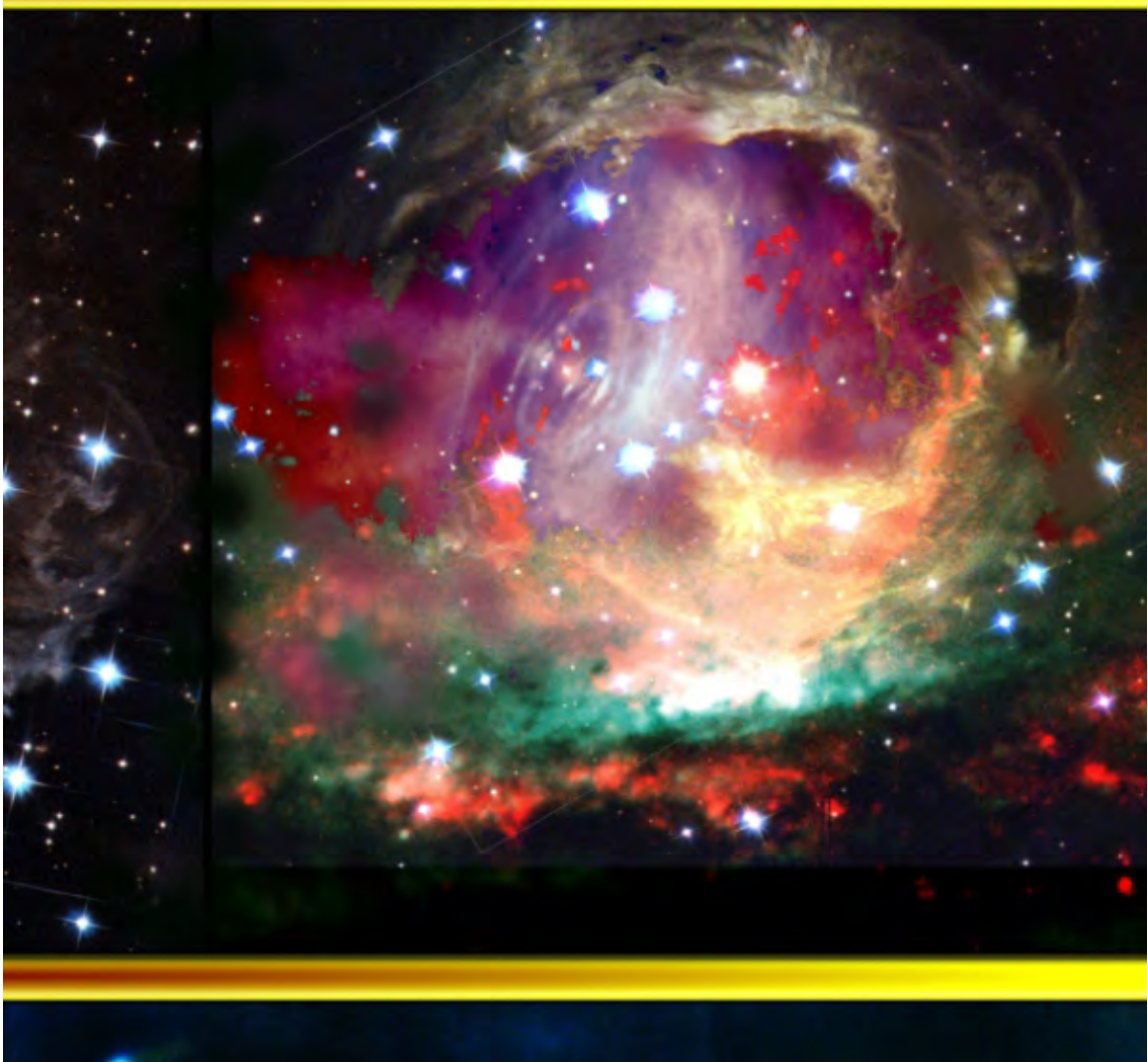


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**Hellgate #4**

**PROBE**

MEL KEEGAN

DREAMCRAFT MULTIMEDIA, AUSTRALIA

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# **HELLGATE: Probe**



## Chapter One

### *The Port of Marak, Ulland*

The night air was sharp with the tangs of metal and exhaust, and only the brightest stars showed through the pall of pollution which shrouded the low side of Marak City. The port facilities stretched away to east and west, more than twelve kilometers of docks designed to accommodate every size and manner of ship, short of the leviathans like the *Wastrel*. She was parked in orbit at Mumbai Station, and berthed right beside her was the Fleet cruiser *Ganymede*.

The civilian salvage vessel was welcome at Ulland's facilities; the Fleet ship was not, but Richard Vaurien was grateful for its presence. Marak was no longer safe — not for his own crew, and certainly not for Harrison Shapiro's people.

For twenty years Vaurien had operated out of this port, not quite with impunity, but with the cooperation of the local authorities. Since the devastation of El Khouri everything had changed. Marak was locked down tight, there were Tactical uniforms on every street, and the crews of Fleet vessels were not permitted groundside. Transgressors were arrested, and in recent weeks — since the Senate had been debating the question of secession — the government of Marak was imprisoning Fleet stragglers locally rather than handing them back to Fleet.

Two years in an Ullish prison was a high price to pay for breaching the cordon, Vaurien thought. Crewmen from any Fleet vessel were so hated, imprisonment was actually a sentence of death. Consequently, military uniforms were rare on the street, and always escorted, authorized, with redundant documentation.

If Harrison Shapiro had hoped to travel Ulland inconspicuously, forming his own impressions of the world, the people, the political and environmental situation, he was disappointed. The only reason he was



groundside at all was the presence of Senator Charleston Aimes Rutherford, the first representative from the Confederacy to set foot in Marak City in more than a half century.

Not that Rutherford had intended to appear before the Grand Senate in Marak. The man was white with rage, powerless to prevent Shapiro manipulating him. He was, Vaurien thought, the consummate politician. None of the rage was apparent in his face or voice. In the CNS newsvids he smiled, shook hands, sighed over the devastation of the biosphere, and condemned Colonel Wayne Mulholland as a fool who had acted beyond his authority and would have been court-martialed, if he had lived. But Mulholland was dead, there was no one to blame or punish; and Ulrand was in trouble.

The night was warm, humid, and in this part of Marak it stank. Vaurien had lived most of his life in spaceport cities on twenty worlds. He was used to the equatorial climate, but the reek of heavy lifter exhaust wrinkled his nose.

This time of year was always uncomfortable in Marak, and this time around it would be worse than usual. The locals called it 'the Duldram,' which Vaurien guessed was a Pakrani mispronunciation of an ancient sailors' term, *doldrums*. Even in a good year, for six weeks the otherwise constant easterly wind shifted to the south and Marak broiled until the winds returned with hurricane force.

This year, the easterly had shifted twenty degrees further south than ever before, and Ulrand's environmentalists were warning Marak, the end of the Duldram was impossible to predict. After El Khouri the climate had been modeled many times, but each simulation produced different results, leaving only uncertainty.

Hurricane season was already three weeks overdue. The chain of WeatherNet satellites Harrison Shapiro had provided in the early days after the event were still gathering data. Nothing was certain, save that the biosphere was badly damaged — and the people of Ulrand were murderous.

The highlands which had been El Khouri were covered with a rime of frost which had already killed the delicate native plants and animals. None of them had been engineered for the intense cold of a 'nuclear winter' under a deep, dense overcast of dust. And the pall was making its way toward Marak, albeit slowly. The patterns of the winds had changed. Marak was broiling, windless, while El Khouri froze.

In the five days since the *Wastrel* berthed at Mumbai Station, Richard Vaurien had seen enough to give him a deep empathy with the Ulrish rage, and their fear. Projects were underway to repair the bio-

sphere, but everyone knew what it would ultimately take.

A terraformer fleet. Massive machines, orbital monsters that physically reworked the atmosphere, rearranged whole land masses ... preferentially wiped out the local indigenous species so as to prepare the way for humans. This Pakrani colony had been isolated a long time — too long, Vaurien decided. They had become *different*. They did not want their world changed, the native animals exterminated. All they wanted was their world restored to its former balance. But Vaurien suspected they were demanding the impossible.

He was standing under a neon-blue lighting tower on the corner of Connecticut Row, which intersected with Lisbon Circuit — ‘the rink.’ Lisbon cut a vast, racetrack-like oval around the smaller docks, where his own lighter was parked. He would have preferred to be on the *Earthlight*, but as far as he knew she was still on Omaru.

He had heard nothing of Neil Travers’s party since they went their own way on Borushek. Travers and Marin had gone after Mark Sherratt’s kid, and Vaurien wished them well. Hydralis was even less pleasant than Marak, and infinitely more dangerous. But Marak was bad enough. No matter the oppressive heat, Vaurien wore a light linen jacket, just heavy enough to disguise the Colt AP 60 without which he was not about to set foot in any part of Marak, much less citybottom.

The locals called it Dockland, and the term was apt. Anything inside of Macao Circuit — vastly larger than Lisbon, and circuiting the entire spaceport — was the province of offworlders, Freespacers, mercenaries, free traders to whom Marak was only a place to touch ground for a day, restock the autochefs and rotate cargo before they were gone again. Marak Tactical rarely ventured into Dockland, and lately troopers were only seen arresting Fleet uniforms.

Vaurien lifted the handy from his pocket and held it to his lips. “Barb, what’s holding you? The man’s not going to wait.”

The lighter was parked in Bay 184, seventy meters back down Connecticut. Vaurien had hired a car, but tonight the Marshall jet runabout was abandoned under the wing of the lighter and Vaurien was watching for landing lights. Lisbon Circuit was always busy, but there was plenty of touchdown space near the Connecticut junction. The driving lights of roadsters streaked by and the sky overhead was bright with vehicles headed in every direction.

“Barb, are you hearing me?” he said to the handy.

“I hear you, Richard. I’m still waiting for the Air Traffic computer. It’s slow as a snail on tranks.”

“We’re almost out of time,” he said tersely.

"And I'm not about to run dumb risks." Jazinsky's voice sharpened. "It's dangerous around here — we shouldn't even be ground-side!"

She was right, but Vaurien had rationalized the assignment. "Desperate times demand desperate measures," he said to the handy.

