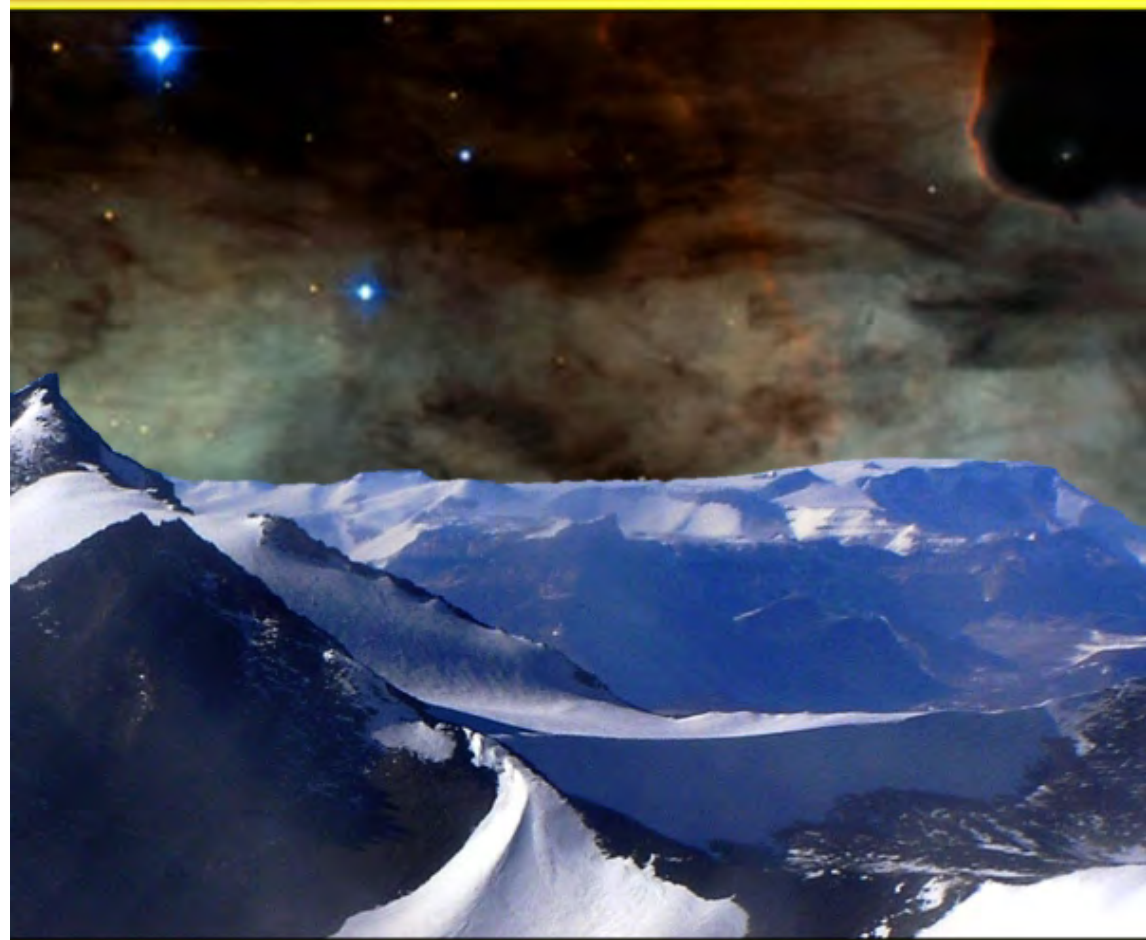


MEL KEEGAN

HELLGATE

Deep Sky



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Hellgate #2

DEEP SKY

MEL KEEGAN

DREAMCRAFT MULTIMEDIA, AUSTRALIA

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HELLGATE:
Deep Sky

Chapter One

*Mont Katherine,
Velcastra*

The south wind sang continually in the network of guy wires around the comm towers, more than two hundred meters overhead, and since night fell every gust was cold as ice. Four pylons, each with the girth of a sequoia, sprouted from the bare mountainside, picked out in the multiple beams of blue-white searchlights embedded at the roots and crowned with winking red lights which marked the Mont Katherine Comm-relay Complex as a hazard to civilian air traffic.

The lights outlined the shapes of the massive pylons like a bizarre constellation, and as Neil Travers looked up a few flakes of dry, powdery snow began to swirl in the searchlight beams. The wind came screeching off the permanent polar pack, four thousand kilometers south of the city of Dominguez; it funneled through the tortuous Col de Guêpier, picked up speed in a fierce ventura effect and stormed out over Mont Katherine. Winter came months early on the flood plain of the Yu River and like an unwelcome guest, stayed late.

A thousand meters below the comm-relay, where Dominguez sprawled along both banks of the broad, silt-rich river, late summer was already becoming early fall. Maple, birch and aspen thrived there, transplanted from the second-generation colony worlds of the Middle Heavens, and the city was romping through carnival time. The industrial city of Dominguez permitted itself just two weeks of music, light and self-indulgence before the long dark began, and Velcastra's long orbit made the dark seasons seem interminable.

For the moment the streets glittered with lanterns, fireworks crackled in the alleys, lion dancers and silk dragons competed for space in every mall, where sexshops, dream shops and danceshops reverberated with garish, even defiant celebration. Dominguez ran wild with painted-on costumes and fantasy brought to life in the last grudging warmth of late

summer, but up on the mountainside, in the teeth of the wind known to the locals as *la chasseuse*, winter had already descended on Comm Relay 17.

Since mid afternoon a scarlet and white Yamazake Eclipse had stood in the engineers' bay under the pylons, safely out of sight. Even its engine heat had dissipated, leaving nothing to betray the presence of a space-plane launched from the commercial salvage tug *Wastrel*, and the *Wastrel* itself had pulled out as far as Lisbon Dock, the civilian facility parked at geostationary over Elstrom City on the other side of Velcastra.

The cold was insidious, and it was impossible to run the heaters either in the Eclipse or in the linings of the suits. So much radiant heat would be a dead giveaway on thermoscan, and the incoming pilots would surely scan the whole parking lot under the pylons before setting down. An hour before, Travers and Curtis Marin had deliberately turned off the heaters, resigned to spending a cold, uncomfortable evening as the Dominguez city lights came on below and they waited for their quarry to arrive.

It was the job, and they had accepted Harrison Shapiro's deal, but Travers still grumbled through the smoke-mauve dusk. Two of the three moons were up. Down in the city, in the space of a hundred meters on Lincoln Boulevard, one could eat in a fine restaurant to the strains of Mozart and Bevan Daku, cross the road — where traffic had been stopped for the endless *Mardi Gras* — dance for an hour in a world of sweat-streaked body paints, swirling pheromones and the savage rhythms of synthbands Travers had never heard of and could barely understand ... then stroll on in the cooling air of night, and at last slide into a dream shop till dawn, where the air was heavy and fragrant with a dozen gentle narcotics and the sheets were cool and black and silk.

A night in Dominguez at carnival time, and a man wanted more. Travers had never before stayed on Velcastra long enough to be here for carnival, but Curtis Marin had been in the right city, in the right season, several times. He knew the danceshop where the Lushi boys were painted green as gelemeralds and gold as birch woods in fall, where the music surged and writhed but did not quite pierce the eardrums, and the air prickled, effervesced with peptides which burst in the brain and tingled into every extremity a man possessed.

