

## SOUL'S BLOOD

By

Stephen Graham King

### Chapter One

Keene found him in a deep within the Grift, hunched over a quivering table in the back. He figured and the image Zyd had given him appeared before his eyes, the smoky, cramped room blurring behind it. Definitely Nord, Keene thought, watching him down a shot of something, then give a nervous wave of the empty glass to call for another.

He 'pushed a drink order to the bar's system, found a booth with a good view of Nord's table, and took in the sad sameness of the bar until his cider arrived. There were a thousand others like it, in a thousand other Grifts surrounding spaceports across the Cluster. Deevie panes floated in air clotted with the spicy-sweet haze of fizzstick smoke, streaming wagers and odds on anything from races to sporting events to the games happening at the tables themselves. Underneath it all, Keene

could hear the barely audible whisper of cards and the click of Slapjack tiles on the hard tables.

\*Got him in my sights, Blue, positive ID. Zyd's information was solid\* He looked in Nord's direction, opened his node and 'pushed the image to her as a server dropped off his drink.

\*Good\* Her satisfaction caressed his node. \*I'm on my way. Mark him, and wait for me.\*

\*Will do\* Watching Nord, he took a sip of his cider and it fizzed on his tongue. Not bad, he thought. Too bad he wasn't planning on drinking it.

He reached into his pocket, for the tracer tablet and dropped it into his glass; watching it dissolve into a pillar of whitish bubbles, then disappear. He clutched the glass, and took a breath to steady himself and focus, then eyed the mass of people between him and Nord. Seeing an opening, he stood.

He wormed his way through the crowd, keeping the glass above his head to protect the contents. With the same honed skill he used to gauge weight distributions and lading of cargo, he calculated the distance he had to cross, the mark he needed to hit, how he needed to stumble and just the right tone embarrassed apology in his voice.

There.

A gap opened in the crowd opened in front of him, just where he needed to be. He moved left into the sudden void and

was directly in front of Nord's table. A shift of his body weight and he stumbled into a doughy, harmless looking man concentrating on a screen. Keene's glass fell from his hands and hit the floor near Nord's feet, the marked cider fanning out in a sheet under the table.

Nord moved to rise, but Keene put a hand on his skinny shoulder, applying just enough pressure to keep the smaller man seated without him realizing that he was pinned. Keene grabbed a napkin from the table and wiped at the frayed hem of Nord's coat for cider stains that weren't actually there.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I can't believe I did that. Someone bumped my arm. What a waste of good tope, eh?"

Nord gave an irritated shake of his head. "Never mind. No damage done. Forget about it."

"Thanks, man, really." Keene shifted and saw Nord's shoes planted firmly in the puddle of cider, drops spattered across the toes. The corner of Keene's mouth raised, the only outward sign everything was just as planned. He smiled down at Nord. "You enjoy the games, my friend."

He turned from Nord and walked toward back toward the booth, a half smile on his face. He settled back into the seat again, and ordered another cider.

\*Marked and ready. I'll wait for you here\*

He felt Lexa-Blue enter the bar shortly after that, the sensation in his mind like a shift in atmospheric pressure. His eyes stayed on Nord as he felt her make her way through the crowd to him. He knew she was in the booth with him an instant before he felt the seat shift under her weight.

"Hey, trader, wanna get squishy?"

He turned to her just as she picked up his glass and took a sip. She grimaced and put the glass back in front of him.

"How can you drink that stuff? Tastes like someone pissed in a mug and shook it to make bubbles." Her eyes lost focus as she ordered a drink for herself.

"I didn't order it for you," he shot back at her. "And for the record, I'd love to get squishy, just not with you."

"Yeah, yeah, like it's my fault you're a bummer and I don't have a dick." She cuffed him in the arm. "Not that I'd want one anyway. They're more fun when they belong to someone else."

Keene chuckled, knowing that even a dick was not a prerequisite for getting her attention.

"Where is he?" She asked, her eyes making a slow circuit of the room.

Keene pointed to the table where Nord was still sitting, yet another drink in his hand, three empties on the table in front of him. "Looks like Vrick was right, he spends all his

money either here or at the casino, so we were bound to find him at one or the other. He looks just like the image Zyd gave us."