"And one hell of a lot we'll be able to do for the Deep Sky if we're dead," Jazinsky retorted. "Tell your man to wait two minutes."

"He's not actually here yet," Vaurien admitted.

"They *you* can bloody wait two minutes. And it'll be more like five if you don't let me get on with it!"

She had hacked the spaceport AI days ago, but like most things on Ulrand it was a museum piece. The local technology was a mix of the old, the new, the borrowed, jury-rigged junk, lash-ups — and very occasionally a local product that was innovative, even brilliant. The Air Traffic Control AI was not one of these. If Vaurien was any judge, it was one of the original mainframes from the *Pakrenne Coaster*, updated, lovingly maintained and still serviceable, though it was unimaginably obsolete. It was slow. Hacking it with one of the machines on the lighter was easy; but data was offered at the recall rate of a computer so old, it belonged in a museum.

And then Jazinsky was back. "This one's your call, Richard. They were right. The *Mako* got in this afternoon. She's right here in Dockland."

"*Merde*," Vaurien whispered. The *Wastrel* could not monitor every vessel arriving and departing from Marak, but it could come close; and the pilot, Yuval Greenstein, had messaged the lighter when he half-recognized an incoming ship. If it was not the *Mako*, it was her twin sister.

"Richard?" Jazinsky prompted. "Three times in five years, Sergei van Donne's tried to kill you. You want to give him another chance? We don't have to do this."

"We do," Vaurien said quietly. "Shapiro —"

"Harrison Shapiro is using us. We're just convenient. He couldn't have guessed van Donne would show up on Ulrand, right here, right now, and he can assign someone else to this bloody stupid escapade!"

Vaurien smiled faintly. Jazinsky needed to blow off steam after five days of unreturned calls, letting themselves be bugged and tailed all over Marak, and drinking too much bad whisky in too many citybottom taverns. Being Jazinsky, she also needed to point out the risks and issue a tacit caveat: *When it all goes pear-shaped, don't point at me!*

But also, being Jazinsky, she had taken Shapiro's commission, because she knew there was no one more likely than herself and

Vaurien to walk Marak's streets in broad daylight, call the most shadowy of the city's Freespacers, and swing the deal Shapiro needed. No one else on Shapiro's covert taskforce could do these things; no one else from Vaurien's crew would command immediate respect and credibility. And without that credibility, the deal Shapiro was offering would never happen.

"Your call, Richard," Jazinsky reminded. "What do you want to do?"

"If I see van Donne," Vaurien said dryly, "I might easily put a bullet in him."

"You'd have to stand in line," Jazinsky snorted. "The man's got so many enemies, he's not safe anywhere."

"Which is an occupational hazard," Vaurien suggested ruefully, "when you're a professional bastard."

"He tried to steal my work," Jazinsky growled, "right off the *Wastrel*, from under my nose."

"So maybe you'll get the chance to deliver on your promise." Vaurien was looking up into the deep red velvet of the smog overcast. "You told him you'd break his legs the next time you saw him, as I recall ... and our ride's here, Barb. Let's get this thing done, for god-sakes. We've got five days invested in it. Let's not flush them."

A sigh carried clearly across the handy. "You're a maniac," Jazinsky told him. "You armed?"

"I'm carrying the Colt," Vaurien said self-mockingly.

"Good enough. Give me one minute, I'm on my way."

She would be picking up sidearms, Vaurien guessed, and looking forward to the very real possibility of putting Sergei van Donne on his back. The man had it coming. He was a self-confessed thief as well as a double-dealing liar, who would try to filch technology anywhere he could get his hands on it — even aboard the *Wastrel* itself. He was the kind, Vaurien decided as he watched the car drop in out of the smog, who gave Freespacers a bad name. The average Freespace pilot, trader or mercenary might be called a 'lowlife,' but they would usually stand by their own kind and they played by a set of rules, just as surely as did Fleet and Tactical.

The likes of van Donne and Boden Zwerner made their own rules, betrayed comrades, and Zwerner at least was not squeamish about having the blood of a whole colony on his hands. For a thousand years it had been said that there was no honor among thieves. Vaurien believed it.

The car was dropping in fast. He looked up, let his face be seen,

recognized — probably imaged. He had nothing to hide tonight, not even the Colt. They would expect him and Jazinsky to be armed; anything else was foolish, and though Richard Vaurien had been called many things, he had never been accused of idiocy.

Footsteps echoed along the deserted length of Connecticut Row, and he glanced back as Jazinsky jogged toward him. She was in pale gray linen, slacks and shirt, and a jacket like his own which could conceal a weapon. Vaurien did not have to ask if she were armed. The white-blond mane was roped back and clasped with platinum and gelemeralds, and Jazinsky's light blue eyes glittered with a wicked amusement.

"Be pessimistic," Vaurien said over the jet noise as the car landed and Jazinsky came to a halt beside him. "Dockland's a big place. We might not even see van Donne ... breaking his legs will have to wait."

Before she could answer, the canopy popped on a sleek, blood-scarlet Volvo aerodyne, and a face they both knew looked out. Alain Devereaux was a little younger than Vaurien, but not much. His dark bronze skin was still perfect, and the eyes which should have been liquid brown had been redesigned. They were green-gold. His head was shaved — cityside chic this year — and his lobes were heavy with rings, bright with diamonds. A white linen suit molded around a body which was gym-sculptured, and the lines of a sidearm showed deliberately at his left side. He was good looking, and he knew it; the voice was deep, incongruously soft, and the accent was 'colonial' — from everywhere in general, from nowhere special.

"How are you, Alain?" Vaurien thrust out his hand as he slid into the Volvo.

Devereaux clasped his wrist and displayed a great many white teeth in a brash grin. "I'm good, Rich."

He was watching Jazinsky maneuver her big frame into the back of the car. Devereaux was not Ulrish, and if there was any Pakrani in him, Vaurien would have been surprised. No matter how much time Devereaux spent pumping his body in the gym, Jazinsky would always out-mass and out-muscle him without even trying.

"Sorry about the car, man," he said wryly. "If I'd been thinking, I'd have checked out the Rand. But I don't often get to fly the fast shit, you know? Couldn't resist the temptation."

The Volvo was one of the fastest cars in the air. Vaurien buckled the harness as the canopy locked down, and he gave Devereaux a speculative look. Had he come far? The Palmeral was on the far side of the city, in the brightlights sector, if Marak could be said to have such a region.

No matter how far the mercenary had come, they only had a short distance to go. The meeting would take place in Dockland — a kind of no-man's-land where Tactical could be trusted to stay away and the Freespacers played by the rules they themselves laid down.

Repulsion thrashed the stained plascrete as the car rose, and Vaurien watched the lights of Connecticut and Lisbon fall away below. Devereaux was headed east, down the length of the rink. Open docks, gantries, fuel booms, ramps, warehouses, cargo aprons, site offices, and the orbital shuttle terminal sped by. The *Mako* was down there; Vaurien wondered if Devereaux knew she was in Marak tonight. More than likely, he did. He might be a minor player in this game, but the people he worked for were powerful. Dangerous.

The back of Vaurien's neck smarted sharply at the thought. The bug was right under the skin, in the hairline. It had been a painful implant, and he was conscious of it every moment, and eager to have it removed. But he knew the *Wastrel* was getting every word tonight, and could place him and Jazinsky within five meters— the width of a room.

"Too bad the trip can't be longer," Devereaux apologized. "She's a sweet ride ... but we're here already."

"And where's *here*?" Jazinsky demanded. The view from the rear of the Volvo was restricted by the molded canopy surround.

The red and green animated neon of a club had just appeared in Vaurien's line of sight, and Devereaux was dropping down into a basement parking pit. The neon shriveled Vaurien's irises, but he read *Mayuko* before the car was through into the pit. The vast parking garages were half-populated, half-lit, full of shadows Vaurien had never noticed before. Tonight they seemed to threaten.

Three levels down, Devereaux slid into a ramp and cruised into an empty zone where three in four lights were out and a knife could have sliced the shadows. He angled the Volvo toward a slot, but the jets were still whining when a Chiyoda pistol nudged into his left ear.

"If this is a setup," Jazinsky said quietly, "you're the first one they'll be shoving in a body bag ... on account of the mess of goo you've turned into."

Devereaux was not even surprised, and his tone remained pleasant though he did not move a muscle. "It's not a setup, lady. It's just my boss and his people being careful. You want to just waltz in, unannounced?"

"I don't want to waltz anywhere," Jazinsky informed him. "Pop the canopy, Alaine, and be bloody damned careful."

The mercenary looked sidelong at Vaurien. "Is she always like this?"

"No," Vaurien said in an easy tone while his gut raveled. "Sometimes she's suspicious."

The jets whined into a grudging silence, and as the canopy lifted the acrid air burned his sinuses. The spaceport smog seemed to have pooled in this underground, and local traffic added to it. Vaurien was reminded of the air quality in Vazyabinsk, Cimarosa, where even the locals chose to wear breath masks and offworlders would be face-down in the street without them.

He might have wished he had one as he stepped out of the car and peered into the syrup-thick darkness beyond the lights. Shapes moved there — they were under observation, and he heard the whir of at least one machine. A drone? Vaurien's hackles rose and he whispered, back into the car, "You hear that, Barb?"

Her hearing was acute. "A drone?" She nudged the muzzle of the Chiyoda into the back of Devereaux's neck. "Get out carefully, Alaine. Keep your hands away from the cannon. In fact, let me see them folded on top of your shining bald head, and then we'll all be safe."

"It's not what you think." Devereaux's patience was wearing thin, but he did as he was told. "I told Richard only the truth, my boss is interested. But not so interested he's going to take anybody or anything at face value. Live with it, Jazinsky: none of us would be any use to you or whoever you're fronting for if we were dumb as mud." Devereaux laced his fingers on the top of his head. "Jump through the goddamn hoops, lady, get it done ... then we can get down to business."

They were on the lee side of the car and Jazinsky was not about to leave that cover. Vaurien's nerves were crawling. The deal was spinning away from him, and the danger was very real. He looked from Devereaux to Jazinsky and back, and said loudly — to the goons in the shadows, "This is ridiculous. If you guys don't want to do business, don't bother. The water's full of fish, I'll throw a line in someplace else."

