right behind him. He had grown up on the wrong side of the law as far back as the great cities of Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and with the freedom of Halfway, all controls on Wang were removed. He forged a dark reputation in a matter of weeks, and nothing had changed.

As they stepped through the docking collar, Marin was recalling Jo Queneau, who had flown a tour with Wang. She had learned to despise the man, but was too wise to fight with him. The ship was named for the creature which was its mascot, and Marin admitted to a dark fascination.

The *Krait* was as plush on the inside as it was ugly on the outside. The hatches closed up, and Marin felt a rush of warmth, smelt the sweet scents of joss, heard the soft, ambient sigh of music, machinery and low voices. The lights were amber and rose; the smoke was probably a mix of kip and bel grasses; the music issued from discreet amps, and Marin knew it. It was Bevan Daku. The last place he had heard this was in Robert Chandra Liang's home.

He had no idea what he had expected of Fernando Wang's ship, but this was not it. He began to wonder if Queneau had been lying, and shared a glance with Travers. But when he looked up into Vaurien's face he saw something steely, guarded, as if Richard's teeth were clenched and every sense had come alive.

The moment they stepped into the ship, Ramon vanished into a passage leading forward to the private quarters. He would be packing as swiftly as he knew how, and Marin's curiosity was piqued. In the crew lounge, three men and two women were playing cards. The massive Folgen deck was dealt for a game which had been underway for some time. Beyond them was a wet bar, and tucked in beside it, an autochef. The ship's fittings were very new, very slick. Marin was liking what he saw, until the servitors appeared from the lower deck.

A young man and a young woman, both naked, both collared and cuffed, with downcast eyes and a swiftness to serve which set off warning bells in Marin's head. They were both lovely, and branded with the coiled-snake motif of this ship, this company. The brands were

weeks or months old, well healed, one on the crest of each buttock. Both servitors were pierced with multiple rings in the most sensitive flesh they possessed, and Marin recognized those rings. One saw them in sexshops from the citybottom to the brightlights of any colony. Tethers clipped into them, and they would carry a current.

He shot a look at Vaurien, and Richard's head shook minutely: *don't make anything of it*. So Marin took a long breath, courting patience, and watched their charming host crack open a bottle of Velcastran Green Label. The whisky was twenty years old, literally worth its weight in colonial credits. At the bar, Fernando Wang held court with every old world grace.

"Take a seat, Richard – and tell me about this favor you're doing me, for which I owe you so handsomely."

Long-limbed and elegant, Vaurien took off the leather jacket and handed it to the servitor who was by his side before he could even begin to look for a place to put it. The girl hung it for him and returned to the bar, where her companion in bondage had begun to distribute shot glasses. Marin and Travers took the couch opposite the bar, and Marin was aware of Neil's intense discomfort as he took his glass from the young man. In the seats by the bar, van Donne and Byrne seemed to notice nothing unusual, and Marin settled to wait.

"Boden Zwerner," Vaurien said without preamble. "You and Sergei are trying to take the man down before he can pull out, and the next time you want a shot at him you'll have to cut your way through Tactical, in the homeworlds. It might interest you to know that Harrison Shapiro bought the Dendra Shemiji contract on the same target ... and Curtis Marin is here to fulfil it."

Wang's lips pursed, and he whistled. "Well, now, I'm impressed. Very. I didn't know we numbered any Dendra Shemiji agents among our Freespacer complement."

"You don't, Mister Wang," Marin said levelly. "I'm purely a freelance. I work via an agency, and I take only the jobs that interest me. Suffice to say, Boden Zwerner ... interests me. He has a great deal to account for, and the only authority he's ever likely to answer to is –"

"You," Wang finished.

"Us," van Donne corrected. His eyes were following the girl, who had finished with the shot glasses and was at the folgen table, clearing away the debris of a meal, until two of the players pushed back from the table, and she was propelled into an alcove off the crew lounge. "We're on the same page here, Fernie. I spent the morning trading data for a shot at the fucker."