That was last night, the ten hours after the TransColonial clipper *Regina Maris* docked, and Travers let go the memory only with a curse for both Shapiro and Richard Vaurien. Their timing went beyond lousy, right to vile. But tonight was the night set for Shapiro's special op, and his quarry took no account of carnival time in Dominguez.

Fleet Security had no part of this assignment: Shapiro had used no Fleet resource, no Fleet personnel. The *Wastrel* was on his contract, Vaurien's crew at his command, Travers and Marin his operatives in the field — and the Confederacy would not share the data returned from this covert assignment.

The need for secrecy was depressing, but even inside his own office in his own building, Shapiro was uncomfortably aware of the government spies who answered to senators, corporate executives and deep-buried departments as far away as Earth, offices unknown even to the Senate. As yet Travers knew little about Shapiro's business, and the more he knew, the less he wanted to. Shapiro was walking a tightrope, and Travers felt no envy.

Not long before noon, he and Marin peeled themselves off black silk sheets, shared the shower and rode the elevator up to the vast, wind-swept garage on the roof of the Savitch building. For the sake of safety they ran the whole preflight test routine on the Yamazake.

The city was drowsing in the afternoon; it came alive at twilight, when the Lushi, the Pakrani, the Haldi, came out to play in paint and gold chains, skin-soft leathers and sensual smiles. The streets became a smorgasbord of deliberate seduction, twilight to dawn, where gender was often impossible to distinguish and the drifting dreamsmoke banished any inhibition with the temerity to hang on.

For a kid from Darwin's World, it was a fantasy come to life. Walking away when the appetite had just been whetted was nothing short of torture, and Travers were still growling as the third of Velcastra's moons showed above the horizon. The city lights seemed to mock him with the lure of pleasures undreamed of, promises never to be fulfilled.

The view from Mont Katerine was superb. Dominguez filled the flood plain of the River Yu, extending to the horizon in every direction. A small civvy spaceport sprawled on the city limits, forty kilometers in the north, and every few minutes the white-gold sternflare of a ship chased up into the overcast, vanishing there a minute before the muffled thunder of its engine noise reached Travers's ears. If civilians had not been legally excluded from the heights of Mont Katerine, a five-star restaurant would surely have stood under the comm relays.

The only better view was from StarCity, Travers thought; but the only street-normal civilians who ever made it to the billionaires' ghetto in the sky were servants, or cabbies, or the most expensive Companions money could buy. StarCity was home to people like Robert Chandra Liang, and Travers had conflicting memories of the place, two suites of memories from two points in time.

He had worked there for months, installing Chandra Liang's security system. His access to StarCity was so unrestricted, he might have owned the place — but when the job was done he handed in his keycard and was locked out. And no matter how pleasant Robert Chandra Liang had been to the young man, just out of Fleet with the rank of Master Sergeant, there was always the discrete distance between master and subordinate. How different it was to return as an officer from General Harrison Shapiro's bureau on Borushek, with a Fleet Sector Command warrant in his pocket along with the infrakey to a Yamazake Eclipse.

The view seemed to change when you were a house guest. His memories of StarCity now were of dinner in a garden smelling of frangipani, and watching Velcastra's three moons set over the endless, sparkling carpet of Elstrom's city lights; the blue-gold light of pool lamps reflected in Curtis Marin's bewitching eyes as they made love, floating in tepid water strewn with blossom petals — and jogging with Curtis hours later, while dawn rose and green parrots set up a raucous clamor in a tropical forest under a plastex dome. Chandra Liang and his ex-wife, Sondra Mei Ming Deuel, were sociable now, as if Curtis Marin and Neil Travers himself were born to the most elite strata of Velcastran society.

Not too bad, he thought ruefully, for a kid from Darwin's World who grew up perilously close to the wrong side of the tracks and took the military service levy as his ticket out of a life of mediocrity in the crowded, oppressive 'burbs of the Near Sky. Not too bad for a kid who had come to believe he could expect nothing better than a service career, a hitch with some mercenary squad out of Freespace to get his hands on real cash, then back home to Darwin's for a pasteurized, homogenized job with some corporate security unit, for as long as his sanity lasted. An uptown apartment in a mid-price 'burb he could afford; if he was lucky, a lover to put a little zest into his downtime.

But you were not going to find a partner like Curtis Marin kicking his heels on Darwin's World. Lushi, Haldi, Pakrani — the Companions haunted the danceshops and sexshops, stalking their prey like any other kind of mercenary, looking for bored, overpaid, under-stimulated corporate lackeys. Their beauty was dazzling and seduction might last a night or a year, but in the end it was the same. *Ennui* set in, the Companion moved out in search of greener fields, and Travers was appalled at the imagined emptiness of such a life. Consciously, he had always wanted a partner, an equal, a man who would complete him rather than just competing with him, and for years he had hoped to meet his other half in Fleet. In the end it happened, but not in any scene he could ever have imagined.

He looked sidelong at his partner now, admiring the way the backwash of the lights made Curtis Marin's eyes into cat's eyes, outlined his features and gave his skin a blue-green hue, like the body paints of the carnival dancers down in Dominguez. The cat's eyes flicked toward him, wide, speculative, and Travers smiled in spite of the chill and the tense, hurry-up-and-wait nature of the job.

"They're late." Marin was an hour past the expiration of his patience, and terse. He looked uncharacteristically stocky in ski-skins and boots. The hood pulled up around his face concealed a combug in his right ear, and he listened occasionally to a whisper of datafeed from the passive sensor in his right hand. The ski-skins were dark blue, but in the backwash from the searchlights they looked purple.

Travers glanced at his wrist for the time. "They're not due on the ground for five more minutes."

"And if you were a bastard like Sergei van Donne, heading into a meeting this important, you'd be five minutes early and hang out up there, scanning the whole mountainside with every system you had on board." He gestured at the empty sky, where the clouds looked heavy with snow and a few stars glittered through an unlikely break in the overcast. "So where the hell are they?"

"You thinking, maybe they were tipped off?" Travers guessed.

"I don't know, but I'm starting to get the proverbial bad feelings." Marin shifted his feet, perhaps to urge a little warmth back into his extremities. "Ten minutes, Neil, and we're out of here. If van Donne and his contact were tipped off, they could know we're here."

And if van Donne's company knew they had been set up, Travers thought with a peculiar prickle in the pit of his belly, half of Mont Katherine could be so thoroughly leveled from orbit, no trace of the Yamazake Eclipse would survive to tell Dominguez Tactical of a special op from General Harrison Shapiro's office. Travers had taken nothing for granted since he discovered how Curtis's assignment for Dendra Shemiji had been blown even before it began, by an informant in an office on Borushek. The spy served Sonja Mei Ming Deuel on one hand, and apparently reported to Shapiro on the other.

And what of an informant who reported to Sergei van Donne, in an office on Halfway? Travers was watching the sky while, buried in the pocket of his ski-skins, his fingers clenched around the infrakey to the Yamazake.

"Five minutes," Marin said in the same terse tone.

They were an hour beyond the point where they could call the *Wastrel*. If van Donne or his colonial government contact were out there,

perhaps on approach, any transmission from Mont Katherine would betray them in an instant. The *Wastrel* was scanning for small, civilian registry ships headed into this location; if van Donne and his client were going to show, the *Wastrel* would not be far behind. But survival could be measured in seconds, and backup was absurdly futile when it arrived a half minute late. A fist had clenched in Travers's belly and his fingers tightened in the infrakey.