The drone slid out of the darkness first on near-silent repulsion. Velvet black lens eyes gazed at them from the head of a barrel-like body; sensors and sniffers twitched toward them like cat's whiskers, and the big barrels of four cannons tracked them.

Behind the drone were three human figures. Vaurien did not recognize two, but the third called himself Ramon, and Vaurien smothered a curse. The kid was a draft dodger. He was born on Velcastra and had signed aboard the first freighter he could get out of Elstrom City, a few weeks before his conscription notice would have been posted to City-Net. He found his way to Ulrand, where the Confederacy's power was

tenuous, and vanished into the Marak underground. Ramon was nineteen, maybe twenty by now. He should have been aboard a super-carrier, but instead had already forged a name for himself on Ulland, among the Freespace community. He was a shooter, and a good one.

"Ramon." Vaurien gave the kid a nod. "You want to tell me what all this crap's about? Does your boss want to do business, or not?"

The little snot was good looking, too, Vaurien thought sourly. He was only a hand's span taller than Tonio Teniko, and only had half of Tonio's looks, but what he did with them was astonishing, and the Lushi-like stature had not made Ramon bitter. It had made him lethal. Despite the heat, he was dressed in black, linen pants and a flimsy silk shirt with rainbow-hued embroidery around the collar and cuffs. His hair was blue-black as a raven, a cascade down his back, and his fingers were heavy with gold rings. Two cannons were not even concealed, one at his left side, the other at his right. Ramon made no secret of his ambidexterity.

"The captain wants to deal," he said in a thick accent from some rural part of Velcastra. "But you asked him to bring other interested parties aboard ... he did, and they don't trust you, Vaurien. They don't know jack-shit about you." He glanced at his companions and the drone. "So they sent the welcome wagon to make sure you're what you look like."

"And what do I look like?" Vaurien demanded, resisting the impulse to look down at himself.

"Like a Freespace playing both ends against the middle," Ramon said almost indifferently. "You think we don't know you went legit? You fly charter for Shapiro. Then here you are, right back in Dockland with the ordinary mortals, making deals to cut the heart right out of Fleet."

Vaurien looked over his left shoulder at Jazinsky, who had not yet moved a muscle. The Chiyoda was still in Devereaux's neck, and the mercenary's hands were on his head. "It's no secret we do charter work for Shapiro," Vaurien began.

"It was that," Jazinsky rasped, "or change our mailing address to the Jackson penitentiary for twenty years! Christ, you think we had a choice? And you think we haven't been looking for an out? And maybe we've found one that'll gut Fleet like a halibut and make us all rich beyond your dreams?"

The shooter's raven-maned head nodded. "Yeah, that's what three mercenary crews want to believe. But they're not entirely stupid, Barb. You mind if I call you Barb?"



"It's my name," Jazinsky growled.

Ramon's mouth twisted in a wry grin. "So here we are, in a stinking parking lot, with a security drone ... and it tells me you're bugged, Vaurien. It's reading comm between you and some ship in orbit."

"Of course I'm bugged," Vaurien snarled. "And I'll give you a broad word of warning, kid: tamper with the bug, remove it or waste it, and any deal we came here to make is history. You'll be talking to a squad from my ship, and if Jazinsky and I are dead ... well, *adios, muchacho*."

The shooter's smile only widened. "You're smart, Vaurien. I told Fernie you could take care of yourself."

"You don't know me," Vaurien began.

"I know *about* you." Ramon turned his eyes to the dim plascrete ceiling. "I know about the *Wastrel*. I've drunk beer with the flight crew of the *Earthlight* ... and I used to screw an Arago technician off the *Wings of Freedom*, every time he swung through Dockland here — till a few months ago. And then she vanished out of space. Why is that, Vaurien?"

Vaurien's pulse quickened. His eyes narrowed on Ramon. "She's on a job."

"For months?" Ramon sounded far from convinced. "And if the *Wings* is on an assignment, where? She hasn't shown up in any port in the Deep Sky, and I haven't had a message from your man Paul Wymark in so long ..." He cocked his head at Vaurien. "If the *Wings of Freedom* was blown out of space, why don't you just say so? If she was crushed by Hellgate —"

"She's fine." Jazinsky's voice cut across the garage. "She's working."

"Where?" Ramon challenged.

"That," Vaurien told him, "is classified. You'll find out if your boss comes on board. Put your name on my contract, and you'll be privy to privileged information."

For some time Ramon studied Vaurien, mute, thoughtful. At last he gave an eloquent shrug and stepped aside. "It's not for me to reason why. Put your hands down, Devereaux."

"You want to tell Jazinsky to get the gun out of my neck?" Devereaux's patience had expired long ago.

"Consider yourself told," Ramon said to Jazinsky.

Still, she did not move. Vaurien lifted a curious brow at Ramon. "I assume you've done whatever you came here to do."

"Security." Ramon nodded at the drone. "It's my job. The captain trusted me to make sure you didn't bring in a tail ... a squad from Fleet

Borushek, a bunch of Shapiro's goons. The bug in your head, we expect. It's your insurance. Smart boy. The cannons? Hold onto them. They won't do you any good where you're going."

Vaurien's skin prickled. "And where's that?" He stepped back, closer to the car. "I don't like what I'm hearing, Ramon. Barb, put the man back in the car. We're leaving."

A cackling laugh issued from the shadows, where a shape detached from the half-seen forms of cars. Vaurien knew that voice, though he had not seen the man for years. He flew out of Halfway, and like any Freespace he was on Ulrand only to take advantage of a world in chaos.

He stepped into the light, a tall man though not as big as the Pakrani, wide-shouldered, lean, with red-blond hair and ice-green eyes, dressed for the equatorial heat in a black and gray kaftan printed in the geometric Ulrish designs. He applauded Vaurien's speech with a few claps which rang back off the plascrete walls, and gestured Ramon aside.

"Very good, Captain Vaurien. You pass the test."

The accent was clipped, barbed. Fernando Wang was from Earth itself, though he could never go back there. He was wanted on every world from Mars to Borushek, and his ship, the *Krait*, was notorious even in the Deep Sky. Vaurien had done business with him several times, but he would not have called Wang an associate, much less a friend.

But Wang had a great deal to recommend him. Freespace was his backyard and he treated Halfway as if he owned it. He had dealt with men like Botero and Cheng, from the *Kiev*, and often the *Krait* had run in convoy with the *Mako*, the *Ranjipur*, even the *Wastrel*. Every day, Wang did business with the likes of Sergei van Donne — and Boden Zwerner.

"What test am I supposed to have passed?" Vaurien demanded harshly.

Wang gestured with a handy which had been cradled in his left palm. "I just spoke to my people. There's a Fleet ship in orbit —"

"She's the *Ganymede*." Jazinsky's voice cut like a knife. "Shapiro came in with a politician from Earth, some waste-of-time eleventh hour bid to placate Ulrand, get them to stay with the Confederacy."

"I know what the ship is." Wang looked Jazinsky up and down. "I've seen Rutherford in the vids, we all have. He's wasting his breath ... but it's amusing to watch the death throes of a colony. My people tell me there's been no activity around the *Ganymede*. You didn't lead in a Fleet squad."

"Christ," Vaurien breathed, "you think I came here to set you up?"

"The thought crossed my mind," Wang admitted. He gestured at Jazinsky. "You took measures to stay alive, keep safe. You'll have to forgive me for doing the same." His teeth bared in a predatory smile. "My people also tell me the *Wastrel* is passively monitoring you ... they're dead overhead, low orbit, with a receiving array aimed right at the bug you're carrying." He raised his voice. "Good evening, Pilot Greenstein, Engineer Ingersol. My compliments on your surveillance!"

A muscle which had been cramped in Vaurien's belly began to relax. "Good enough, Wang. The *Krait*'s up there, is she?"

"Of course." Wang extended a hand toward his man, Devereaux. "Miss Jazinsky, you can release poor Alaine. Let the blood run back into his arms."

But Jazinsky remained immovable. "Get rid of the drone first."

"If you wish. Ramon?" Wang seemed unperturbed.

The shooter aimed a remote at the drone, and it reconfigured as Vaurien watched. Sensors and sniffers retracted; cannons rotated down into their 'rest' position and locked; laser targeting went off and the drone settled down into its standby mode.

"Barb." Vaurien's voice was a bare murmur.

And at last she thrust the Chiyoda into the sheath, against her back. Alaine Devereaux gave her a rueful look and shook out his hands as he came around the body of the Volvo. "Jesus, lady, you're just a tad-bit paranoid."

"I'm alive," Jazinsky retorted. "Richard and I both are — and the odds have been against it for half my life."

Vaurien had begun to breathe again. Still cautious, he offered his hand to Fernando Wang. It was shaken lightly, and Wang turned toward the elevators. "Let me buy you a drink, Vaurien. Do you know where you are?"

"Under a club called *Mayuko*. You drink there?" Vaurien wondered.

"Sometimes." The elevator car opened, and Wang stepped in. "It's a Freespacer club. You would have been welcome in Halfway, once."

"And now?" Vaurien shared a grim glance with Jazinsky.

The mercenary only shrugged. "You're under a flag of truce, escorted by my people, and I'm vouching for you. *This* time." His voice hardened and he gave Vaurien a dark look. "Play me for a fool, Vaurien ... betray my trust, and you won't live to regret it."

A thread of quicksilver shivered the length of Vaurien's spine and he pressed back against the brushed-steel rear wall of the lift. Jazinsky was at his right hand, and Wang placed himself opposite, just out of

reach. They were waiting for Devereaux and Ramon, and Vaurien watched the two slap hands and share the quick kiss of old lovers. Ramon was less than half Devereaux's age, but he was harder, sharper, much the more dangerous of the two. Vaurien did not underestimate him, and he filed away any tidbit of information. So Ramon and Devereaux were intimate? Vaurien was unsurprised — and the knowledge could be valuable.

The lift rose only three levels and opened into a dusky hall. The heavy bass of some indeterminate music carried from another part of the building and misty, multicolored holographs shimmered in the dimness. Some shadowboxed, some writhed in erotic dance forms. The vapors of a dozen kinds of booze wafted from the bar area, beyond which was the street. Vaurien let himself be steered in that direction.