"Vrick was right? Don't tell him that, or we'll never hear the end of it."

\*I heard that\* Vrick said, through both of their nodes.

\*Quiet, you. You are replaceable, you know.\*

"Leave him alone, Blue," Keene said. "You know how bored he gets planetside."

\*Bored?\* Vrick's snort of disbelief reverberated through their nodes. \*I'll have you know I'm watching seven different ballet, opera and theatre performances and scanning the local library for books I haven't read. 'Push me when you need me\*

Without turning to him, Lexa-Blue asked, "You sure he's tagged?"

"See for yourself," he answered, pointing at the floor beneath Nord's table.

She followed his gaze, shifting the wavelength. There was a slight tingle in the scar that bisected the eye socket from brow to cheekbone as her vision shifted. The floor below the table glowed brilliant green, the bilious tracer covering Nord's shoes like splatters of paint. Satisfied, she shifted her vision back to normal, just as the server delivered her drink.

Keene felt the wisp of mischief from her, as she arched an eyebrow and looked up to catch and hold the server's gaze. The

server's eyes went wide when he noticed her scar, and the smooth darkness of black sensor gem set where her right eye used to be. Keene didn't need to be nodelinked to him to sense his profound unease at such an obvious and perfectly correctible deformity. Through their link, he felt her spark of satisfaction at the reaction, and dismiss him, turning from him with body language that all but left a rime of frost on his serving tray.

"You enjoy doing that, don't you?"

She shrugged, but her pleasure at the casual provocation was a spiky simmer through her node. He had known her long enough, worked by her side enough to know this agitative side of her; the urge to provoke those around her. It had taken years of partnership before she had told him where the scar came from and why she refused to have it corrected. Why the sensor looked like a chip of polished agate rather than a human eye. Still, he often felt for the victims of her compulsion, who ended up having her atavism shoved in their faces. It had bothered him, when they met, had made him avoid her eyes, but that had just provoked her further. Finally, getting used to it was his only defense. Without any reaction from him, she soon lost interest in provoking him and the door opened for friendship.

He felt her hand on his arm "I think he's on the move."

Nord stood from his constellation of empty glasses and headed for the door, his small frame disappearing in the mass of

people just as a roar of approval at a change in the score of the zoomstick game.

Lexa-Blue surged from her seat to follow, but Keene held her back. "Let him go. We'll know wherever he goes, so there's no harm in letting him have a head start." \*Track him, please, Vrick. Let us know where he goes\* "Finish your drink, Blue."

When their glasses were empty, they stepped out of the noise of the bar into the late autumn evening, the warmest since they had arrived on Highland. Above them, three tiny moons cast an intricate lattice of shadows across the street, cords of light and dark twisting and crisscrossing each other into the distance. A lazy drift of mottled clouds, fat with the threat of rain, stretched into stripes as they were taken by currents of air.

Sidestepping to avoid a woman striding past in satin gown, whale-bone corset and powdered wig, flanked by two men wearing nothing but fig leaves and bronze body paint, Keene saw Lexa-Blue scan for Nord's footprints on the pavement. Through their link, he had a flickering, visual echo of how they glowed ferny bright to her sensor eye. Looking back at him, she pointed in the direction of Factory Town and Vrick showed them his position relative to theirs. \*He isn't moving all that fast, you should be able to catch up to him if you hustle\*

They quickened their pace, following the footprints through the garish lights lining the streets, past the bars, clubs and restaurants that made up the Grift around the port. Their path led them away from the bustle of activity towards the quieter, industrial section of the city. At one point, they came up short at the end of a slidewalk, Lexa-Blue's vision losing the trail.

\*Don't panic, meat. I have him on the grid. He took the Half-Moon exit. The trail picks up again there\*

Keene felt a bubble of humour from Lexa-Blue at the hush in Vrick's tone. He spoke through her node, making eavesdropping impossible, but still his words were a whisper-touch, intimate and stealthy.

Sure enough the pattern of footprints continued again exactly where Vrick had said they would.