His ears picked up the incoming aircraft long before he saw it, and the plane plucked itself out of the background audio and visual clutter of the local spaceport on the horizon. By law, civvy aircraft overflew Mont Katherine at a minimum of five hundred meters, and Shapiro had forewarned Dominguez Tactical of his special op: no military or service crew was headed up to the comm relays tonight.

The aircraft was coming in, braking on repulsion as it approached the mountainside, and it pulled up a kilometer out to perform a final ground-scan. The plane was just a handful of lights in the darkness; the type was impossible to tell. Travers and Curtis were in the lee of one monstrous foot of the eastern pylon. The guy wires howled in a growing, swirling wind, and the pylons themselves crackled with static electricity, buzzed with the million transmissions cluttering Velcastra's bandwidth in any second. The two men standing behind the pylon were cold enough by now to blend into the thermal ambiance of the mountainside, and the Yamazake was ice-cold, stashed in an engineers' hanger more than fifty meters under the crusting of fresh snow. The sensor in Marin's right hand was passive, reporting by wire to the combug in his ear only the signals it received.

"They're scanning," Marin whispered under the sigh of the wind. "Scanning again. They're not seeing us."

"Any sign of the *Wastrel*?" Travers wondered.

"No. And I don't want to catch any glimpse of Vaurien yet," Marin said quietly, intent on his handy. "If we can see him, van Donne will see him, and the show's over."

"Is it van Donne?" Travers lifted a hand to protect his eyes as the aircraft fell in, braking down on a blustering Arago field.

Repulsion cast a surge of warmth across the parking lot. Any warmth was welcome for a moment, but the cold seemed more intense as the Arago field shut off. The incoming plane was one of the little Chevrolets, exported out of the home colonies and a ridiculously expensive status symbol out here in the Deep Sky.

"It won't be van Donne," Travers guessed. "Not in a civvy sport-plane."

"If it doesn't carry at least a half dozen cannons, he doesn't fly it," Marin agreed. "So, for godsakes where is he?"

"Sitting out there, using his client as a lure," Travers guessed. "If the site's under surveillance, maybe we're stupid enough to show our hand too early."

Tactical might have made the blunder. The Chevy Viento sat in the harsh backwash of the searchlights, engine exhausts shimmering with heat, while two minutes became five, and even the pilot himself must have wondered if he had been stood up. Tactical might easily have moved in, figuring Sergei van Donne for a no-show, and taking what they could get: the customer, the other half of a deal so illicit, both client and supplier were unlikely to breathe free air again for decades.

Marking time, Travers and Curtis waited. If the Viento pulled out they might still apprehend their man — Richard Vaurien would certainly have picked up the spaceplane on approach to Mont Katherine, and the salvage tug could pluck it out of space as it tried to leave, with no concerns about 'permissible arrest methods' which too often hamstrung Tactical. Shapiro's office was outside of colonial law. The Fleet Sector Command warrant indemnified Travers and Marin from any legality in the colonies, and if the pilot of the Viento squealed when he was snatched out of space by a salvage tug, he must file his complaint with Shapiro's office on Borushek, which would be no mean feat, when he was buried in a Fleet cell, facing charges of treason against the government of the Terran Confederacy.

The crime was capital. It was also infinitely debatable, and Travers was deeply ambivalent about this pickup. The same individual who was a traitor in the eyes of Earth was a hero, a savior, in the eyes of any civilian in the Deep Sky. For months CNS had been calling it 'the colonial wars,' and the conflict had already begun. The first eruptions took place on Omaru, while the super-carrier *Intrepid* struggled to pull itself out of Hellgate, but in the last ten days a dozen local mutinies had sprung up like so many bushfires. The Deep Sky colonies were at war, bridges burning behind them; and Fleet was stretched thinner than a drumhead.

"I've got another signature," Marin murmured, head bowed over the handy. "He's coming in from the west, straight and level ... looks like he's been there all along, just watching. Which sounds like van Donne," he added. "The man's careful."

"The bastard's still alive," Travers added. "What's he flying?"

"Difficult to tell yet." Marin gave up on the handy and lifted his head. His eyes were wide in the near-darkness as he gazed west, along the line of the pylons, above the curve of the Dominguez Hills and over the

glittering outskirts of the city lights which seemed to lap up against the hills like waves breaking in a bay. "There he is." He pointed. "Can you make him out?"

The engine noise was already thundering against the wind. The dry, powder snow swirled in the heavy downwash of powerful Arago fields, but Travers could not yet see the aircraft. By its running lights and the jet signature, it was big, heavy, which probably meant it was armored — all of which fit both Shapiro's profile of Sergei van Donne, and Richard Vaurien's personal opinion of the man.

Vaurien nursed no love for van Donne. He had known the Halfway privateer for five years, and van Donne had three times tried to kill him, as well as attempting to filch his technology. Barb Jazinsky would be delighted to put a bullet in van Donne, who was a thief, a cheat, a liar and a bastard. The 'low-lives' who operated out of Freespace, outside the jurisdiction of both Fleet and any colony's Tactical, were not constrained by any sense of honor. Some Freespaceers, like Sergei van Donne, actually seemed to despise the concept.

The incoming spaceplane rotated through sixty degrees to fit the parking lot and wafted down gently, like a five tonne feather among a blizzard of dust-dry snowflakes. Travers was impressed with the landing, in difficult conditions and tight spaces. The plane was a lighter by Kotaro-Fuente, and at a glance he could see it had been modified. Weapons pods and sensor arrays gave the civilian plane the look of a fighter, leaving just enough of the original scan profile for it to transit civil airspace unmolested.

"He's scanning again," Marin warned. He had stooped to the sensor-shielded weapons case at their feet, tucked in behind the pylon, but had not yet opened it. The shell of the case effectively blinded all but military-grade sensor probes, but it was not impossible for van Donne to be using those. Then: "We're clear. Scanning has shut down ... flight systems are on standby ... he's cracking the seals." Marin adjusted the handy and aimed it tightly on the lighter's side-hatch. "Let me get some pictures."

The mission brief called for a lot more than pictures, but good, clear images would theoretically let Shapiro simply arrest the pilot of the Viento long after the fact, perhaps after he made it back to Hydralis City, weeks or months after this cold, blustery evening on Velcastra, when the war on Omaru had been extinguished.

For months Shapiro had been trading carefully in a difficult gray zone. One by one the colonies were becoming battlefields, but civil law was still in effect over most of them. Fleet Sector Command held the ultimate jurisdiction across the frontier, but a rampant display of Fleet

authority was more than enough to light the fuse on another regional mutiny — and Harrison Shapiro himself was colonial, Borushek born and bred. More than anything he wanted to defuse the situation, quell the violence, get the colonial governors to the conference table. And then, Travers thought cynically, Shapiro would have to work the final act of magic: get the Confederacy to the same table and make them talk.

More likely, after the colonial wars had been smoldering for most of a decade, now they would blaze across scores of systems, leaving carnage and ruining the DeepSky Fleet just as the Zunshu began to strike in earnest, out of the maelstrom of Hellgate.