The light was murky, with each table lit by the glow of its own surface, which cast odd shadows. The planes and hollows of faces became harsh, and the hair rose on Vaurien's nape as he glimpsed weapons in the half-light. Tactical squads never patrolled here; Freespacers were a law unto themselves. They played by their own codes, according to hierarchies that were established and smashed every time a new personality entered the arena.

Still, some characters seemed perennial, like Fernando Wang. Like Sergei van Donne. The *Mako* had been in Dockland for hours, and Vaurien was not surprised to recognize faces in the shadows. He knew Kraus and Purvis on sight, as did Jazinsky, and he heard her breathe a curse as she stepped into the bar a pace behind him.

"Now, who invited the vermin?" Jazinsky muttered.

"Barb." Richard glanced once over his shoulder. "Not here, not now."

"You think we're going to be given the choice?" Jazinsky gave Sammy Kraus and Vin Purvis one glare and turned her back on them. She fronted up to the bar and beckoned the keeper. "Can you manage a decent tiger lily?"

The bar keeper was wary. Dark Kuchini eyes flicked from Jazinsky to the men from the *Mako* and back again. Vaurien watched as a shape detached from the table in the rear corner and an undersized little character showed his face to the light for one moment before he bolted into the street.

"That's Gord Sheedy making for home like a pigeon," Vaurien told Jazinsky.

"Christ." She collected the tiger lily and held the glass to her nose to inhale the aromas of dark rum and white curacao.

Wang lifted his buttocks onto a bar stool and peered into Jazinsky's glass. "You want to talk deals with the best ships that fly out of Half-way, or don't you? If you don't, you shouldn't even be in this system ... and if you do, you *want* Sergei's people here." He beckoned his men closer. "Ramon. And you, Devereaux. How long've you people known Vaurien and van Donne? Shit, what am I talking about? Ramon was still bawling for his mommy to come change his diapers when the circus started."

The shooter appeared mildly interested. "What circus?"

"Them." Wang gestured at Vaurien and Jazinsky with a glass of scotch and ice. "Sergei's tried to kill Vaurien four or five times —"

"Three," Richard corrected quietly. "The spat goes back a long way, Ramon. I don't think you were actually in diapers, but your preference ..." He gave Devereaux a glance "... would probably have run closer to lollipops."

"This thing with you and Sergei," Ramon remarked. "It's a legend in Dockland."

"Should I be flattered?" Vaurien was doubtful. "It was all about a hijacked cargo, a client left thinking he'd been ripped off ... a contract on my life that had to be settled the hard way. And I gave Sergei fair warning: if he tried it on again, I'd put him in an unmarked hole in the ground on a planet nobody ever heard of." He gave a humorless chuckle. "For some reason the man was annoyed. He took a crack at me. Several cracks."

The story seemed to vastly amuse Fernando Wang. He toasted Vaurien in whisky. "Here's to private enterprise."

"To staying alive," Jazinsky corrected. She gave Ramon a hard look. "Muzzle van Donne if you can, kid ... but if that creep gets in my way, don't make me have to climb over you to get to him."

Wang cackled delightedly. "This circus has three rings." He tossed down the scotch and leaned on one elbow, closer to Ramon. "What d'you know about Sergei van Donne?"

A disgusted look pasted itself over Ramon's dusky features. "Like she said, he's a creep. He's also a big, beautiful creep ... half the people who know him want to kill him, the other half want to shag him. If he doesn't double-cross you, you get a bad case of the hots."

"You mean, *until* he double-crosses you," Vaurien growled.

"He hasn't double-crossed me." Wang's voice was whisky-hoarse.

"He hasn't shagged me — yet," Ramon added. "Doesn't mean he won't." He gave Wang a brash grin.

The captain of the *Krait* studied the young shooter with a frown, but

he spoke to Vaurien. "Every generation of pups think they're indestructible."

"Not indestructible." Ramon's grin widened as he drifted to Devereaux's side, and the bigger man slung a proprietorial arm around him. "But *this* pup's fast enough to take care of himself. Maybe van Donne lands in that hole in the ground."

"Ramon," Wang barked.

But the kid only shrugged. "So the *Mako* passes to somebody else, what do you care? Maybe you get her yourself Fernie. Maybe you give her to Devereaux. It's the ship you want, not the creep."

"And his contacts," Wang said darkly. "He has Fleet connections."

"Not anymore." Vaurien watched Devereaux and Ramon. "The Fleet end of his pipeline was a bunch of smugglers aboard the *Kiev*, and they were busted. One of them was killed. You didn't hear about it?"

"Some of us," Wang said tartly, "don't have access to Fleet intel. We don't do lunch with Harrison Shapiro." He gave Vaurien a sidelong glare. "I'm still not sure about you, Vaurien. You went legit, for chrisakes. You charter for Shapiro, you dock at Fleet-freakin' Borushek. You gotta know, half of Freespace wants blood." He drew one finger across his gullet.

The muscle in Vaurien's belly which had begun to relax cramped again. He gave Jazinsky a glance, but she was intent on Kraus and Purvis. Moments before, chairs had scraped back. The two were on their feet. Vaurien turned his back to the bar, leaned his spine against it and let his left hand rest close to the Colt.

"You ever been jumped by a couple of Fleet gunships?" he asked of Wang. "Not in space, where you can cut them up for scrap — or run, if you think it's a better idea — but groundside, on your feet, caught napping, nothing you can do but put your hands up and wonder what the inside of the Jackson military prison looks like."

"I haven't had the pleasure." Wang still sounded amused.

"We have," Jazinsky informed him. "And you don't talk your way out of Jackson easily. We had to sign our lives away to Shapiro, and then make nice for months, fly his bloody stupid, suicidal assignments, and make enemies where we used to have friends and allies." Her pale blue eyes glittered with anger. "And all *that*," she said in tones like broken glass, "is about to finish."

How much had Kraus and Purvis heard? Vaurien did not believe the two had been listening. They were lice on the hide of Dockland, and if they had a brain between them, Vaurien would have been surprised. Sammy Kraus in particular was the flotsam of the Deep Sky, born on a

cargo hauler, of Freespace parents. His birth was never entered into the civil registry, his draft notice was never posted. The Confederacy did not even know he existed.

"They said you two was coming in, but I didn't believe you'd be dumb enough." His accent was something like Haven or Louverne, bastardized by the lingual drift of Halfway.

Vaurien gave the man a disinterested look. "No imagination, Sammy, that's always been your problem." He nudged Jazinsky with one elbow and deliberately shifted into his native language. "*Il est amusant, non?*"

"*C'est ce à quoi je pensais.*" Jazinsky looked Kraus up and down, and pushed away from the bar. As she straightened, she towered over him with the stature of the Pakrani. "I haven't forgotten you, Kraus."

He made monkey faces at her. "So, you gonna break my legs this time, then?"

She frowned down at him. "Why, do you want me to?"

"Oh ... *merde*," Vaurien murmured, in the half-second before the first punch was thrown.

With the agility and reflexes of the ten-year Dendra Shemiji veteran, Jazinsky sidestepped it and calmly handed her drink to Richard. He drove Wang before him to make elbow-space, and passed the tiger lily into his right hand to keep his left free, close to the Colt. Like a rank amateur, Kraus was windmilling, with neither the reach, the strength nor the skill to challenge any Pakrani convincingly, much less one who had been trained. Mark Sherratt had taught Jazinsky when she was still a girl, just as he had taught Curtis Marin and was now teaching Neil Travers.

It never occurred to Vaurien to try to break up the fight, but with his peripheral vision he watched Ramon, Devereaux and Wang — and Wang was reaching for something. Vaurien's left hand had curved about the butt of the Colt before he realized the mercenary captain had pulled out his wallet.

"Leave the cannon where it is, Cap," Ramon said pleasantly, "it's not your fight."

"Give me twenty on the woman," Wang was saying to Devereaux.

"Five to one?" Devereaux hazarded, watching shrewdly as Jazinsky ducked and wove, not even bothering to return a blow. "Or maybe ten?" And then Jazinsky landed a right-handed tap on the bridge of Kraus's nose. Blood spurted, Kraus bellowed like a wounded buffalo, both hands cupping his face, and Devereaux shook his head. "I wouldn't give you forty to one, Fernie."

"I would." Ramon took the bright blue, Ulrish twenty-dollar bill and flashed a mock-apologetic glance at Vaurien. "Small folks have to fight dirty, Cap. Ma Nature gives 'em no choice about it ... and when they get good, they get lethal. How good's the Pak chick?"

"I wouldn't give Wang fifty to one *on*," Vaurien said acerbically, and since Kraus was still fussing about his nose, he was watching Purvis now.

Vin Purvis was much taller than Kraus, less bellicose, better muscled and much better coordinated. Jazinsky was not about to underestimate him, because this was not the first time she had put him on his ass. Wang and his crew could not know it, but Purvis had picked a fight to make the diversion while van Donne himself was trying to filch technology from the *Wastrel*; and since Vin was passably good in a brawl, with a few Jeetkwando moves in his repertoire, he rated at least a little respect.

He was angry as he barreled in toward Jazinsky — the anger seemed to be directed as much at Kraus for being an ineffectual fool, but Jazinsky took the broadside of it. Purvis aimed a low sidekick at her knee, and she blocked it neatly. He dove in under her longer Pakrani reach and kicked again, keeping her off balance, and though she dodged the second kick, she was wrong-footed. The Freespace might have landed a blow at that moment, but he knew the folly of trying to break Pakrani bones with the fists belonging to normal genestock. And this was a rematch — he knew Jazinsky was skilled as well as almost ridiculously strong.

With a grunt of effort he leaned over for a chair, hefted it and swung it over his head with both arms. She ducked and pivoted with a hand's span to spare, and it crashed into the floor at her feet. Purvis had put every scrap of his strength, every gram of his weight behind the swing, and after he was committed he realized it was never going to land.

He saw her fist coming, but it was the last thing he would be seeing for a while. The blow smacked into his cheekbone, snapping his head back as if his neck were a twig, and he sagged at the knees. Wang and Ramon swore passionately and the garish local currency changed hands. Vin Purvis was still falling when the doors swung inward, admitting a blare of street noise, the reek of traffic, and three figures Vaurien would have known anywhere, even in silhouette. Jazinsky also knew them, and as Purvis hit the floor she withdrew to Vaurien's side, where Ramon and Elaine Devereaux had formed up with Wang, perhaps to ensure that negotiations were at least opened.