They followed him through the streets, deeper into the Industrial section of Port City, into the warren of square, unadorned factories. Night shift was well underway, and the streets were deserted, with nothing to interfere with the rhythmic sounds of industry; machinery and the wave power that drove them. Off in the distance, ships lifted and landed at the port proper. Nord doubled back several times, cutting through laneways and shortcuts, obviously trying to lose anyone tailing him, unaware every footstep led them closer to him.

\*How close is he?\* Lexa-Blue asked Vrick.



\*He's slowing down. I think he's almost made it to wherever he's headed\* Again, the positional data came through their nodes, showing a shrinking distance between them and Nord. They slowed their pace, keeping out of his line of sight.

\*He stopped on the next street over, just down the alley. If you stay just this side of the alley, he shouldn't see you\*

They took a few steps back and waited, Keene sensing Lexa-Blue focusing her thoughts. Gadgets and tech were his area, but the rough stuff was her specialty and he was happy to let her take charge. No point in messing with a formula that works, he thought. He moved closer to the wall, meditating in a different way. Where her mind coiled, filling her with a kinetic energy that might burst into action at a moment's notice, Keene grew quiet and still, his essence becoming smooth as a mirror pool, ready to follow her lead.

Lexa-Blue fugued, and her dark, pocketed shipsuit tightened close against her steelskin, so nothing would catch, no fold of cloth would hinder her movement, and Keene followed suit. This was her domain, and she knew the night well, could feel its touch on her skin. It was a remnant of the time when she had hidden her face from daylight and inquisitive glances. The hours after sunset had always been more forgiving. The reticence to be seen was long gone, but the love of the dark remained. She stepped from the shadows, into the growing dusk and felt Keene

follow. As she hugged close and silent to the wall, she seemed less substantial than the rising shadows. At the mouth of an alley, she stopped and scanned the ground again. At her feet, the trail of glowing tracer footprints crossed her path and led to her right.

Taking a careful look to in the direction of the trail, she saw him about twenty five metres further along, by himself in the glow of a lightpost.

Lexa-Blue smiled, her gaze hard and predatory, and her energy coiled tighter as she 'pushed the image of their quarry to Keene's node.

Together, Keene through her eyes, they saw Nord in the chill, bluish glow of the streetlight, fidgeting with his sleeves, his belt, his cuffs. She took in his ratty, stained coat, and a flash of distaste coursed through her. As she watched him, his shaking hands pulled out a fizz-stick and lit it, the tip flickering blue white, his hand shaking as he inhaled. She watched as the initial hit of smoke seemed to calm him a bit, easing his jitters. He inhaled again, sucking more greedily this time.

They watched him and waited. Zyd's information seemed accurate. When they had delivered the cargo of exotic foodstuffs from Mandragora, Zyd had hired them in their less publicized, but more lucrative sideline, something Keene called "Creative

Problem Solving". Nord had stolen a valuable bit chip of information that Zyd proclaimed essential to his business. Not wanting to sully his reputation by getting his hands dirty, or trust his local precinct of UnSec, he had hired them to quietly recover the block.

\*Someone is coming.\* Vrick said. \*Opposite direction, you're okay. He won't see you.\*

Lexa-Blue's hand hovered near the gun strapped along her thigh. Through her node, she felt the power cell cycle and confirm its charge, the diagnostics signalling perfect working order.

She zoomed on Nord's contact as he came into view, the images flowing like water between her and Keene. The new arrival was taller than Nord, but fleshy and mean, with a hard set in his eyes. He wore padded, beaten zoomstick leathers, scarred and split at the joints, showing years of use. Her instincts told her that the bulge at his waist was a gun and that there was a good chance Nord was going to end up dead once the deal was struck. For a moment, she considered letting the deal play out. Once the new arrival had the block and killed Nord, one shot would take him out. The polymers of the block could withstand a couple of bounces off the pavement. No muss, no fuss.