The hatches in the side of the lighter opened with a hiss of equalizing air pressures. It was a big plane, wide bodied, with Weimann modules under the tail, while the Chev sportplane was light, slender, much more graceful and as a downside, not Weimann enabled. The man from Omaru had either docked his wings on the clipper or hired the Chev at the Aurora terminal at geostationary. TransColonial was still flying into Omaru, though they were stopped at the Fleet blockade; the orbital clipper terminal was destroyed in the first few days of the war, and passengers and baggage came aboard by shuttle under the scanners and guns of the blockade.

As the Chev's canopy whined up, Travers stooped to the gun case and drew out his own weapon and Marin's. Curtis was still busy with the handy, getting a series of images as the Omaru agent climbed out of the sportplane. The man was obliging: as he shrugged into a heavy jacket in the sudden, striking cold, he cast a cynical glance around the parking lot. For several seconds he looked right into Marin's lenses and the handy captured fifty images.

A figure had appeared in the side hatch of the bigger plane, and Travers's eyes narrowed in the glare of cabin lights. He was tall, big-shouldered and long-legged like all the Pakrani. The body geometry was designed into them, not even a bulky ski-skin tunic could disguise it much. He wore the white-blond hair roped in a thick braid, over the forest-green shoulder of the tunic, and on his right cheek were the old unit tattoos, still not removed seven years after he was cashiered out of Fleet.

According to his file, Sergei van Donne had been an officer on the *Chicago*, a lieutenant flying with the combat wing. More specifically, with the unit calling itself *Los Hachazos*. The tattoos were stylized Maori representations of a winged blade, curved around the cheekbone. All *Los Hachazos* pilots wore them like an indelible unit badge. Those who survived the service usually kept the marks as a symbol of honor and a

memorial to the dead, of whom there were many. The unit was disgraced along with most of the commands corps of the *Chicago*, when Kristyn Bauer's task force broke them apart. Four officers were imprisoned; two more were executed. Sergei van Donne was one of six more junior officers who were dismissed from the service, carrying heavy fines into civilian life.

Like several of his colleagues, van Donne soon disappeared into Free-space; unlike the others, he prospered. The man had become the thorn in Harrison Shapiro's ass, and he was one of the very few human beings on whom Richard Vaurien had sworn vengeance. The data bringing Travers and Marin to Velcastra tonight was Richard's, but Shapiro had been so hungry for it, he cut Vaurien a handsome deal. Before the Fleet courier *Mercury* dropped into orbit over Saraine, Richard had already granted contracts to a number of the *Intrepid's* crew. They wanted to stay with him; he wanted to keep them. Fleet had other plans for its conscripted kids, and the carrier reassignment orders were already being processed when Vaurien walked into Fleet Sector Command with an offer: van Donne was on the move. If Shapiro wanted him, he cut a deal.

Perlman, Fujioka, Fargo, Inosanto, Grant, Szabo, Hodaka and many others were back aboard Vaurien's ships. Between one job and the next they might be on the *Wastrel*, the *Earthlight* or the *Wings of Freedom*, and if Mark Sherratt was shorthanded aboard the science vessel *Rainbow Voyager*, specialists such as David Hodaka were eager to transfer over and work with Barb Jazinsky.

For almost a minute Sergei van Donne stood framed in the side hatch of the lighter. In one hand was a scanner, in the other, a broad-muzzle weapon. Marin captured a single series of images in the first moments after he appeared, and then bobbed down into the lee of the pylon, crouched shoulder-to-shoulder with Travers. They froze like ice carvings. If van Donne was using motion sensors, the slightest movement could betray them.

"Mister van Donne." The voice issued from the direction of the Chev. "I'd begun to think you were not coming." The accent was Omaru, with clipped vowels and hard consonants.

Not a muscle twitched, but Marin's eyes were on his handy. A red light blipped: van Donne was still scanning.

"You can't be too careful. Stand still, Berglun. We're still not clear." The Pakrani voice was deep. The accent was so much like Jazinsky's, Travers felt a shiver.

"Foxes," Berglun suggested. "Marsupial foxes, these hills are full of them. They're vermin, indigenous to the planet. I lived eight years on

Velcastra. I had the little bastards in my garage every winter, couldn't get rid of them."

"Vermin," van Donne mused, and a moment later seemed satisfied. The scanner shut off, and the red blip on Marin's handy went off with it.

Marin's eyes were wide, silvery in the odd light conditions. "We're clear." He folded down the handy, pocketed it, and Travers passed him a weapon. "Two shots, we can take them both."

"Alive," Travers added quietly. "Shapiro's got no use for them dead." With van Donne and Frank Berglun dead, the datatrail stopped. One end of the trail started in Halfway, deep in Freespace, and the other end terminated somewhere in Hydralis City on Omaru.

The colony was under a Fleet blockade but the war raged like an inferno right across the system. Their weapons were high-caliber, good enough to make Fleet work hard for its pay, and only a fool would be complacent when two warships and the tender *Ariel* had already been pulled out as far as the docks on Albeniz for critical repairs. Civilian and militia casualties on Omaru were unknown, but a CNS report swore Fleet had lost four hundred crew and twice that number of drones in the first days of the war. Shapiro badly wanted to chart the datatrail, and the deal he had cut with Vaurien to get agents onto the side of Mount Katherine tonight was his first opportunity.

Careful, slow, Curtis Marin stood up and checked the Chiyoda AP-90 Travers had just handed him. It was preloaded with kevlex-titanium tipped incendiary ammunition, and with a grunt he popped out the magazine. Those rounds would drop an aircraft in flight. A human body would be so much carbonized goo. "Who loaded these?"

"Richard," Travers said wryly. "I don't think he wants van Donne to get out of here alive."

"Just before we flew out, Vaurien asked me to make damned sure he doesn't," Marin whispered, hands busy reloading the Chiyoda with a standard anti-personnel magazine.

"That's not what Shapiro wants," Travers warned.

"I know." Marin's eyes were silver-green in the lights as he primed the gun. "But Richard's been supplying Omaru for months while they set up for the war. He wants to see the Confederacy chased the hell off the frontier — ten days ago he and Jazinsky were planning to shoot Hellgate and run the blockade into Omaru. Now Shapiro's trying to use him to shut down the last trade route Omaru has left." His brows arched. "Richard used his information, that van Donne had set up a meeting here with an agent from Hydralis, and then —"

"Then he promptly set up a counter-deal with you," Travers said

with a certain rueful humor, "to get rid of an old enemy and to stop Shapiro getting his hooks into the black-market arms trade that's keeping colonies like Omaru in the war business! That's Richard." Travers checked his own Chiyoda. "I'm loaded with the kevlex-titanium incendiaries. If you miss van Donne and Berglun, I'll immobilize the aircraft." He paused. "What did you tell Richard?"

"I didn't make any promises." Marin was listening to the men out in the parking lot, and poised, ready to move.

"And what's your plan?" Travers took the Chiyoda in both hands and sketched a mental picture of the parking lot before they moved out of cover.

Marin looked faintly annoyed to be pinned down. "Van Donne's a bastard who bleeds his clients white. Mark has a file on him that Shapiro's never even seen, and van Donne doesn't do the colonies any favors. It'd be like swatting a cockroach, and there's enough mercenary captains in Halfway to fill the vacuum he leaves behind."