Under the din of the formless, featureless music, Vaurien cleared his throat. "Hello, Sergei. I'm glad you could make it. You heard the deal that's on the table? You want a piece? We can use you."

Sergei van Donne's voice was a rasp. "You can *use* me? You and your Fleet friends cost me a tonne of money, Vaurien, back on Velcastra. You know the name of Berglun? Frank Berglun, one end of a deal I had going — till you and Shapiro showed up and blew the whole show sky-high." He stepped into the light, bigger than Jazinsky, just as white-blond, with the hair buzzcut, the big frame clad in blacks and grays, uptown chic, save for the bulge of a weapon at his right side. Blue Pakrani eyes glittered in the bar lights as he approached Vaurien. "Monte Katerine, above Dominguez ... snow falling, and suddenly the whole comm relay tower's coming down. Is your memory starting to jog?"

"I don't need it jogged," Vaurien said harshly. "You're a bloody fool, van Donne. If you didn't cheat both ends of your deals, you'd have fewer people lining up to put a bullet in you. Half the people in this room would stand up and applaud if I cut you down right now, and your place in the pecking order would be filled in four seconds." He lifted his chin and gave van Donne back glare for glare. "Now, did you come here to lick old wounds, chew over old grievances ... or you want a piece of the deal, and a haul bigger than anything your dim little brain ever imagined?"

For a long, elastic moment he was so sure van Donne would go for the weapon that his own left hand itched, tingled. Did van Donne see Ramon there, on the other side of Alaine Devereaux, with the cannon already out, leveled? And was van Donne unsure which of them Ramon would blow away?

Neither was Vaurien, and his heart was in his throat until van Donne carefully lifted his hands, thrust them into the pockets of a black silk jacket, took one calculated step back and said hoarsely, "I'm listening, Vaurien. Make it good. You fuck around with me, waste any more of my time, and I'll add it to the bill you already owe me." His teeth bared, and the expression was not a smile. "Then I'll take it out of your goddamned *Earther* hide."

It was the first time Richard Vaurien had been called by that name in almost thirty years, and he was more taken aback than he would have been if van Donne had hit him. "Well, now," he said slowly, looking at Sergei's offsidiers instead, "why don't we put it to a vote here? Raise your hand, anybody who wants to be so stinking rich, they could buy Borushek and toss it in a dumpster." To van Donne's left and

right were his own copilot and the mercenary commander of the frigate *Harlequin*. "It's good to see you here, Asako. Still hanging out with the scum of the Deep Sky?"

Asako Rodman knew van Donne as well as anyone in Freespace, and probably trusted him less than most. He had not — yet — double-crossed her, because she had the *Harlequin* behind her: the bow section from a DeepSky Fleet warship which had perished in the Rabelais Drift, mated to the stern section from an ore hauler which had died the same way. With the guns, sensors and armor of a cruiser very like the *Ganymede* and the monstrous engines of a leviathan like CL-389, the *Harlequin* was bigger, faster and tougher than the *Mako*.

Brute strength was the one quality van Donne respected. Rage had balled his fists, but the copilot laid one hand on Sergei's shoulder. "Let it ride, man. If the deal's as sweet as this, we want a bite. You can send Vaurien and his balls in three different directions later." Rafe Byrne's voice was soft but the words penetrated. "Sergei? Come on, babe, let it be. Let's see the man's goods."

The rage subsided as Vaurien watched. Part of Richard was almost disappointed. In case there was any doubt, Asako Rodman put herself between van Donne and Vaurien. She was only half Kuchini, no physical match for the Pakrani in a standup fight, but her crew were notorious even in Halfway, and many of them were her blood-kin. An injury done to Rodman was an insult to them all. Not even van Donne was complacent enough to cross her. She wore her dark brown hair short, and the scars of a badly-removed unit tattoo marked her left cheek. She was not a handsome woman, Vaurien thought, and she was no longer young; but she was arresting, she commanded attention even in civvy clothes, on the street.

"You're looking good, Barb," Rodman was saying to Jazinsky. "I'm surprised you're still alive. This maniac seems to be trying to get you killed lately. There's better rides around ... I've offered before."

"The Deep Sky's no place to be these days. Nobody's safe." Jazinsky gave her hand to Rodman, and they clasped wrists. "You heard via the rumor mill, we're hiring?"

"We heard," van Donne said harshly. "And it's not you, Vaurien. You don't have the bucks to hire a battle group out of Halfway, especially since Shapiro shut down your operation." His fair brows rose. "You're fronting for somebody, aren't you?"

The man was dangerously astute. Vaurien pasted on a smile and passed Jazinsky's glass back into her hand. "Of course we are. Does it matter who's paying the bills?"

"It could." Rodman angled a glance up and back at van Donne, and the two words were heavy. "Sergei can be ... persnickety."

Perhaps against his better judgment, Vaurien took the bait. He met van Donne's eyes levelly. "If you're wondering if we're fronting for Boden Zwerner, forget it. I wouldn't work for the scum."

"That's not what I hear," van Donne growled. "They tell me you've been putting out feelers, trying to make contact."

"Who tells you?" Vaurien demanded as a pulse jumped in his throat.

"You think I don't know what shit goes on in Dockland?" For a moment van Donne seemed about to lash out. "I *own* this territory, Vaurien. I know the Palmeral got hit. I know they lost a pilot, one of their best, name of Queneau."

"That's the rules of the game," Jazinsky said tersely. "Asako, you haven't explained it to him yet?"

She was goading, deliberately needling, and Vaurien held his breath as van Donne's breathing shortened with rising anger. It was Rodman who got between them and snapped, "For chrissakes, do like Rafe says and let it be — *all* of you. You too, Barb. You want to kill yourselves? Do it on your own time, not mine." She nailed Vaurien with a hard look. "Is there a deal, or isn't there? If you got me here under false pretenses, it'll cost you, Richard. For your information, Boden Zwerner is in Freespace. He's been holed up in a Halfway dream shop for months. What you want with him?"

Vaurien answered with an eloquent shrug. "You already know we're hiring. Like Sergei, but for different reasons, I'd relish the chance to put a bullet in the back of Boden Zwerner's skull ... *after* we get so stinking rich, we could buy the Deep Sky."

Sergei van Donne muttered an oath. "You want Zwerner dead?"

"Same as you," Jazinsky affirmed, "but our reasons are better. You and Zwerner tried to double-cross each other on the same deal? Well, now, what a surprise." Her voice hardened. "It's ancient history, van Donne. There isn't a drunken old rummy in Halfway that doesn't know you'd pay money for Zwerner's head on a plate."

It was a lie, but a good one. Vaurien had never heard the name of Zwerner before the CL-389 incident, but van Donne could never be sure. "If you wanted to take down Zwerner, you'd have to take a number and wait," Richard added. "I have friends on Omaru. I'll take him, Sergei, for CL-389. But not before we work the deal that gives us the Deep Sky, gift wrapped."

The pale blue eyes glittered. "You think Boden Zwerner was behind CL-389? Christ, when did your brains turn to shit?"

"No," Vaurien snarled, "but I bloody know he set it up — and I know he took his money from an office way back on Earth."

Now, van Donne's face clenched. "You want to tell me how the hell you can know that?" His mind was churning almost audibly, and as pieces of the puzzle fell into place his brows rose. "The agent who busted the Palmeral — the agent who got Jo Queneau killed — he had to be working for you."

"Close," Jazinsky rasped. "The man was working for the same consortium we're fronting for. Did you know the agent made it out of the Palmeral in one piece? We got enough data to roast Boden Zwerner with an apple in his mouth, Sergei. But like Rafe says, later. There's better things to do first."

"Like?" Asako Rodman prompted. Her dark, cropped head tilted at the whole group. "I'm looking at one hell of a lot of firepower here, Sergei. The *Wastrel* and the *Earthlight* ... the *Krait* ... the *Mako* and the *Harlequin*. Shit, you add in Con Steller's *Ranjipur* and Zwerner's *Palenque*, and you've got yourself a battle group. Meaning," she added pointedly, "there's a battle to fight." She thrust both hands into the pockets of the pale blue linen jacket, making the fabric stretch tight enough for the line of her sidearm to show through. "Richard?"

Vaurien took a long, deep breath. "There is a very old, very wise axiom. In chaos there is profit." Deliberately, he ignored van Donne and looked from Rodman and Byrne to Wang, Ramon and Devereaux. He gestured at a nearby table. "If we're all done insulting and provoking each other, are we ready to do business?"

## Chapter Two

### *El Khouri Highlands, Ulrand*

It was a few minutes short of noon, but the sky was almost as dark as night over the uplands, and the canyons wore a rime of frost. The ground temperature was twenty below, and as far as any living creature was concerned, the wind chill dropped the temperature another fifteen degrees. Harrison Shapiro rested the palm of his hand on the armorglass viewplate before him, and felt the cold strike into the bones from fingers to wrist. The life forms native to El Khouri had evolved to occupy a high desert where no rain had fallen in living memory and by day the temperature could be fifty above. Little survived in ten thousand square kilometers, and at the epicenter of the region was 'ground zero.'

Grimly, Shapiro watched it come up over the horizon as the barge made its way northwest from the outpost of Alexandria. The implosion seemed to have taken a bite out of the surface of Ulrand. The crater was as deep as the open-pit mines on Cimarosa and five times wider, and as far as the eye could see, the surface was covered in drifts of sand-gray dust and frost. The dust fell constantly in a thin rain, choking everything, and when the wind blew it eddied into miniature whirlwinds, resettling on anything that might have escaped.

El Khouri was as dead as if a warhead had impacted here, and the only advantage was that the radiation count was low. The implosion of the Zunshu device had scattered odd wavelengths across a wide area but most of it had dissipated. The prevailing wind was from the southeast, and Alexandria had narrowly escaped contamination. If the wind had dumped a thousand tonnes of radioactive dust on the outpost, Shapiro thought, the uproar in Marak city would have been even worse.

If Ulrand were a vacuum, the event would have caused little or no damage, but in an atmospheric environment, an implosion — as if part

of the atmosphere had simply ceased to exist — the effects were devastating. The whole El Khouri plateau fell within the radius where every molecule of oxygen, nitrogen, water vapor and the trace elements had to get up and move instantaneously, to fill a vacuum. At ground-zero, the effect was appalling.