Marin was trying not to listen to the grunts and muffled cries issuing from the alcove. They were distressed, not surprised or panicked, so whatever was taking place was routine. "We're taking Zwerner tomorrow," he said to Wang, "which gives Richard the time to pursue his own assignment here."

"We?" van Donne echoed. "We, meaning I get a shot at him?"

"That was the deal," Marin agreed. He watched the other servitor, the boy, subtly trying to avoid Wang, as if the man were a plague carrier. "You're fetching the *Mako* up topside, when we leave here ... and tomorrow you'll be in at the kill."

"Is that a fact?" Sergei's pale brows rose. "What would make me move my ship?"

"The necessity for ease and speed of access when the moment comes," Travers said smoothly. "Unless you don't want in. Decide now, because you won't have time to run home for your ride when the balloon goes up. When it happens, it'll happen fast."

"Consider it moved," van Donne said promptly. "You going to tell me how it'll go down?"

"No." Marin saluted him with the glass and tried the Green Label. It was like liquid gold in his throat.

Wang applauded with a few sharp claps. "Bravo! And Ramon is quite correct, Richard. For this one, you can name a favor, call it in and expect it to be delivered."

"In that case, I will." Vaurien tossed back the whisky and handed the glass to the servitor. His eyes followed the young man back to the bar, where Wang caught him by the collar, dragged him close and handled him absently, so preoccupied with Vaurien that he seemed barely aware of the prisoner. "I need a favor, Fernie and I need it now," Richard mused, as if he did not even notice the byplay. "There's no time to waste trying to make contacts and win trust."

"Name it," Wang prompted. He was intent on Vaurien, and something in the lines of his face told Marin, he suspected what Richard was about to ask.

"Information," Vaurien said levelly. "There's two reasons we came to Halfway, and Zwerner is the second. The first ... well, it's no secret you were reeling in escape pods, after the battle at Ulrand."

"No secret at all," Wang said mildly. His brows arched at Vaurien. "I wasn't there for the good of the Deep Sky, or for Harrison Shapiro's benefit! I was there to make a profit. And we did very well. Ramon could have told you."

"He wasn't about to say two syllables about your business, Fern-

ie," Sergei said darkly. He gestured at the servitor. "You think Ramon wants to wind up like them, with his ass branded, and a collar on his neck, and rings in his tits and dick, so you can play him like a puppet?"

For a moment Wang blinked at him, and then laughed. "Ramon's dangerous. You haven't noticed? I wouldn't punish him the way these two are finishing out their contract aboard this ship. These little creatures tried to double-cross me. They were taking jobs for themselves that should have come to me, and handing them off to friends and relations with Fleet experience, for a nice, fat commission. They're paying their price, Sergei, and in six months they'll be free to leave. You're saying it's unfair? You wanted me to flog them to death, or let Hatyara have them?"

"Hatyara?" Travers echoed.

"The krait," Fernando Wang told him. "You'll have heard the stories they tell about me and this ship. Let me save you the trouble of speculating. They're all true – and a good many more stories you might not have heard, too." He took a handful of the servitor's hair and pulled his head back, exposing the long, clean line of his gullet. "They've had their whipping, they've settled down to service, and they're paying their price with good graces. They won't leave this ship one hour before their time is up, but when they do, they'll walk away with their lives and their limbs. They're lucky. Another captain would have shot them and dumped the bodies. You don't recognize compassion when you see it, Sergei?"

"That's an interesting word for it," Marin said acidly.

Wang frowned at him. "Suggest another. Justice? You prefer to let them walk away, so they can tell tales of how they double-crossed Fernie Wang and got away with it? Or you prefer them introduced to Hatyara?" He stroked the servitor's shoulder and flank. "What a waste that would be. The krait produces a neurotoxin which destroys the peripheral venous system. The body dies slowly from the outside in, and rots long before the brain has enough sense to perish. It takes days, perhaps a week, if the subject is strong, by which time there's not much left but blue-black tatters of flesh and stinking suppuration of all colors. Most ... unpleasant. And no, I wouldn't introduce Ramon to Hatyara, either, if he double-crossed me. Him, I would kill outright, because if I gave him the shade of a chance, he'd send me to hell ahead of him." He paused, and gave the servitor a push which sent him sprawling onto Sergei's lap. "You want him? Have him. Actually, he's quite good, and getting better with the training."