"And the datatrail gets cut," Travers murmured.

"In the wrong direction," Marin reminded him, still listening to the terse exchange from the parking lot. "If you wanted to safeguard the trade routes into Hydralis City, it's Berglun I'd have to eliminate, not van Donne."

With that he was moving, and Travers was impressed. Marin was a just a blur, spinning outward from the pylon and diving flat into the layer of powder snow, the Chiyoda up and leveled as if it had locked itself on target. He took his first shot at Frank Berglun, put a single round into him, high in the left shoulder, spinning him around and throwing him into the front struts of the Chev. Berglun went down hard, swearing and whimpering, and curled into a fetal ball. Travers had dropped to a crouch beside the pylon and leveled his aim on the lighter, and in the time it took Marin to retarget on van Donne, the mercenary was already moving.

The second round smacked into the ski-skin tunic and van Donne went down, slithering along the snow. He rolled, clawing for a weapon, and Travers swore fluently. "He's not hurt," he snapped at Marin. "Some kind of armor."

"Like he said, you can't be too careful." Marin fired again, and again, as van Donne rolled, but the armor under the tunic was good enough to hold him off while the gunrunner dove into the cover of the lighter's aft undercart. "Damn." Marin's voice was soft, almost crooning. "Watch yourself, Neil, he's armed."

And he was not alone. Marin was almost randomly targeting the area under the tail of the lighter, either hoping to keep van Donne pinned

down or to get a serendipitous hit, and Travers had picked out a jet intake. His finger stroked the trigger once, twice, and a stream of kevlex-titanium rounds traced a bright arc into the engine, but before he could judge his own work a gun pod in the lighter's chin was tracking toward him.

"Curtis!" His voice was sharp with a razor's edge of warning, but there was not even a second to make a move toward Marin.

"I see it. Go!" Marin himself was moving in the same instant, on his feet and scrambling into the cover provided by the comm-relay.

The structure was valued at more than forty million Velcastran dollars, and van Donne's copilot could bring it down like felling a tree. Trying to shelter at its base was worse than taking cover in a burning house, and Travers was cursing in several languages as he flung himself out of the lighter's direct line of fire.

He had spent a half hour, soon after he and Marin arrived, charting the territory, marking ways out and pitfalls. The reason they had staked out the pylon was the plascrete and steel engineering hatch three meters behind it. The hatch cover slid sideways, opening into a service bay directly under the comm-relays. Wiring trunks tangled in a seeming chaos; conduits as thick as a man's torso snaked up the inside of the pylons and down into the ground. From the service bay they could get through into the hangar where they had left the Yamazake, but if the pylon came down the hangar could be blocked. The roof could collapse under the weight, it could flood with the toxic fumes generated by energy weapons and electrical fires, or the generators under the comm-relay could go up, filling the whole cavernous underground with a plasma-hot fireball.

With a whining growl that threatened to make the eardrums bleed, the lighter's cannons opened up. The copilot was shooting high and wide, only guessing at where his targets lay, but the pylon was taking heavy hits at once. Guy wires snapped like harp strings, flying away into the darkness and swirling snow, and girders began to fall as Travers dove toward the service hatch. They hit the ground with the sound of bell-chimes, while a loose wire came snapping back like a whip cracking in the air over Travers's head.

The wire was steel mesh and thick as his wrist, and if it touched, it would take off his head. He dove again, rolling, for a crazy instant on his back and looking up into the swirl of snow and phosphor-white sparks which had begun to spit out of a ruptured conduit.

Where was Marin? Travers's heart was in his mouth as he rolled again, scrambling toward the service hatch on hands and knees. Then he

saw his partner and took a breath to shout a protest Marin would never have heard: he was up in the straggling thorn bushes, a dozen yards from the comm-relays, out of the hail of falling debris, and from there he had a good line-of-sight on the lighter. Loaded with antipersonnel ammunition, he was never going to do the spaceplane any damage, but Travers guessed he could see van Donne from that angle.

He would get only one or two shots before he gave away his own position and became a target, but for the moments while van Donne's copilot was tracking him, Travers was free to move, get the service hatch open. Marin was taking his best shot at van Donne and drawing fire at one time, and Travers had no chance even to curse. Marin spared him a single glance, making sure Travers knew the play, and Travers was poised like a runner on the blocks as he gave Curtis a nod.

He might have envied the Dendra Shemiji training. Mark Sherratt had promised to share his secrets, but the training had not even begun. Travers had little idea how Marin marked several targets at once, then fired in sequence as fast as the Chiyoda could cycle on single-shot, correcting on the fly for the reaction of a moving target in something seeming much faster than real-time. These were ancient skills the bushido warrior would have recognized — lost in the modern age, when the professional soldier came to rely on machines, sensors, 'smart' weapons, self-targeting guns and pop-up probes to see over the horizon.

By whatever alchemy, Marin was dead on target with two rounds, but van Donne's armor was proof against the Chiyoda. Under the spruce-green tunic he must be wearing something like a Tactical riot-vest, and at last Marin tried for a head shot. He would kill van Donne outright and aggravate Shapiro, but Vaurien would be delighted — and of a sudden Marin was out of options. The mercenary was damned dangerous.

Travers could not spare another second to watch. The gun pod under the port wing rotated with a whine of servos, presenting three glowing barrels to the hillside behind the pylons. Marin had crouched there moments before, in the paper-thin cover of the undergrowth.

The Chiyoda barked again. Several rounds hunted for van Donne in the shadows under the lighter, and every muzzle flash betrayed Marin's position. The copilot would have him in seconds, while he kept van Donne pinned down, and even as the gun pod tracked toward him, the lighter's ignition systems were firing.

Fear was a physical sensation, a taste on the back of the tongue, a smell in the nostrils. Travers dove at the service hatch, with his left hand scraping away the rime of new snow, searching for the control pad. Access was coded, but when he and Marin set up here, he had swiped the

Fleet Sector Command warrant through the reader and logged in a new ID code. The system knew him, was waiting for him. As the snow scooped out of the way he punched four digits and the hatch began to growl open. He rolled over onto his back, ears full of the howl of ignition noise from the lighter, and drew a loose aim on the plane.

Subtlety and precision were gone. A figure moved in the cockpit, he half-saw a face in the instrument lights. The copilot was intent on the gun controls while the lighter powered itself up, and Travers emptied the Chiyoda into the forward canopy. The Kotaro-Fuente lighter was stocky with Weimann modules, the airframe and skin were strong enough to buck the stormy transition into e-space. Travers's chances of damaging the cockpit canopy were slight, but the multiple impacts there made the copilot duck reflexively. In the momentary respite as the guns shut down Travers yelled,

"Curtis! Move it!"

Marin did not need to be urged twice. He was moving even as Travers shouted, and came down the hillside in a tuck-and-roll. His spine never straightened before he was down through the hatch and in the weird, neon-blue illumination of the service bay. Travers was a split second behind him, and palmed the hatch shut as he fell through.

The hangar was away to the east, and Travers paused only long enough to see Marin up on his feet and in one piece, before he ran. The hundred meter sprint to the code-sealed door was endless, punctuated by muffled metallic impacts overhead. At least one of the pylons was coming down in pieces. South Velcastra, and Dominguez in particular, had just lost a large slice of its bandwidth and the public would be screaming for blood. Fleet would pick up the repair costs on the comm-relay, but Harrison Shapiro would have nothing to celebrate. His datatrail was already broken.