She became aware of the dun of Keene's disapproval. \*Fine\* she 'pushed. \*We can do it the hard way\*

They watched the pair converse in whispers for a moment, Nord's nervous eyes darting around, on the lookout for intruders. Her grin was feral when she realized he had no idea she and Keene were there. They both reached into their respective pockets, Nord pulling out the bit chip, the other pulling out a credit chit.

\*Bingo.\* Keene thought to her. \*A little subtle intimidation and we should be able to...\*

Before he finished his thought, she drew her gun, stepped from the shadows and fired.

The stun charge caught Nord's contact full in the chest, lifting him off his feet and sending him hard to the pavement. Before the energy flare had faded, the gun was trained in Nord.

"Or you could just shoot him," Keene said dryly, as she advanced on Nord, her gun not wavering even a millimetre. He followed her into the open, raising his own gun to cover her.

"Give me the chip." Her voice was flat, cold.

Nord's lip twitched and his eyes widened at the implacable tone in her voice. She saw his frantic gaze flick from side to side, gauging his chances of getting away from her, his hand clenched around the chip. She took a slow step toward him, the gun not wavering.

"We all know he was probably going to kill you once you gave it to him, so it looks like I just saved your life." When

he didn't move, she activated the tracer beam, and a pinpoint of red heat appeared between his eyes. "I'm not playing games, Nord. Now."

\*Stay snappy, Blue\* Keene 'pushed. \*Last thing we need to explain to UnSec is another body\*

Nord's gaze flicked to Keene, then back to Lexa-Blue, wide eyed, and she saw a muscle in his jaw go into frantic spasm. There was sharp click and a stiletto shot from the cuff of his filthy coat. His desperate slash went up and across her torso, his panic and adrenaline making the cut frantic and deadly, sparking across her steelskin. Faster than she could think, faster even than Keene could fire on him, she twisted out of the way and struck back, her fist catching him hard in the jaw. There was an echoing crunch of bone impacting bone and he jerked backward, his head hitting the lightpost with a resonant gong-like peal. He crumpled into a heap as the light above him began to flicker.

She bent down at his side, pressing the gun against his temple, in case he had any more tricks planned. When he didn't move, she pried the block from his fingers. "You lose." A smirk formed on her face as she looked up at Keene. "Better than being dead, though."

Keene looked down at Nord. "Is he going to be all right?"

She touched her fingers to Nord's neck, and nodded. "He might have a concussion, but it's no less than he deserves. Vrick can call Med-Aid once we're on our way." She stood and crossed to the stunned form of Nord's contact. She knelt at his side, picking up the chit from where it had fallen at his side. Examining it, she smiled again and held it out for Keene to examine. "An unexpected bonus."

Keene saw it was a bearer chit, no payee or payer registered. All one had to do was present it for deposit.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You know this isn't ours to keep, don't you?"

She shrugged. "Finder's keepers." She stood and, through her node, instructed the shipsuit to loosen, changing it from a skin tight layer, to a comfortable coverall. She slid the chit and bit chip into a pocket and sealed it.

\*Nice work for someone who's seventy-six percent water.\* Vrick said. \*The car is on its way. Should be there in a couple of minutes.\*

\*Thanks, Vrick \* Keene 'pushed, crossing his arms across his chest. He whistled, tunelessly and off key, while waiting for their rented groundcar to make its way to them. He took in a deep breath, smelling the salt tang of the evening mist from the ocean. Somewhere in the distance, a disgruntled murmur of thunder promised a storm before morning. Beside him, Lexa-Blue

examined the slash in the front of her coverall, a stripe of burnished silver showing through the gap. Finally, she detached the top half entirely, leaving only the dark cargo pants, and then made as if to throw the torn fabric away.

"Hey," Keene said. "I can fix that. Hang onto it."

She shrugged and tied the sleeves around her waist, then stretched, and shadowboxed in place, attempting to work off the thrum of adrenaline from the confrontation

Keene watched her and shook his head, an altogether familiar "what am I going to do with you" gesture. He watched the trained play of her muscles as she moved, the fringe of her short dark hair dancing over the fair skin of her face. She was beautiful, he thought, but it was the kind of beauty that eats its young. Ferociously protective, he had seen her break bones when provoked, without a second thought or a whisper of regret. Beside her, he felt large and clumsy, and not just because he stood half a head taller than her and was broader, more solid. She moved with a grace, a control that he had never had and knew he never would. His milk chocolate skin and coarse, cropped hair made him feel like her negative, her shadow, sometimes. He was just a farm boy with a talent for tech when he had fallen into her orbit. And now he bounced from planet to planet and danced along the edge of the blade with an astonishing regularity.