"Later, maybe." With an expression of contempt, van Donne shoved the servitor away.

"Speaking of Ramon," Wang mused, "where is he?"

"Packing," van Donne told him baldly. "He's jumping ship, Fernie. He's on the *Mako* now."

"Is that so?" Wang seemed perturbed for a moment, and then shrugged. "He's a free man, I don't hold his contract. He was useful to have around, but it's no secret he has the hots for you." He gave van Donne a disdainful sniff. "There's no accounting for taste. And I have to commend the boy for his loyalty – either that or his good sense. He said little or nothing of my business after Ulrand. I've nothing to punish ... there, you see? How easy it is *not* to make enemies. Now, why can't they all be so intelligent?" He watched the girl stumble out of the alcove, shook his head disapprovingly over her. She disappeared deeper into the ship, and Wang lifted a brow at Vaurien. "I took possession of a good number of the *Shanghai* survivors. I picked up over twenty. That's smart business, Richard. I wasn't the only one scooping the poor, bedraggled little rats out of space."

Perhaps only Marin heard Vaurien draw a long breath in some quest for patience. "Sergei said you transshipped them through a Freespace agent on Ulrand."

"Yes." Wang returned to the Green Label for another glass. "All suppliers were paid crap prices, damnit ... and I think I know what you're asking. If I'd waited a while, haggled a little, I think Harrison Shapiro might have paid more to get them back. Yes?"

"Probably." Vaurien stood restlessly, unable to be still. "We know you have no clue where the agent delivered the *stock*, but they came to Halfway, nothing's so sure. Intel, Fernie. All we want is the contact. We'll chase the *Shanghai* kids. Now, Sergei tells me there's a deadhead off this ship, a moron who likes to skull out in the club right there – Gemini. Name of Talantov."

"Talentless," Wang said in arid tones. "The most useless lump of semi-animate human flesh I've ever had the misfortune to take under contract ... yet the brainless little shit is also the most loyal hand I ever hired, he'll do what he's told, and he never tries to cheat me. What can you say? You want Kolya, you'll have to go dig him out of some pit he's gotten himself into. Take Ramon with you. He's spent enough time in Gemini to know the lie of the land. And if you're going to dig up Kolya, you better take these." He stooped, reached under the bar, and produced a red plastex case. "Blockers. He's going to be high as a kite. One day he's going to crash and burn, but ... just so long as it's not today, right?" He tossed the case into Vaurien's hand. "For what it's worth, Talantov can probably plug you right into the pipeline better than I

could myself. I might dock down here, but I don't mix with the low-lives." He produced a wide, quite charming smile. "I just take their money and move on." He gave Curtis Marin a curious look. "And when I hear of the demise of Boden Zwerner tomorrow, well, suffice to say, the time to move on will have arrived."

Vaurien gestured with the case. "Thanks for this. As soon as Ramon's done, we'll get out of your way."

"Oh, stay awhile," Wang invited. "Avail yourselves of the ... entertainments."

His eyes were on the servitor as he made the offer, and Marin saw the old anger. "Thanks, but we have things to do. Richard?" He was on his feet as he spoke.

"Only waiting for Ramon," Vaurien said tersely.

As if it were a cue, the younger man stepped out of the passage. He carried a scarlet duffel in his left hand and a silver-trim backpack over one shoulder. With a self-mocking grin he offered his hand to Wang, and Wang took it, clasped it.

"Hey, *mi viejo amigo*, *me tengo que ir, entiendes?*"

"Of course." Wang released his hand and sketched him a salute. "It was fine having you aboard. Do I owe you?"