The door closing off the hangar also recognized Travers's Fleet code. In the moments it took to punch it in, Marin had adjusted his handy and was shouting over the impacts. "Vaurien! Vaurien! This is *Wastrel* 101, where the hell are you, Richard?"

Dust shook out of the plascrete beams overhead as the hangar door growled open, and Vaurien was there: "Locating on your signal, *Wastrel* 101. I'm showing two hot marks at your location. One is prepping for flight."

"That's van Donne," Marin shouted into the handy's pickup. "Keep a track on him. Let him get out of here, and Shapiro'll skin us alive!"

"The bastard's alive?" Richard Vaurien skipped a beat. "Damn, I was hoping you'd *itemized* him. And Frank Berglun?"

"I put one in him, he's alive." Marin went sideways through the door, a pace behind Travers as the plascrete spars overhead began to creak and buckle inward on themselves. "It's possible van Donne may pick him up and drag him out." Marin coughed on the dust and hung back as Travers aimed the infrakey at the Yamazake.

Vaurien's voice over the handy made scornful sounds. "More likely, van Donne will make sure Berglun is dead before he pulls out. You realize, he's going to blame Berglun for setting him up."

"It's possible. Where are you, Richard?"

"In a gunship, fifteen k's downrange of your position, coming up from the east at twenty thousand meters," Vaurien told him crisply. "And your luck just ran out, Marin. Your man lifted off a few seconds ago. He's heading out so fast, it looks like his tail feathers are on fire, straight up for space."

"What about the other plane?" Travers shouted in the direction of the handy as the Yamazake's canopy whined up.

"Still on the ground," Vaurien told him. "Can you cover it? I can go after van Donne."

"We've got it," Marin told him, and folded down the handy as he followed Travers up the side of the sportplane.

The Eclipse was cold. The engines had been shut down five hours ago, and even the nav-deck was dead. Travers swore again, cursing van Donne and Shapiro in the same breath, as he slid into the forward cockpit and thumbed the flight systems alive. Groundscan blipped a warning as it read the hangar walls, much too close for comfort. The service bay was not designed for a plane this size. Marin was in the rear cockpit a second later, and as Travers dropped the canopy he began a recklessly abbreviated check of the flight systems.

The plascrete overhead was raining white dust as the Arago generators stuttered into life, and Travers released the controls to Marin. "All yours, and you're welcome to it," he said darkly over his shoulder. Curtis had a lot more experience in these planes. Travers could fly the Eclipse, but gunships were more his forte.

The outside hangar door was armored, and it should have opened along with the door into the service bay. It remained locked, and Marin was muttering to himself as he fired every code he knew at it. Fleet overrides should have opened it, but it remained resolutely closed. "Jammed," Marin said tersely. "There's got to be wreckage on the outside. Hold on."

With less than a meter off each wingtip, the Eclipse lifted on the shimmering hot Arago field, and Marin rotated the plane through 180° to

present the nose, the guns, to the blocked door. The Eclipse was a civvy raceplane, Weimann enabled but certainly not armed as it left the factory. But for half a century the Omaru plant had been supplying couriers first to Starfleet and later to the DeepSky Fleet. The Eclipse was designed around military prerequisites; the modifications were simple, and Richard Vaurien had done them all.

Hatches opened in the nose, exposing the muzzles of a pair of rotary cannons. Travers's thumb stroked the 'arm' key, and he selected armor-piercing. The hangar filled with waste gases, dust and shards of shrapnel as the twin cannons tore the doors to pieces and flung them out onto the side of Mont Katherine. Travers gave a grunt, not quite of satisfaction.

Still, Marin held back, peering at a screen, unable to see visually through the smoke and dust. The doors were off, but enough wreckage had fallen to seriously block the exit. He flicked on the lidar, reading clearances down to the centimeter, and at last the Eclipse crept into forward motion.

The greatest danger came as she put her nose out, with the comm-relay pylon shedding spars, conduit, girders and plascrete from a great height — no way back into the dubious cover of the hangar, and less than a half meter between each wingtip and the twisted, mangled frame of the doors. Travers just held his breath and wished he knew how to pray.

A guy wire came down like a whip, cracked across the nose and bounced away. Travers's heart was still in his throat as Marin cleared the doors with the widest sweep of the wings, and throttled forward at last. The Eclipse was out fast now, and he sent her a generous kilometer out of harm's way before looping up and back for a look at the hillside.

Sweat still prickled along his ribs as Travers zoomed on the parking lot. He cleared his throat. "The Chev's still down. She's in one piece, but there's damage. It's not flying anywhere." Then he tilted the view angle up and cranked the contrast. "Shit, Curtis, the pylon's coming down piecemeal."

"And Frank Berglun is under the mess somewhere. Damn." Marin nudged the Eclipse back toward the hillside. The public address kicked in, loud enough to vibrate in the canopy. "Berglun. Frank Berglun, can you see this aircraft? Berglun, where are you?" Then, to Travers, off-air, "Can you see him?"

The sensor images were confused. Scores of electrical fires raced up and down the damaged pylon and millions of simultaneous transmissions were still surging through the comm-relays while the control systems shunted the load into whatever bandwidth it could find. The side of Mont Katherine was almost sensor-blind. Infrared was useless. Travers

switched to thermal and swore at the fracas of signals, a confusion of swirling snow and burning conduit.

A spar came down on the spine of the Chev Viento, and Marin ouch. "I hope he was well insured. Any sign of him?"

The screen was still a chaos, and as a last resort Travers kicked in visual. And there he was, a tiny figure standing up in the thorn bushes, waving frantically with one arm while he hugged his chest with the other. "Got him. Eleven o'clock from the Chev, a hundred meters up the hill."

"I see him." Marin kicked the public address back in. "We can see you, Mr. Berglun. Can you make your way west into the open space beyond the last pylon? We can pick you up there."

The figure seemed to sag for a moment, then Berglun waved once more, and got moving. "He's got to know he's in trouble," Travers said quietly.

The Eclipse wafted on fractional engine power and the Arago field, drifting like a leaf in the wind. Marin had already picked his spot to touch down, but Berglun would be some time making his way through the tangle of underbrush. "If he's used to dealing with men like van Donne," Curtis mused, "our man Berglun has probably convinced himself he can talk his way out of anything."

"He might be right."

"Don't underestimate Shapiro." Marin sighed. "It's bad, Neil. I've no time for van Donne, but Berglun came here to secure the means to keep Omaru fighting. You want to see them crushed?"

It was the last thing anyone in the Deep Sky wanted to see, Harrison Shapiro included. The colonial wars had to ignite somewhere, it was only a matter of time. But Omaru was the oldest colony on the frontier, the best-established, the richest, the most populous — and therefore the colony hardest hit by the military service levy which fed warm bodies to the DeepSky Fleet, and the fierce taxation which built that Fleet. Frank Berglun was funneling guns into a war zone. It depended which side of the line you were standing on, whether he was the hero or the villain.

The Eclipse touched down gently and Marin left the repulsion running as Travers sent up the canopy. Berglun was struggling toward them, one arm hugged against his chest, and as Marin released his flight harness and took his weight on the side of the cockpit, the man began to shout up at them.