The images were captured, realtime, by a weather surveillance satellite. The intrush of air was already explosive before the shape of the terrain caused funneling. More than a hundred tornados touched down in El Khouri in seven minutes, and the biggest of them were fueled by the energy pouring out of ground-zero as volatiles in the soil, close to the actual event horizon of the collapsing stasis chamber, compressed and detonated in a blast like a low-yield, tactical nuclear warhead.

For seventeen seconds, the largest of the El Khouri tornados connected the jetstream with the ground. Hurricane-force winds rampaged through Alexandria, more than a thousand kilometers away; the sky dimmed and high winds from an odd direction caused minor damage even in Marak.

At Shapiro's shoulder, Senator Charleston Aimes Rutherford viewed the damage stoically. Little expression had touched his thick, jowly face as he was briefed by the team from the *Grossman*. He viewed vid footage of the operation to put a dome over a five-kilometer long ravine. Under the micron-thin kevlar shell, the air temperature was raised by the exhaust heat of the same Aragos which held up the dome itself, and an assortment of plants, reptiles, insects, survived in artificial light. In orbit, the chain of weather satellites gathered data and supplied it freely to scientists in Marak City, but the three tenders Shapiro had assigned to Ulland, headed by the *Grossman* itself, were in a better position to manage climate control.

Little could be done, short of assigning a terraforming operation, and that was the last card Shapiro had left to play. The problems were vast and complex. Terraforming would exterminate any life which had, against the odds, managed to survive in the highlands; and it would cost as much as opening up a new colony.

If the twist of Rutherford's mouth was anything to judge by, Shapiro knew the funding would not come from any office on Earth. The Grand Senate had already been briefed on the 'Ulland situation,' and Shapiro's intelligence was that the event had been categorized as an unfortunate accident with few casualties and no significant consequences. Few people on Earth would care about the difficult environment and the extinction of indigenous wildlife on a colony world that had been forgotten, isolated for a century and a half.

"It's a mess," Shapiro said quietly. "I've done what I can, but the only thing that would entirely pacify the Marak Senate would be a wind-back of the clock, until it never happened at all."

"They're being utterly unreasonable." Rutherford's voice was deep, with the quality of gravel, and his accent said *Earth* with every word he spoke. He had never learned any of the dialects common to the colonies even of the Middle Heavens. He was fluent in three languages, only one of which Shapiro spoke well, and more than once during the last week they had summoned Rutherford's multilingual secretary to clarify the odd quirks of dialog.

The senator traveled with the secretary, three bodyguards, one of whom was cross-trained as a paramedic, a personal trainer who was also a chiropractor, plus a valet who doubled as his barber and could be called upon to serve as chef when necessary. By turns, Shapiro was amused and angry.

In Rutherford's palm was a handy, no bigger than the pack of his favorite kip-grass cigarettes, which was never out of reach. He rarely spoke without consulting the handy, into which his secretary was continually feeding prep-notes for Rutherford's eyes only — Shapiro was never allowed to see them.

"I wouldn't say the Ulrish are being unreasonable," he argued. "They're angry, and they have every right to be. My people were on-site, Senator. They knew *exactly* what would happen if Colonel Mulholland tampered with the thing."

"I've been assured Colonel Mulholland's team represented the best Fleet engineers, and he had the foremost military scientists at his disposal," Rutherford said dismissively.

"I don't doubt it." Shapiro looked out at El Khouri as the barge fell into an Arago hover and began to turn on its axis, infinitely slowly, to give them the full three-sixty view. "But it's not much of a recommendation for either him or his people. You can see with your own eyes, the results of Mulholland's work."

Powerful floodlights lanced into the near-darkness, overlapping, illuminating a field of dust and rubble, dead as a graveyard. Rutherford gave it one brooding look, and then angled a sharp glance at Shapiro.

"Mulholland's crew were specialists from labs on Earth. There's no better talent in the Deep Sky."

He was wrong, but Shapiro was not about to correct him. "Still, Colonel Mulholland was advised by my people, warned time and again, and you can see for yourself the results of his handiwork."

"Your ... people," Rutherford echoed. He turned his back on the desolation, folded his arms on the breast of an immaculate Deccan suit, and fixed Shapiro with a glare. "Exactly who *are* your people?"

"Civilian specialists, on contract to my office on Borushek." Shapiro refused to be intimidated.

The senator was a difficult man, senior in years as well as rank. He was wealthy, with 'old money' which extended back through many generations of his family. There was no First Fleet snobbery here: Rutherford was the 'real deal,' not merely from Earth, but from the world's most elite community.

-190 And the man was a career politician, a professional in a trade that was often corrupt and almost always driven by self-interest. His eyes were shrewd, nested in lines which seemed to have been deliberately etched into his skin. His hair was dark brown, as immaculate as the suit, as luxurious as the antique platinum fob-watch and the thick gold rings among his fingers. Everything about him annoyed Shapiro.

"You'll introduce me to these civilians when we return," Rutherford said tartly. Not a question. "Citizens of the Deep Sky, no doubt."

He meant *colonials*. Shapiro closed his eyes for a moment and summoned patience. It was increasingly difficult to find. "Senator, I don't believe this is the time or place to be pointing fingers, trying to assign blame. It really doesn't matter who was responsible for the El Khouri event. On behalf of both the Confederacy and the DeepSky Fleet, I have already admitted culpability and accepted responsibility. I've done all I can to repair the damage."

"I'd say you've done rather too much." Rutherford glanced once at the vista beyond the armorglass and then ignored it. "This is a desolate and ugly ball of rock, Shapiro. No people in their right minds would live here by choice. You couldn't hurt this corner of space if you hit it with a salvo of nukes."

Anger rose in Shapiro's chest. "With all due respect, Senator, the present day Ulrish are the seventh generation to be born on this ... ball of rock, as you call it. This corner of space is their home. In fact, it's their sovereign territory. You're well aware that the government of Earth *invited* the Ulrish to join the Confederacy, and unlike the worlds which could be called true colonies of Earth, Ulrand bears no allegiance whatsoever —"

"I know my history," Rutherford said sharply. "This planet was colonized by a splinter group from Pakrenne. And I need hardly remind you, Shapiro, the Pakrani are as human as you or I."

"Even if they're not welcome on your streets," Shapiro said bitterly.



He was thinking of Kristyn Bauer, her Pakrani husband, her half-caste children, and the prejudice she had met on humanity's so-called motherworld.

"The Pakrani know their place, like the Lushi, like the Mazjeet." Rutherford looked darkly at Shapiro. "They have their own niche, and they're at their most agreeable when they are *in* it. They don't belong on Earth, and the wise among them know it."

A vivid image of Jazinsky flittered through Shapiro's mind. "But, by gods, you'll impoverish them to enrich and defend the Earth," he growled. "You'll tax them, conscript them and kill them in the name of a world where they're not even welcome to breathe your air."

Rutherford's brows lowered, and his eyes smoldered on Shapiro. "You begin to sound like a republican yourself. Do you need me to warn you, Shapiro? There's no room for this ridiculous republican sentimentality in the DeepSky Fleet, nor in the office of colonial government."

"And you can easily have me replaced. I know." Shapiro bit back the anger, sealed his lips and glared at the ruin of El Khouri in silence for some time. "Should I apologize? Suffice to say, Senator Rutherford, I was born out here in the Deep Sky. I'm from a little place called Elmendorf, in the Riga Sector. These are my skies, my stars ... my people." He shook his head thoughtfully. "I went to Earth once. My own genestrand isn't engineered, but I still felt —" He hesitated a moment longer and then said it. "Alien. Human, and yet dislocated from the Earth. I don't suppose you can even imagine what I felt."

"You suppose correctly," Rutherford informed him. He dug out the pack of cigarettes and lit up. "What are you driving at, Shapiro?"

"Only this." Shapiro drew back his shoulders and looked Rutherford in the eye again. The senator was a little taller, twenty years more senior, and much higher in rank, but Shapiro refused to be impressed. "You don't have to be a republican to want peace in the Deep Sky. And that's all I want, Senator. An end to the colonial war, a mutually acceptable way to avert what's going to happen here at Ulrand ... and some magic to safeguard us against the rest." He looked up, into the patch of the sky where Hellgate would have been visible on a clear night. Not that El Khouri enjoyed clear nights anymore.

"The Zunshu," Rutherford said thoughtfully. He plumed a dragon's breath of smoke from both nostrils and studied Shapiro almost rudely. "Tell me the truth, now. Is there any such threat? Isn't it just a legend, a story — like the haunted house, the headless horseman?"

"Oh, the Zunshu are real enough." Shapiro nodded out at the dark,

icy wasteland. "It was an ancient Zunshu device that got away from your man Mulholland."

"And it's a Zunshu device I came out from Earth to collect." Rutherford gave the floodlit crater and the low, ink-black overcast a glare. He flicked ash from the cigarette and dragged on it again. "I'm wasting my time here. There is no question, none whatever, regarding Ulrand. More than enough has already been done to recover this region, and rather too much has been paid over to the government in Marak."

"Would you care to stand up in their Grand Senate and say that?" Shapiro challenged. "We came here to avert a war, Senator." *At least, I did.*

But Rutherford was making negative noises. "It takes two to parlay. And the Ulrish won't be appeased. They're no longer open to negotiation, if they ever were. Which I have come to doubt."

The referendum had already begun, across the whole planet, but Ulrand would take three days to vote, and it would be two more days before the decision of the people and the Senate was final. Shapiro had no doubt what he would hear, and any address Rutherford could make would hardly influence the tides of anger which swept this world.

"Then it'll be an invasion force," he said quietly.

"The *Shanghai* carrier battle group is making preparations." Rutherford looked sidelong at Shapiro. He dropped the cigarette, ground it out under his heel. "You see an alternative? Then *you* stand up in their piddling Grand Senate and convince them to get back in line."

"Me?" Shapiro smiled thinly, without humor. "They're less than likely to listen to me, Senator. The voice of Earth is what they need to hear now ... but you've been saying all the wrong things."

"Oh, for godsakes." Rutherford swung away and stalked toward the seats which flanked the bulkhead behind the cockpit. His bodyguard and secretary drifted after him like a pair of shadows.