They heard the hum of the car's anti-gravs at the same moment, between grumbles of thunder. When he saw the car rounding the corner, Keene stepped away from the light. "Come on, Blue. Zyd's waiting." \*Vrick, better call Med-Aid now\*

\*Already done. You'll be long gone by the time they get here\* Vrick told them both.

Lexa-Blue executed a smooth bow to her imaginary sparring partner, did a neck roll, and followed him to meet the car as it slowed to a hover between them. The doors moved laterally back along the car's chassis to admit them.

"I'll drive," Keene said, taking the driver's seat and releasing Vrick's auto-drive. Beside him, Lexa-Blue slid into the passenger seat, webbing herself in. Hand on the throttle, Keene geared up the grav cushion, moving the car into the dark street, away from the industrial district, moving deeper into the heart of the city proper. They drove in the companionable silence of long-time friends, Lexa-Blue looking out the window while Keene concentrated on driving.

"Is it just me?" he said, after they had left the industrial section and headed into the city. "Or are the Grifts all starting to look the same?"

She snorted, but he knew it wasn't directed at him. "How long we been working together, junior?"



He suspected she could provide the exact date if she wanted, but humoured her. He knew he would never forget that afternoon he had walked across the hard, flat surface of that landing pad on Goldslick, to take his place with her and Vrick. He would always remember the swagger in her step as she greeted him, defying him to say anything about her scar and her eye; how long it had taken to win her acceptance and her trust. "Just over five years now."

She smiled, and there was just a tickle of friendly condescension in it, and something else, he thought. Weariness? No, that wasn't it. It was an acceptance that some things were just what they were, and nothing could change them. "I took my first steps on the concourse of a space port. Knocked over a rack of sim-chips when Da wasn't looking and scuppered a deal he was trying to set up. I've been on every port on every planet in the Galactum a dozen times over, and after a while, they're just a blur. Every colony in the Galactum has something they need to get rid of and something else they need more of. The trade and the ships are the only way to spread it around. Ships need crews and crews need downtime. They need to relax after a trip or set up the next one. They need to find passengers for the next run or jettison the ones they just had. And they need places to do it. Bars, clubs, theatres, jiggle-joints, squish-houses, they need it all and they need it close by. It's where they do

business, and where they play when business is done. Anyone local who wants to make money off them, and who has more than three neurons firing, gets as close to the Port as possible. And no matter where you are, it's pretty much all the same juju."

He nodded, agreeing with her assessment and looking again at Highland, with new, slightly more jaded eyes. Holo-signs, lurid and sweat shiny, beckoned and bludgeoned for his attention, all subtlety gone in their quest for the attention of any trader, pilot or crew happening by. In the Grift, there was only chaos, bright and noisy. Light from signs, storefronts, streetlamps and floating holos drowned out the few stars that were not already hidden by the glow of the moons.

The flow of traffic around them increased steadily, hemming them in and forcing Keene to reduce speed. He steered the car away from the clogged main artery, only to find himself caught in a press of bodies that had spilled out of a bar to clog the street, emerald and silver banners clutched and waving.

"Looks like Comet 10 took the zoomstick cup. Pay up, Blue."

"Yeah, yeah, put it on my tab." She flicked a dismissive wave of her hand.

"One of these days, I'm collecting, missy. Don't think I'm not." He spotted an a gap in the wedge of bodies and edged the car onto a side street, able to speed up. He turned left at the

second intersection, then right three streets later, pulling into the long, curving drive at their destination.

Amid the gaudy lights around it, the façade of Wave was understated and elegant; a whisper amid the shouting. Set back from the street by a manicured lawn and gardens, the main body of the club was a wide, four story dome of burnished bronze, surrounded by four turrets, each ten stories tall.