"Who are you? Who are you?" He waved at Marin. "Where do you come from?"

"We have to get out of here!" Marin bawled over the bluster of the repulsion. "Can you climb up?"

"Help me," Berglun panted, "for godsakes help me — the bastard tried to kill me!"

"Which bastard does he mean?" Travers wondered in an undertone. He had unbuckled his own flight harness and was halfway out of the Eclipse, up on the side and ready to help Berglun into the front. Marin was flying from the rear cockpit, and the casualty would be better in the front.

"He could mean me or van Donne," Marin mused, "except I could have killed him on a whim. I shot to hinder, Neil. Doesn't look like there's anything wrong with Berglun a back-country paramedic couldn't fix in ten minutes." He lifted his voice and reached down with a hand as Berglun approached. "Who tried to kill you, Mr. Berglun?"

"That — that bastard." Berglun gestured over his shoulder. "He pulled out after they shot him up, and he tried to fry me on his way out, goddamn him!"

"Careful," Travers murmured. "He hasn't realized it was our setup yet."

"He probably thinks we're search and rescue, or a squad from Dominguez Tac," Marin said quietly as Berglun reached up toward him with his good hand. "Seems a shame to disillusion him." Then, louder, "Hold on tight, Mr. Berglun, I've got you. Can you see the hard-points to climb up?"

The Arago field was hot against the background of winter-night cold, and the dry snow flurried in the Eclipse's landing lights. Travers reached down and back, catching Berglun under both arms. As the man clambered up by the marked 'step here' places, Travers lifted him deliberately into the front.

With a sharp cry and a deep, bass groan, Berglun settled into the acceleration couch. The harness ran up around him and the canopy was already whining down. The first aid case was under the forward seat, and Travers dug it out as Marin increased the Arago field and folded the struts.

A shot for the pain, a pressure bandage on the shoulder, and Travers was at the limit of what he could do in the field. The round had gone clean through, leaving small but messy wounds. In seconds, the shot made Berglun so groggy, he was not even capable of wondering who had pulled him out or where he was being taken. His head lolled and he was half asleep as Marin lifted the spaceplane.

"This is *Wastrel* 101, where are you, Richard?" Travers called sharply as he crammed the helmet onto his head and cut into the ship-to-ship comm loop. The Yamazake was falling upward toward the overcast.

Dominguez seemed to expand and rotate below, a shimmering carpet of gold and blue lights. "Vaurien!"

"This is *Wastrel* Gunship 505." The voice belonged to Gillian Perlman, and Travers shivered to hear it now. She had been the *Intrepid's* Bravo Company gunship pilot; she flew for Vaurien now, since Richard struck the deal with Shapiro. And the gunship she was flying tonight was salvage right off the wrecked carrier. It might even be the same gunship she had flown off the *Intrepid* like a lifeboat. She and Fujioka were normally aboard the commercial salvage tug *Earthlight*, but for this mission Vaurien had guessed he would have a gunship in the air over Velcastra, and he wanted the best.

It was too bad Shapiro's end of the deal had shattered apart. *Almost* shattered apart, Travers corrected with a sidelong glance at the limp form in the set beside him. Shapiro still had the Omaru end of the deal, and if push came to shove, his ticket into Halfway was Vaurien.

"Where are you, *Wastrel* Gunship?" Travers called again as the Yamazake fell upward into the snow clouds and the city lights vanished.

The airsearch scanners were alive with marks coming in. Tactical, Medevac, Dominguez TransCom and a contingent from the local Fleet base were all converging on the battle zone on the side of Mont Katherine, and Travers wished them joy. The damage would be calculated in eight figures, and it was down to van Donne's trigger-happy copilot.

"We're a thousand meters behind van Donne, headed out of orbit," Perlman called. "The *Wastrel's* coming up fast on an intercept. If van Donne doesn't see her, he must be blind. You know Shapiro's aboard?"

"He's — what?" Travers echoed.

"When did he get in?" Marin wanted to know as he stood the Yamazake on its tail and opened the afterburners.

The clouds streamed over the canopy for elongated moments in limbo, and then all at once the sky was clear, indigo, and the stars lit up like the glittering threedee interior of a navigation tank. The spaceplane began to perform better as Velcastra's atmosphere thinned, and Travers was intent on his screens.

"I can see you, *Wastrel* Gunship. Turning to follow, but we won't catch you before you rendezvous ... I can see the *Wastrel* coming in too."

"Which means van Donne sees her," Marin added. "Perlman, can you get a shot at him before he runs?"

"I can try," Perlman said grimly. "I better had. Like I told you, Harry Shapiro's on the *Wastrel*. We got the boss breathing down our necks, kids. We better do good."

A crackle over the ship-to-ship loop, and Shapiro's dry voice added,

"You also have you boss listening in, *kids*. And I've already received the damage report from Dominguez TransCom. I'm assuming you have a good explanation."

"Well ... shit," Travers breathed soundlessly.

"We didn't pick the meeting place," Marin was saying, smooth as silk and unintimidated. Many years of working for Dendra Shemiji made him impervious to any authority Fleet assumed it possessed. "And we didn't put a shot into the comm-relay. Travers did some damage to van Donne's lighter, but not enough to keep it on the ground, and as for me, General, I was firing anti-personnel. I couldn't have put a dent in the comm-relay if I'd wanted to."

"Understood," Shapiro responded. "We haven't lost van Donne yet. And I assume the client from Omaru is either dead or —"

"Very much alive, sir," Travers corrected. "Mildly sedated with a minor wound in one shoulder, and strapped in right beside me."

"Good enough." Shapiro paused. "*Wastrel* Gunship, see if you can force van Donne toward us."

"Beat the bushes for you? Will do," Perlman murmured over the storm of static on the edge of the atmosphere.

The Eclipse was slithering fast out of Velcastra's gravity well, and Marin turned her on her back to chase upward, outward, toward the rendezvous. The *Wastrel* was one of many marks on the screens now. Civvy traffic was busy, with the TransColonial clipper dock loading, the *Regina Maris* prepping to leave, the Lisbon Dock swarming with 'free trade' at geostationary over Elstrom, the Fleet Transit Terminal generating its own ordered chaos, and a thousand small ships in between.

Against that backdrop of furious activity a salvage tug, its gunship and their quarry seemed insignificant. It was difficult to believe, Travers decided, but the outcome of the colonial wars, even the future of the Deep Sky colonies, could be decided right here.

If Omaru was going to win against the sheer might of Fleet, they must be armed and serviced, and their only suppliers were mercenaries, black marketeers like van Donne. If the privateer captains who flew out of Halfway were persuaded to write off the war on Omaru as a lost cause — too expensive, too hazardous, too crazy — it was over. Scores of other colonies were watching Omaru right now. The system was a testing ground for every regional mutiny on the frontier, and Travers was well aware that the colonial wars could be won right here, right now, in a battle which would never be shown on CNS, and documented only by future historians, when the episode was declassified.

"I'm not going to catch them," Marin warned.

"No surprise there. The gunship's bloody fast," Travers mused.

Fast enough to outrun a temporo-gravitic anomaly, to skip through Hellgate like a pebble across the surface of a lake which heaved and twisted with multidimensional storms beneath the surface. For years Perlman had been doing this work. Chasing a runaway out of Velcastra was a vacation by comparison.