Four times since the *Ganymede* and the *Wastrel* arrived insystem, he had appeared in the newsvids. A current affairs show, a science digest, a public forum, and a CNS biography — a montage of hastily-gathered materials from sources Shapiro himself envied. Every word out of Rutherford's mouth had offended someone, somewhere. He was the *Earther*, whose family had been rich even before the buildup of the DeepSky Fleet. In the last thirty years, the Rutherfords' fortunes had risen, riding on the back of military construction contracts. They owned vast shares in the yards where the carriers and super-carriers were built. And their most illustrious son was here on Ulrand, telling people who had nothing to 'get real.' That their biosphere and native wildlife

were worthless, and the autonomy they thought they possessed was a figment of their imagination.

Shapiro was silent now. It had all been said, and his throat was dry as El Khouri's frozen dust. He walked forward, past Rutherford and into the cockpit. Coming out here had been a mistake, but when CNS laid down the challenge to the senator — he should witness the devastation with his own eyes, and see if he could remain unmoved — Shapiro could not refuse.

For himself, he had seen the ruin of El Khouri several times. He conferenced regularly with the officers from the *Grossman* and its group, and the feeling among the crews working out here was mainly guilt. Fleet had done this; Fleet should set it right.

But Rutherford's face was a mask, clenched in anger, and Shapiro knew when to hold his silence. The cockpit was dim, lit by the glow of screens and instruments. Sitting behind the pilot was Jon Kim, who headed the Marak Environmental Bureau and had chaired a dozen symposia devoted to this world's indigenous life. Shapiro had done most of his business with Kim, feeding money, manpower, machines and resources to a department that was laughably out of its depth. Jon Kim had known from the beginning what must be done, but he had nothing to work with before Shapiro involved himself. He was one of the specialists who arrived at 'ground zero,' just twelve hours after the event.

Like few of his colleagues, Kim appreciated what Shapiro had done. A gene bank had already been stocked with tissue samples from every plant and animal in El Khouri, and in the domed ravine a few living specimens would survive. The dark and cold would pass, and with a breeding program for fauna and flora alike, the highlands could be restored. It might take a century, but it would happen. Harrison Shapiro alone was responsible for this, and Jon Kim knew it.

He was very young for the job, at just thirty. His face was still smooth, his body was well-worked on the racquetball court, and he had enough conscience and compassion left to actually care what happened to El Khouri and the scattered outposts like Alexandria. He was young enough to be Shapiro's son, yet taller and broader, with a deeper voice and a grim sense of duty and authority which made him seem much older. He was in blue and white denim, jeans and jacket, and a pale yellow turtle neck which made his tan seem deeper and the shock of white-blond hair seem more pale. He came to his feet as Shapiro appeared, and nodded aft toward the senator.

"Any joy?"

"It's been a waste of time for us all, Jon. Thank gods we wouldn't let CNS send a vidcrew along. The man is an A-Grade bastard."

"Earther," Kim observed disdainfully.

"And a bigot," Shapiro added. "You know the routine: gene-tweaked colonials should know their place and stay in it." He crooked one brow at Kim. "I married a Kuchini, you know."

"I know. I did my homework on you, when we started doing business. I saw pictures, and I admit, I was surprised ... you being so highly placed in Fleet, I suppose, and Fleet being what it is! Lauren Russell was a handsome woman, Harrison."

"She was," Shapiro agreed, "and she died long before her time. An accident. You must have read the file, and you've every right to. You need to know who you're dealing with. And what."

He watched as the pilots lifted the barge up out of the wide depression of the El Khouri crater. The aircraft passed into the cloud of airborne dirt and through the canopies he saw only darkness, deep, endless, depressing. He turned back toward Kim and hunted for words.

"Fleet isn't what it used to be. I wasn't conscripted. I put my name on their contract ten years before you were born, and by the time the whole show turned sour I was already a colonel. I thought I was in a position to make a difference, so I stuck around."

"I'm glad you did," Kim said with a twist of bitter humor. "If you've made a difference nowhere else, you've worked magic here."

"Not enough to sway your people's vote." Shapiro's hand fell on the back of the nearest seat as the barge began to accelerate toward Marak.

"I'm afraid nothing would sweeten them," Kim said dismissively. "I've done all I can. I've been on the vidnews a dozen times, explaining how the uplands can be repopulated when the dust settles — literally. We're still gathering data about what's happening to the climate, but we'll know enough soon to meddle with it, nudge it back where it should be." He gave Shapiro an apologetic look. "None of this work would have happened without your cooperation. A few people have listened. At college level there's quite a number who'll be voting to stay with the Confederacy ... if only because they can see the fight coming, and they don't want to be part of it."

Just the night before, Marak Channel 85 had broadcast vidclips supplied by CNS. Some AI camera had captured images of the *Shanghai* taskforce. Today, the media was ablaze with speculation, and Shapiro's tongue itched to say it aloud: why else would the *Shanghai* be in this

part of the Deep Sky? She was out of her usual territory, and the *Chicago* was covering for her, on the endless patrol of the Middle Heavens data conduit.

The *Chicago* was more than half crewed by kids from the Deep Sky, and even Fleet knew better than to send her to pulverize Ulrand and Omaru. But the *Shanghai*'s crew was drawn from worlds as far back as Darwin's, Rethan, Mars. They could reasonably be assigned to wreak havoc on colonies where the people were different enough to be alien.

"You, uh, saw the newsvids last night?" Kim prompted as the barge leveled out in early evening sunlight and headed fast for the city.

"I saw them." Shapiro studied the younger man closely, and Jon Kim had to know he was being evaluated on some level.

One premature word directly from Shapiro about the *Shanghai* and its mission, and Rutherford would surely indict him for treason. But news could be leaked, while all parties denied any knowledge of the source.

Kim leaned close enough for Shapiro to smell his cologne. "Harrison, it's going bad, isn't it? For godsakes, there's no more either of us can do."

For a last moment Shapiro hesitated and then he said quietly, against Kim's right ear, "Will you have a word of advice from an old soldier?" Kim was waiting. "Borushek is a nice place for a vacation," Shapiro went on, "and I hear you can get cut-price clipper tickets right now."

"The *Shanghai* —?"

"It'll be carnival time in Sark next week." Shapiro looked into Kim's face, and with an eloquent quirk of his brows added, "I'd seriously consider being there. You'd have the time of your life ... in fact, you'd have a life to have a good time in."

The young man's eyes closed for several seconds and when they reopened they were dark with foreboding. "Damn. I don't have a lot of bucks, Harrison. You know what the Ulrish dollar's worth? I'd be looking for a couch to crash on." He threw it out like a baited hook.

"It could be arranged." Shapiro permitted a small, crooked smile. "You know what's going to happen here, Jon. When the shooting's stopped they'll round up the 'ringleaders,' meaning anyone remotely connected with government, the old regime." He looked away. "As an environmentalist, you'll be accused of inciting the population against the Confederacy, deliberately influencing the vote."

"I suppose I did, in the early days," Kim admitted. "I was one of the first out here, as you know. CNS pushed a camera into my face, and I

told them without hesitation, the blast was the result of some kind of weapon ... and there'd been a Fleet crew working here."

"That's more than enough to lock you up," Shapiro said regretfully. "You can expect those vids to be used as evidence at the trial, and then you'll be looking at the inside of the bars for a long, long time." He gave Kim a look of bleak humor. "By rights I shouldn't be telling you even a syllable of this. I'm implicating myself. Conspiracy, collusion, treason."

"Bullshit," Kim whispered.

"Not in the eyes of a Confederate prosecutor!" Shapiro rubbed his face with both hands and looked up at the taller man. "But you cooperated with me, and we worked well together. You and I laid the foundations for repairing El Khouri, but Fleet won't see the value of it. If you're here, Jon, when push comes to shove, you're going to take the fall with the rest of the colonial government, and — I'll be damned if I'll stand by and see it happen."

"Sweet Christ." Kim's face had lost several shades of color. "There's been talk on CNS about the crackdown if we challenge Fleet and lose. The people of this colony don't seem to believe it'll happen."

"It will." Shapiro set a hand on Kim's left shoulder, dealt him a companionable squeeze there. "Don't be here, if you've any chance to get out. Be damned discreet, of course ... if you mention my name, I'm a dead man ... but try to get the word out to people like yourself who've busted their buns to put this place right and stop the shooting before it starts."

"I will. And I appreciate it, Harrison. I mean, I've worried that this would happen, but — getting right out never crossed my mind. I must be getting slow."

"Don't think of it as deserting Ulrand in her time of need," Shapiro counseled. "You can't do squat for this world when you're buried in a prison for twenty-five years. You have to be on the outside, at liberty, to make any difference at all. In fact, the more you feel a surge of patriotism, the faster you should get out."

"I intend to. If you can help me." Kim's right hand covered Shapiro's on his shoulder. "I owe you one, Harrison. In fact, I owe you a whole bunch."

"Nonsense," Shapiro began.

"I'll decide what's nonsense." Kim's hand tightened on Shapiro's for a moment, and a smile touched one side of his wide mouth. "I'm not one of your recruits. I don't wear the uniform. I'm not even a Confederate citizen ... not till Fleet gets finished with Ulrand, I suppose, then they'll call me a fugitive criminal. Good Christ, I'll be on their most-

wanted list." He shook himself hard. "So, if you don't mind, *I'll* decide who I owe a bunch to ... and whose couch I crash on. Unless I get a better offer. It, uh, doesn't have to be the couch, right?"

For a moment Shapiro did not follow, and then the first time in what seemed like a year, he actually chuckled. "Are you propositioning me? I'm old enough to be your father —"

"But you're *not* my father," Kim said, sharing the amusement.

"— and I'm way out of practice at ... this," Shapiro added.

"Practice makes perfect," Kim suggested.

"Is that so?" Shapiro wiped the smile off his face and watched the lights of Marak glitter on the horizon, through the haze of smog and cloud. "I'm flattered, Jon. It's been a long, long time. But don't do this because you think you must, or you should. There's nothing for you to repay, and even if there were, there are better ways to pay back that kind of debt." He gave Kim a sidelong smile. "The fact is, I already owe you, big time, for your work here. If you like, I'll pull some strings, see if I can to slide you into a similar job on Borushek."