Keene stopped the car at the main entrance and they both stepped out, a young parking valet in vibrant sea blue moving toward them. Keene fugged a moment, transferring control to him, then felt Lexa-Blue, fall into step beside him as they climbed the steps leading to the entrance.

At the top of the landing, Wave's sigil appeared in the corner of their vision. When they opened to it, the sigil bloomed, announcing their presence to the club's AI, which instructed them to wait for their escort to Zyd. Though he managed entry to his domain with state of the art systems, Zyd preferred his staff to be flesh and blood, rather than the AIs and holos many of his competitors used. The club's systems were state of the art, but he never let his guests go without the human touch.

Inside the lobby, Wave's AI instructed them through their nodes to wait for escort. They waited in the crowded lobby only a moment, when they recognized Licia, one of Zyd's attendants,

emerging from the hallways into the club's interior. Delicate as a china doll in a sheath of the same swirling blue that the valet had worn, she came to a stop beside them and inclined her head in greeting.

"Welcome back to Wave," she said, the lilt of her voice cutting through the background noise. The flicker of a smile on her face hinted of mysteries and secret seductions.

"Licia, " Keene said. "Good to see you again. You look lovely."

Her smile widened at the compliment. "The Master is waiting in the Atlantis room. If you would follow me?"

She led them back the way she had come, down the curving smokeglass hallways to a door that unfolded before them like the petals of a copper flower. They followed her through and were transported to the bottom of the sea.

At the heart of the centre dome, the Atlantis room was the main dining area of Wave. The holo field above the tables recreated every sight and sound of the sea bed to the finest detail. As Keene and Lexa-Blue followed Licia between tables, ripples of far off light, refracted through crystal clear water dappled shadows on their faces. A school of glossfins flitted over their heads, then broke like surf against the hide of a kraken, passing over them ponderous and slow. A haunting echo of

whale-song followed them across the dining room to Zyd's "captain's table" where their employer was holding court.

A man given to excess in everything, the Wave's owner massed almost a hundred and fifty kilos. An impeccable dresser, his dark suit was pressed and expertly tailored to his body. A gene splice many years before had tinted his skin a pale sea green to accent his almond shaped sapphire eyes, which were prone to sparking with mischief or wrath when provoked. Now, they sparkled only with delight as he saw them approach, a beaming grin splitting his face.

"Come, children, sit, sit. We must eat." Zyd indicated the seats to his right with an expansive wave of his arm. Licia stood just behind him on the left, her hand laid lightly on his shoulder.

"Oh, Zyd, we couldn't possibly," Lexa-Blue said, already sitting and opening the menu.

"You'll have to forgive her, Zyd, she was raised by a pack of wild dogs." Keene said as he sat as well. "I'm hoping to teach her how to use utensils real soon."

Lexa-Blue cuffed him lightly on the shoulder, not even looking up from the menu.

Zyd rolled his eyes at their banter, "Now, children, do behave. Mischief at the table sours my stomach."

Lexa-Blue smirked at Keene other sidelong, but he managed to keep a straight face. "We promise to behave. Is Owen-Ra still your chef?"

Zyd looked affronted. "He is the best in three sectors. Would I allow anyone else to grace my kitchen?" He snapped his fingers, and a waiter filled their glasses with wine. They glanced at each other, trying not to smile. They knew Zyd directed his staff through his node, but the gesture was just the type of theatrical flourish he was known for.

He showed admirable and uncharacteristic restraint by waiting for them to taste the wine and ordered dinner before coming to business. "You have it?" he asked.

Setting her wine glass down, Lexa-Blue smiled and pulled out the bit chip, sliding it across the table. When he saw the block, Zyd's whole body relaxed, and a glint of hunger came into his eyes. Pulling out a portable reader, he slotted the block into it and checked the block's ID signature. He smiled when he saw the results of the scan. With a swift movement of his hand, the block disappeared into his pocket. "I trust you incurred no injuries on my behalf?"

Lexa-Blue chuckled. "No, fit as a fiddle. Of course, the thief can't say the same."