"No, man. It's been a pleasure. But ... you know." Ramon gestured at van Donne with a nod of his raven-maned head. "*Ya sabes lo que es.*"

And Wang chuckled. "Your gonads will be the death of you yet. I wish you well, Ramon. When you're all fucked out and squabbling like sibling brats, give me a call if you want to come back."

"Part as friends and allies," Ramon intoned, as if it were an old saying. "Take care of yourself, Fernie." Then he turned to Sergei, spread his hands. "It's a done deal. You want to go find the deadhead?"

"Me? No. But they need to." Sergei glanced at Vaurien, Marin and Travers. "We made a deal, kiddo, but I don't have to go into that pit. Rafe and me are going to go move the ship topside. You want to throw your bags aboard? All right, Marin, this is your circus. Where do you want the *Mako*?"

Marin had been thinking through the situation for some time, and he gave Vaurien an apologetic look. "Hangar 4, dorsal, on the *Wastrel*, if you don't mind. That'll put you in the best place when the time comes."

A pained look crossed Vaurien's face, but he gave his assent with a curt nod. He nailed van Donne with a glare which told the man he would be under surveillance, every instant. Sergei only grinned

brashly before he gave his hand to Wang in passing, and headed aft to the docking hatch without looking back.

As they stepped back into the chill, aromatic darkness, Vaurien was talking to the *Wastrel*. Greenstein was on watch; Ingersol was in the ops room. Neither relished the news that the *Mako* was coming aboard, but on Vaurien's order they beefed up surveillance on the dorsal decks, and Greenstein's voice said,

"All right, van Donne, we're prepping 4. You're invited."

At the *Mako's* docking ring, Ramon handed his bags to Byrne with a muttered promise to meet them on the *Wastrel*. The words were almost lost in the bass booming out of Gemini, noise which echoed and re-echoed off bulkheads, becoming confused, distracting. Dangerous.

The din issuing from the club continued without pause, as if five or eight sets of amps were blaring several different sound tracks, only some of which were music. Others might have been voices shouting, or the roar of big engines. The vibration through the deck was fierce, and if Marin had thought *Flamenco Rosado* was loud, he learned a new meaning for the word here.

The lights were red as emergency lights. Some of them strobed, while vast areas were unlit, as if no one wanted what happened there to be seen. Vaurien's face was a mask as he and Travers stepped into the cavern-like foyer and peered around.

It was Travers who saw the cache of maintenance equipment hung up by one of the many conduits which bisected this deck. It would have been the very keel of the old *Rotterdam Explorer*, where service bays, access points, power, water and data channels were placed, well away from the human crew, where drones could work unobserved. Travers had seen a single worklight, and Marin watched him retrieve it, adjust the ill-fitted power cell, and then pan the white beam into corners where no photon might ever have fallen before.

"So what are we looking for?" Vaurien was saying to Ramon. "You know this place?"

"Not well," Ramon shouted over the din. "But I know where Kolya's going to be." He caught Vaurien's sleeve. "Keep an eye open for management goons. Outsiders aren't supposed to fuck with patrons in mid-trip. Insiders – no problem. It's all the same when you're one of the merry band. But they protect their own."

"And how do you tell management from patrons?" Travers demanded. He was still panning the light this way and that, picking out the shapes of figures hunched at tables, collapsed against walls, and the writhing tangle of the dancers under the strobes.

"The management goons," Ramon told him, "are sober, and upright. Not many patrons fit that description. Follow me."

He cut a line around the chaos of the dance floor, past the bar and into a network of passages and tiny rooms where bodies heaved and writhed, some screaming, some groaning. The air was as heavy with pheromones as with gryphon and angelino, and Marin was conscious of the sweat that broke out on his sides, his temples.

A woman walked into him, blind in the darkness. He caught her as she staggered, felt bare limbs, the soft cushions of breasts, the hard lines of leather straps, as he set her back onto her feet. He picked his way carefully, stepping over two bodies, gender beyond anything he could discern, locked together and heaving in the dense gloom.

This whole club was built into a single storage bay, where the *Rotterdam Explorer's* tractors would once have been housed. The walls were bulkheads and panels torn from other parts of the ship and tack-welded in place where they were needed.