Kim's brows rose. "If it would mean being closer to you, I'd go for that. It's too long a journey, Borushek to Ulrand, to make the crossing often. Like I said before, I don't have a lot of bucks. They don't pay me too well at the best of times, and the Ulrish dollar isn't worth the plastex they print it on." He wagged one eyebrow at Shapiro. "So...?"

"Damnit, you've got me halfway convinced you're serious." Shapiro felt himself taking the lure — like a sleek, shining trout about to be dropped into the skillet? He knew he should be old enough to know better, but the old maxim only made him chuckle again: *Old enough to know better, young enough to do it anyway*. He fended off Kim with one hand and turned back to the city lights.

"Hey, do I sound like I'm joking?" Kim mocked himself. "Damnit, I have to work on my technique. I used to be good at this."

"You still are. That's a hell of a nice pickup line," Shapiro told him, and then sobered. "Don't make a fool of me, Jon. You know what they say. There's no fool like an old fool."

The younger man's face darkened. "You're not old. And who the hell taught you to mistrust?"

"Not a person. A lifetime of watching other people get beaten to pulp." Shapiro stepped back and watched the swirl of clouds as the barge dropped in toward the private landing bays at Pakrenne Plaza, from which it had departed two hours before. "I don't have time for tomfoolery ... and although I'm not *quite* geriatric yet, I do think I'm too old to forgive and forget, if you play me for a fool."

"That sounded like a gauntlet being thrown down," Kim observed.

"Perhaps," Shapiro allowed. "But not a threat. Because I'm flattered. You're a nice kid, and I appreciate the attention."

"Not a threat ... a challenge, maybe?" Kim wondered. "Be warned: I always relished a challenge. It's why I took on the job at El Khouri instead of making like the proverbial bat out of hell."

Shapiro chuckled again. "All right. If you like. A challenge."

"Then, consider your gauntlet picked up." Kim gave him a curious look. "Open a file on me, have your intel people investigate me."

"I will. You understand, it's procedure."

"I have nothing to hide, Harrison." Kim's eyes were wide, dark, clear. "College, then a move to the city, government, this job. I have a family in the north that won't speak to me because I wouldn't stay home and work my hands to blood in their business. I was married, but it was a disaster. Divorce, no kids I'm aware of ... two dogs." He paused, eyes dancing with reluctant humor. "I need to look into Borushek's quarantine regulations, don't I?"

"Yes," Shapiro said bemusedly, "I think you do. No matter what else happens between us — or doesn't — I want you the hell out of Uland before the *Shanghai* battle group gets here. Just in case."

The deck tilted and the engines changed pitch as the barge dropped in toward Marak. The skyline was familiar by now, and Shapiro could pick out the beacons and comm arrays of the rink. Dockland stretched away, bright in the dimness of its smog, and as the barge rotated around for a landing in the government bays, he wondered if Vaurien and Jazinsky were out of there yet.

The danger was real enough to make his skin crawl, but they were the only agents who could tackle the work. No one else Shapiro knew could walk right into Dockland, set up a meeting with characters like van Donne, Wang, Rodman, and even hope to be taken seriously.

Yet it was no secret Vaurien's operation had 'legitimized,' and the Fleet connection was made doubly dangerous since the *Ganymede*, a Fleet warship, was docked in orbit. Shapiro had tried to insist Rutherford take his staff aboard the *Wastrel*, but the man from Earth was immovable. Shapiro knew when to back off before Rutherford became suspicious that he was being manipulated. He knew it now, just as Shapiro knew there would be a price to be paid eventually, in some coin.

In a day, his dislike of Rutherford had blossomed into full-blown antipathy, and he guarded every word. He checked his comm security daily, and ran his own surveillance on Rutherford's staff. Did the senator know his comm lines were bugged, his quarters monitored, his



Net access full of AI spies? Shapiro had to believe he did, but either Rutherford's staff were not qualified to remove them, or the senator expected them to simply be replaced as soon as they were removed —

Or, Shapiro thought darkly, the bugs and AI snoops were useful right where they were, issuing exactly the intel Rutherford wanted issued. The thought was irritating, like glass powder under the skin, and his mouth compressed as he watched the dim silhouettes of buildings rise up around the barge, murky in the twilight and humid, smoggy air.

With a soft thud, like boots landing in soft sand, it touched down. Rutherford and his entourage were already at the side hatch and their car was still standing by, where they had left it two hours before. The blue Volvo Presidium was armored far beyond the merely bulletproof, and before it left Pakrenne Plaza it would be flanked by two squad flyers from Marak City Tactical. Rutherford was the least liked man on Ulrish soil, and he did not overestimate his chances of survival, 'naked' on the street.

Without even a glance in Shapiro's direction he marched down the ramp. The Volvo's jets and Aragos had already howled into life. The driver would be summoning his Tactical escort. In minutes Rutherford would be back at the Hotel Koromandel, in the Champlain sector, where the northwest corner of the sixteenth floor had been secured by Fleet specialists from the *Ganymede*. He had been on Ulrand two days longer than he had wanted to be, and Shapiro doubted he could keep the man here any longer.

The *Ganymede* was headed directly to Albeniz, where the Zunshu device — or, the shell of it, Shapiro allowed — was sealed in a bunker ten levels under the Fleet dock facilities. The next time it was on display, it would be in a security lab in the Jupiter system, and there would be no out-flow of data. Shapiro wished them joy. The Zunshu hunter's fuel was gone, the brains were fried; only the hull remained intact, 'hot' with unfamiliar energy signatures which hinted at the element Neil Travers had called the 'top fuel.'

It was just enough to convince the Confederacy that the Zunshu were very real, very alien, inconceivably dangerous. The dead hull, plus the data Mark Sherratt's science vessel had supplied from Juarez, and a copy of the document which had been seeded into the archaeological site at On'rabi, might be enough to influence the government of Earth.

But Shapiro was far from optimistic, and he was painfully aware of a sensation of 'going through the motions.' Perhaps only Mark under-

stood fully: these were the last moves in the legal game, and Shapiro *had* to make them. When they were done the game would be over, and all bets off — as well as the gloves.

In a matter of days, the Grand Senate in Marak would cast its own vote, backing up the referendum which was taking place around the planet even now. Secession was no more in doubt than the invasion of Ulrand. But the outcome of the battle was another question.

Shapiro's thoughts returned to Dockland as he waited for Jon Kim and the barge's flight crew. Intelligence from both his own sources and Dendra Shemiji suggested that in the last four weeks both Velcastra and Jagreth had bought the Shrike and Phaeton weapons systems.

They were arming. Like so many other colonies, they were watching Omaru and Ulrand, and what happened in these two systems would set the playing field for the colonial wars. A victory in either theater would bring other colonies into the war; victories in both —

"You fancy a game, Harrison?" Kim was at the top of the ramp, jacket off and hooked over his shoulder from one hand. The soupy, aromatic air was invading the barge's interior, making a man sweat while his sinuses prickled. "You look like you need to unwind, and a hard game's better for you than a fifth of bourbon and a head full of chimera."

In fact, Shapiro's whole body was protesting the stress of dealing with Rutherford. Guarding every syllable, keeping a mask in place over his face, was more exhausting than playing racquetball against a kid half his age. He had never expected to beat Kim, but the older the dog, the more tricks he knew. Jon still had a few to learn, and Shapiro could score.

Score? He looked Kim up and down with fresh eyes, and liked what he saw. "You want a game?"

Kim's head tilted at him. "Yes. You ... *are* talking about racquetball?"

"For the moment." Shapiro stretched his back, listened to his joints, and picked up the jacket he had left by the hatch. "Come on, kid, I'll let you beat me on the court again —"

"Let me?" Kim echoed, a pace behind him.

"— and then I'll buy you dinner," Shapiro offered. Nerves he had forgotten he possessed had begun to stir alive. Old enough to know better, he told himself ... still young enough to do it anyway. Maybe. If time and work permitted, and if Jon Kim was on the level. Cynicism was a hard taskmaster, and he felt its yoke, heavy on his shoulders.

Even now, even here, his thoughts strayed back: if Velcastra and Jagreth were getting the Shrike and the Phaeton, where the hell were

the weapons systems coming from? Not from the *Kiev*. Alexis Rusch had locked down that source of supply. And they were certainly not coming from Freespace. Before they could be supplied by Halfway privateers, first they had to be looted from ships wrecked in the Drift, and in the last twelve months all vessels were accounted for.

"Harrison, enough," Kim said quietly. "Let it go. Turn your brain off for the day. I'm not going to play racquetball with you, I'm not going to dinner with you, and sure as hell I'm not going to go to bed with you while you're preoccupied with ... what *are* you thinking about, anyway?"

"Weapons systems, Freespace, Velcastra's republicans, Jagrethean politics," Shapiro said sketchily. "And you're right. I do need to unwind. If I don't, I could be the first recorded casualty of the colonial wars."

"What about Omaru? The blockade?" Kim fell into step with him as they left the barge.

The parking bays were ranked along the rear of the line of blue-stone government buildings which faced outward into Pakrenne Plaza, with its flags, colonial and corporate insignia. The sound of traffic whined and hummed from the street, and overhead the regimented antlines of air traffic threaded from downtown to Dockland and back. A pair of Tactical squads had just popped up over the roof of the Grand Senate building, and Shapiro stood back with Kim as the Volvo Presidium lifted off, straight up, to join them.

"Omaru doesn't quite count," he said bitterly. "The war hasn't started yet. Back on Earth they're calling the situation in Hydralis 'civil disobedience.' It's a nice, neat, tidy term for bloodshed and grief. Historians will record the beginning of the war with the first actual battle. And I'm afraid," he added, "it's going to be fought here."

Kim's head tipped back and he glared at the smoggy overcast. "I know. It's going to be a bloodbath, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Shapiro said carefully.

"And I should look into Borushek's quarantine regs." Kim headed toward the back entrances to the government buildings, where he had a third floor office. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Shapiro echoed.

"Better things to do tonight." Kim cast a sultry glance over his shoulder and went on ahead to call his staff.

"Don't take too long," Shapiro warned. "I have to leave, very soon. I can't keep Rutherford here much longer, and even if I could, it won't be wise for me to be here as the results of the referendum start to come

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