Zyd's smile flickered, then slipped back into place. "Now, children, you know how I despise violence."

\*I'm sure there's a stash of bodies somewhere that could tell us\*

\*We don't know that for a fact, Blue\* "I'm sure no one would so unwise as to provoke your anger, Master Zyd,"

"Besides, that's what you have us for," Lexa-Blue assured him. "To keep things from coming to that. Don't worry. Other than a nasty headache in the morning, he'll be fine,"

\*He has a broken jaw\* Vrick sounded vaguely disgusted.

\*Mind your own, business\*

Zyd clucked his tongue at her and shook his head. "Such a naughty girl." Zyd's eyes glazed, then focussed on them again. "Your payment is on its way. Thank you, my friends. You have done well as always. Now, more importantly, dinner."

Before their meals had even arrived, a porter appeared and presented them with a credit chit for twice the agreed upon fee. Zyd knew full well of Lexa-Blue's superstition about transferring credit through Know-It-All. She liked a chit in her hand, something tangible, rather than, as she put it, theoretical payment.

When they protested the extra money, Zyd cut them off with a sharp wave of his hand, ending all discussion on the subject . "A small bonus for a job well done."

Lexa-Blue handed the chit to Keene, who pocketed it, then smiled at Zyd. "You're the kind of client I like doing business with."

Zyd waved away the sentiment, lifting his wineglass. "Now then, we can enjoy our dinner in peace."

He signalled the waiter again, who refilled their glasses just as their meals appeared, as if on cue, then fugued for a moment before refocusing his eyes on them. "There. Suites have been prepared for you and I expect you to enjoy yourselves. The pleasures of Wave are yours for the night."

A good day all around, Keene thought, reaching for his wineglass.

\* \* \*

High above the port, a vast spacecraft made orbit, gleaming in the light of the stars. In the main screen on the bridge, the storm over the Port swirled dark and angry. Standing in the midst of the ship's bridge, one man watched lightning spark through the mass of clouds. He shook his head.

"From one storm to another." He sighed, knowing better than to interrupt the crew as they brought the vessel into the planet's gravity well. They performed admirably in keeping the ship in one piece during the gamma storm they encountered on



their journey in-system, but he could tell their nerves were worn. They had not known the reason for their trip here to Highland, but what they had left behind was preying on everyone's mind, but honour and duty had driven them all to exceed their usual limits. He wished he could offer them furloughs to the planet's surface, but the urgency of their mission would not allow it. If all went well, they would be on their way home before the end of the next day. The most he could offer them was a good night's sleep with the relief crew manning the helm.

He turned at the sound of the comms officer's voice.

"Prefect? I have received a transmission from the surface, receipt coded to you, text only."

"Transfer it to the Captain's chair, please." The Prefect took his place in the main chair of the bridge, being nominally in command of this mission. A panel lit beneath his hand and he pressed a short sequence, keying an eyes-only, privacy holo. Words formed in the display. *They have been detained. Nothing more I can do. You have until tomorrow. Once I have made the introduction, our business is finished. We will not speak again.*

Choosing to ignore the hostility of the message, he killed the holo and turned back to the comms officer. "Open a tightline channel to the Technarch, full privacy."

The air shimmered around the Prefect's chair, running like water a moment then solidifying into amber light. He waited until the channel engaged, the holo image of his leader coalescing in the inside of the privacy field. Hazel eyes fixed a penetrating gaze on him, with a power he felt even these light years from home.

"Well?" The Technarch's voice was terse with concern.

"They were detained as you requested. I was able to convince Master Zyd Quarto to keep them occupied until we arrived, and he succeeded. They will be at his establishment until tomorrow. We are in orbit now and will make contact then. Damage teams have the repairs under control and we should be ready to return as soon as contact has been made and our ... guest is aboard.

The Technarch nodded in satisfaction and brushed a tendril of hair back from his face. "Good. There have been no incidents since you left and I am hoping it stays that way until you return. Inform me when you are underway again. You have my gratitude, Amory. You have done well."

The Prefect bowed his gratitude for the praise, but by the time he had straightened, the channel had been broken.