It was a warren. Marin had never been particularly claustrophobic, but he began to feel the odd, elusive sense of pressure, suffocation, and the desire to be out of here. From the look on Travers's face, he was feeling something similar, and Marin knew without asking what it reminded him of.

He would be haunted by memories of the shelter on the low decks of the *Intrepid*, in the moments before and after the Echo gunship plowed into her. The smell of fear, the crush of human bodies, the closeness of armored walls, darkness, strobes –

With an effort of will Marin set aside the sensations and the memories, and focused on the beam of the worklight as Ramon led them back through the maze, to a cubicle he seemed to know. He lifted aside a drape, and within the tiny space they saw a cot, a VR hookup, a tiny table littered with the debris of the session. A few phials, a bottle, a capsule still unused, another torn in half.

On the cot was the body of a man, half clad in battered jeans with the knees ripped out and the cuffs frayed to string. And he might have been dead at first glance. The VR hookup was more than likely filthy – users this far out did not seem worried about contracting the Hamilton-Scalzo virus, though it would have been the first concern on Marin's own mind. This idiot was still flying, still jacked into some synthetic fantasy, mind so far from his physical body that he was utterly oblivious to the club, the noise, the intrusion.

"You want to take him out of here?" Ramon said loudly, over the persistent din. "You can't hear yourself think in here."

"Grab him," Vaurien said against Travers's ear. "Get him back to the Capricorn. I've had about all I care to see of this pit – or hear, or smell."

Marin and Travers stooped over the man, took his weight between them, and as Travers got an arm under him, Marin unhooked the VR rig. A groan told them Kolya Talantov actually was alive, but he was too far out of his head to know as they carried him out of the cubicle. In the narrows of the passage outside, Travers swung him up over his shoulder and handed the worklight to Marin.

"You remember the way out of here?"

"I think so." Marin angled the light. "Stay close."

They were turning back into the foyer when a shape loomed up on Marin's right – big, powerful, sober and motivated. He knew at once it was 'management' protecting its clients, but Ramon was there, cutting off the goon before he could block their path. Marin could not catch what he was saying, but the goon seemed satisfied. He knew Ramon by sight, and if the kid said Talantov was okay, that was good enough. More than likely, he had said the crew of the *Krait* had come to bring the idiot home, sober him up, because he had a job to do.

The worklight's powerpack was uncharged. It was dying even before Marin turned it off, and he dumped it with the rest of the maintenance tools as Vaurien led the way out of the red strobes and into the cold, dark reek of Halfway's lowest level. The way back to the Capricorn was not far, but far enough for the din from the club to fade, allowing a man to marshal his thoughts.

Heavy vibration through the deck told them the *Mako* was powering up, and moments later they heard the bell-like chime as she disconnected from the docking adapter. She would loop up around the old hull and slide into a brighter, warmer, much safer berth.

The remote in Vaurien's left hand issued a squawk as he unlocked the Capricorn, and Travers went ahead. He dumped Talantov in the first available seat, and as Marin joined him he was working his shoulder to and fro after the chore of carrying the idiot. Kolya Talantov had not even twitched an eyelid. He had no idea he had been taken out of Gemini.

"He does this often?" Marin wondered.

"Every off-shift," Ramon sighed. "Addicted. He has it bad. His game is one of the crap ones, total brain-rot. You'd have to be out of your gourd to even load it up, but this loon –? He lives for it."

As he spoke he was opening the case, taking out the blockers Wang had supplied. He loaded a capsule into the hypo as Marin

watched, and jabbed the full shot into Talantov's neck.

"He'll come around in a few," Ramon said, and he sounded as disgusted as amused. "You know, if Fernie didn't owe this bastard, he'd kick his ass the hell of the *Krait*. But Kolya saved his life one time. Go figure. Took a bullet for him – yeah, true! The good old cliché. Now, for all I know, Kolya could've been plugged by accident, but he actually did get between the shooter and Fernie, and he fed Fernie the story about how he tried to save him. Sounds like bullshit to me, but Fernie's ... an oddball. He has this one weird-ass code he lives by. The scales have to balance, he says, and if they don't balance up, they have to be made to."

"Which means he'll beat and screw the value of a hireling's crimes out of him – or her!" Vaurien mused, "and when he thinks he might come up owing a debt, he pays it."

"You got it." Ramon leaned down over Talantov, peering into the man's face, looking for signs of life. "He's coming around. He's gonna live this time. I keep tellin' him, he's runnin' out of luck. One night, he drags himself back to the *Krait* and comes whining at my door. 'Help me, you gotta help me, somebody's been fucking me.' And he's been reamed bloody, and he has no idea who was on him. One bastard or half a dozen, he's never going to know. They could have killed him, and he wouldn't have known one damn' thing about it. Now, how smart is that?"

In the cabin lights, the man looked bad, Marin thought. He was still young, but he had the skin tone of unrisen bread dough and the complexion of putty. Kolya Talantov was probably not yet thirty, but he was raddled, less thin than wasted. He was not going to live much longer, and the worst of it was, he did not seem to care. If he did not succumb to a virus like Hamilton-Scalzo, he would die with a seizure, or with the dope that always accompanied the VR trips.

"Coffee?" Travers offered, on his way to the 'chef. In the warmth of the Capricorn, he dropped his jacket on a seat, and glanced at Marin with the offer of coffee, which Curtis accepted with a mute nod.

"I'll take one, Neil." Vaurien was still frowning over Talantov. He had slipped a combug into his ear and was listening to the *Wastrel's* loop through a crackle of heavy encryption. "Greenstein reports the *Mako* safely tucked away ... and Barb wants to know when we're coming back." He touched the 'bug to cut into the loop. "A few minutes, Barb. We're just waiting on some information, and then we're out of here."

A combug slipped into Marin's ear and he heard her respond,

"Make it soon, Richard. I do *not* like having Sergei aboard."

"Nor do I," Vaurien agreed, "but he's been useful this time."

"Barb," Marin said quietly into the crackle of encryption static, "can you give me an hour, when we get back?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Two things," he told her, "and I'm not about to describe either one on the air! It won't take long. A few minutes."

"You know where I'll be," she told him.

As they fell silent, Kolya Talantov began to groan awake. He changed color as he swam back up toward semi-consciousness, and Marin would not have been surprised if he had begun to heave. The blockers could have that effect, when they were administered in heavy doses and the comedown was fast, abrupt.

His eyes cracked open, showing rims of red and vastly dilated pupils. Ramon got in front of him. The first face he saw was familiar, and at least he did not panic. "Where am – whaa –?"

"You're safe, you moron," Ramon said slowly, distinctly. "We dragged your ass out of Gemini before you could get done over – again. You owe us you understand? You're on a lighter belonging to Richard Vaurien, and don't you dare say 'who?' Because you know Vaurien as well as we all do. He wants some info out of you, shithead. Fernie Wang told Richard he can have the info, so you answer the man's questions, and then I'll drag your sorry ass home."

The words seemed to have made their way into the corner of Talantov's brain which was still functional. Ramon moved aside, and Vaurien took his place, directly before the man. Talantov had both hands on the arms of the seat and shoved as hard as he could to push himself up a hand's span against the backrest. He was sucking his tongue and teeth, tasting acid, looking wretched.

Like Ramon, Vaurien pitched his voice levelly, spoke slowly and intonated every word clearly. "You know me?"

"Course I bloody know yer." The accent was thick. It sounded like Haven, reminiscent of Sergeant Roy Neville. "I seen yer on the rink, twenty different ports."

"All right. Fernie Wang's orders ... you tell me what I need to know. Deal?"

"If Fernie says so." Talantov peered up at Ramon. "Mind, if yer shittin' me, and I tell yer some crap yer ain't supposed to know, and Fernie takes it outta my hide, I'll be after yer with a big gun."

"It's kosher, Kolya," Ramon assured him.

"Kosher," Talantov echoed. "Jesus, I could murder a beer."

"When I get you home," Ramon promised. "Richard?"

"One question," Vaurien said tersely. "I want a name. The name of the guy you know from Gemini, who was talking about his business, and he either deals in labor, or knows who does ... and he just traded through the labor lifted right out of the *Shanghai* escape pods at Ulrand."

For a moment Talantov blinked stupidly at him, as if Vaurien had just delivered a speech in native Resalq, and then the red eyes cleared and he said, "Ron Reanie. Is that all yer want?"

"Ron Reanie," Vaurien echoed. "Is he here?"

"What, yer mean on Halfway? Yeah, got an office in Xanadu, where the lights shine so bloody bright, they burn yer eyeballs right out." Talantov blinked up at Richard, and breathed a tide of acid breath into his face. "He was slumming last night, I seen him getting up close and unfriendly with some of the house nasties. Gemini."

"Barb, you heard that?" Vaurien said softly.

"Every drunken syllable," Jazinsky's voice whispered over the comm. "Give me one minute, let me verify the ID and make sure the bastard's still here."

They waited then, while Talantov fidgeted and squirmed in the seat, looking green to the ears and more likely to start retching with every moment. Vaurien was restless. He wanted the man off the Capricorn before he lost the contents of his belly, and with little time to spare Jazinsky said,

"It checks out, Richard. I'm seeing comm lines, a private dock, fuel and lading manifests. Ronald Joaquin Reanie, at a berth in the rock at the bow-end of the old *Explorer*."

"Good enough." Vaurien stepped aside. "Get him out of here, Ramon, before he's puking on the decks."

"Will do." Ramon caught Talantov by both thin wrists and pulled him more or less upright. "Shit, man, you're a mess. Go home, take a shower, you stink. Richard, give me three minutes to get back here!"

"I want a beer," Talantov whined.

He was still whining when his voice disappeared through the docking adaptor, and Travers gave Marin a look of appalled amusement. Halfway had the reputation for being the place where the refuse of mankind washed up. Vaurien was in the cockpit, and the engines came online as they waited for Ramon. Marin leaned on the bulkhead beside the hatch, tipped his head back and gave Travers a sidelong grin.

"They used to say there's one born every minute."

"I'd guess it's closer to ten." Travers's long fingers traced the line of Marin's jaw. "Xanadu. You want to dress up, do this in style? We'll

be shouldering through the elite bodyguards. They probably won't even let you in to breathe the same air as the likes of Zwerner if you don't dress for the occasion."

"Interesting." Marin turned his face to Travers's palm, enjoying the warm, the strength of it. "What does one wear to hunt for slave dealers?"

"A gun," Travers suggested glibly.

"Several," Marin amended, and his palm hovered over the hatch release. He had heard approaching footfalls. Ramon was returning at a jog, and as he appeared the hatch closed up behind him. "Any time you're ready," Marin said into the loop.

The Capricorn's engines had been on standby for the last minute, and as Marin and Travers moved forward from the hatch, they heard the docking adapter separate.

Chapter Three

The lab's mainframes were independent of Etienne, and Jazinsky had configured them for one task. They were processing the flood of data returned by the *Orpheus*. Neil Travers understood none of the fine details of the work, but the broad concept made a terrible sense, clear as the air on the Fox Glacier on a midwinter's morning.

The flight for which Mick Vidal gave his life had returned more data in less time than any other project Jazinsky had ever coordinated. Only the Resalq wrangled more data, and not often. Mark Sherratt's machines, both at the house in Riga on Borushek, and his home on Saraine, were working on the same project, with AI aboard the science vessel *Carellan Djerun* acting as a conduit between the two.

They needed more computers, more space, more time. The machines might be available, but there was no more time. Travers was keenly aware of the pressure under which Jazinsky and the Resalq were working – and just as aware of the anger Vaurien harbored for Tonio Teniko.

A message was waiting on Richard's private system access, but he continued to ignore it, though he had not deleted it. Travers watched him move about Jazinsky's lab, pacing like a caged animal, unable to