"*Wastrel* to Kotaro-Fuente outbound on track 38-45." Richard Vaurien was on the air now. "*Wastrel* to — damnit, Sergei, I know that's you!"

A crackle, a white-hot blast of confused radio noise, and Travers heard the voice he remembered from the parking lot under the commreals. "So it's you, Richard. I should have known."

"Should you?" Vaurien seemed to hesitate. "I can take you aboard, Sergei. You've got a gunship halfway up your ass, you're on every tracking screen between Velcastra Fleet and Elstrom Tactical, and unless I miss my guess you're carrying some damage."

"Not in the Weimanns," van Donne barked.

"I can see from here how you were shot up," Vaurien said sharply. "You've got problems with your port engines. You know you're streaming coolant out of both injector ports? You're going to overheat."

"Not before I can get a Weimann ignition," van Donne informed him, and as if to prove his point, the Kotaro-Fuente lighter put its nose over and seemed to find some hint of acceleration.

"You're going to lose an engine!" Vaurien's French accent thickened measurably as he became angry. "Jesus, van Donne, if you don't want to think about yourself, think about the civilian traffic! You could get a Weimann implosion, you'll take us all with you!"

"Then get the hell out of my way," van Donne snarled. "Get out to safe distance and let me go."

"Is Vaurien on the level?" Marin asked quietly. "I don't know a lot about this engine technology. If he loses an engine, could it blow back through the system and hit the Weimann module?"

"I don't know," Travers admitted. "I don't know much more than you do, it's not my field." Then, "*Wastrel* 101 to Gunship. Travers for Jim Fujioka, if you're aboard."

A muffled sound over the loop, and Fujioka was on the air. "Where else would I be? Force of habit, Travers."

"You listening into ship-to-ship comm?" Travers asked.

"You'll be wondering if Vaurien's bullshitting the man," Fujioka guessed.

"You're psychic," Marin observed. "And?"

"He's not," the Bravo Company engineer said tartly. "It's a one in ten

thousand shot, but it's happened, it's documented. An engine melts down, and at those temperatures the flight control firmware auto-scrams. Then it auto-reboots, but once in every thousand tests there's physical circuit damage. You get a power surge to the Weimann igniters. They start on their own, and they fire out of sequence. Implosion," he added helpfully. "Every safeguard in the world is built in, but they all depend on the butt-head human pilot not being too shit-faced to have the sense to shut down the engine when he's pissing coolant! Jesus Christ, a trained chimp would know to shut it down!"

The engineer was furious — and Travers heard the sharp edge of fear in his voice too, a sound he had not heard from Jim Fujioka since Hellgate. The same tone was like a bright-honed blade in Richard Vaurien's voice as he called a second time,

"Sergei, I can take you aboard."

"You can also go screw yourself," van Donne told him. "You think I don't know you set me up on Velcastra? Damnit, Vaurien, who'd you sell me to? Who're you working for now?"

"I have to be working for someone?" Vaurien mocked. "Maybe I just wanted to get you out of my life, permanently. You try to steal my technology, Sergei, you try to kill me, and you think I'll forget?"

"There's no honor among thieves, Richard. You're dreaming," van Donne said, like a man preoccupied with a task so complex, he could barely spare the brain cells to talk.

"He's losing it," Marin warned. "And we're way too close. I'm going to back us off, Travers. If that engine melts down, even if he doesn't lose his Weimanns, we still don't want to be this close."

A blast of radio white noise and Vaurien barked, "Switch up to Channel 94 and encrypt."

With that, he closed negotiations with van Donne and shut him out of the ship-to-ship comm loop. They were still eavesdropping on van Donne's communications, but a moment later the Freespacer followed suit, and any signal issuing from the lighter was reduced to a strident whine of electronic gibberish. Travers tuned it out in the interests of his eardrums.

The Eclipse was coming up on the gunship, close enough now to see the blue-white sterntubes as Perlman called, "I've got a clear shot at the bugger."

Vaurien: "*Take it!*"

Agile as a deer, the Eclipse swung left, the new course taking her fast away from the converging lighter, gunship and tug, and Travers dropped his helmet visor as Perlman's cannons opened up. Bright gold arcs flared

in the darkness, a missile flaretail chased, blindingly white, against the stars, and Travers held his breath.

But van Donne was running, and he was smart as an old lame fox. The second he picked up the missile, he turned the lighter's nose into the stream of civilian traffic heading between the clipper terminal and Lisbon Docks. The missile acquired its target on the lighter's superhot tail, and for long seconds gave chase, before van Donne could fix on it with a tailgun. Some energy weapon belched a gout of green and the missile was gone in a single eruption of hot, expanding gases.

With a blistering curse Perlman pulled the gunship around and away. The *Wastrel* was coming up from the far side of the civilian lanes, picking its way through loose traffic and consequently slow. Travers heard Vaurien's French expletives clearly on the air, though Richard was not talking to a comm pickup.

"If van Donne loses the engine in there," Marin began.

"I know." Travers adjusted his scan to pick out a single craft, and hissed through his teeth, an expression of anger. "He's too fast. He's going through the civilian lanes like a comet. Christ, if he doesn't fly right into somebody he'll be lucky."

"Where's he headed? Goddamn him!" Marin jinked the nose around toward the docks at geostationary. He had been closing on the gunship and the tug, but now he was scanning for anything — perhaps even for inspiration.

"*Wastrel* 101, head for home, there's no more you can do," Vaurien called. And then, as he must have seen a threedee, "Where the hell are you going, Travers?"

"I'm just along for the ride," Travers said with taut humor.

"The question is, where the hell is van Donne going?" Marin demanded. "Look at him, Richard! He can't get out to the safe distance for a Weimann ignition, not with that much engine damage, and he's not stupid, he knows it. We'll catch him, soon as he loses the cover of civvy traffic, long before he can put a quarter billion kilometers between him and Velcastra. So where's he going, Neil, answer me that."

"There has to be another ship," Travers guessed. "He's running for a pickup."

"That's what I'm thinking. Scan for anything on an intercept heading." Marin opened the throttles and fell into a parallel course, shadowing the civilian lanes and keeping pace with the lighter. "And then pray, if you can remember how. Because he should have shut that engine down ten minutes ago. He's on borrowed time and too reckless to care. *Wastrel*, Perlman, Fujioka, are you following this?"

Travers's scanners were wide open, looking for anything, everything. The resulting jumble of tracks would have confused a Near Sky air traffic supervisor, but Travers was not trying to make sense of the million marker blips. He was just waiting, content to simply monitor the jumble until two tracks crystallized out of the rest, on a single coherent course.

His mind was back in Dominguez as he waited, watched, just counting time and letting the system run the analysis ... Dominguez, where the River Yu was wide, silt-gray and lazy, where the classic bands played in the street — mariachi, maradanga, reggae, dixie, steelrock — paper dragons streamed from the mall lights, and lithe, naked Lushi boys danced in bodypaint and jewelry, luring a man to his doom in danceshops and dreamshops where he could lose his soul as well as his mind.

"I think ... I've got it." It was Perlman.

The gunship had a fifty kilometer lead on the Eclipse, and its scan platforms were much bigger, more powerful. Travers was not surprised Perlman found the track first, and a moment later Vaurien was confirming it. With an effort, Travers blinked away the images of black silk sheets and writhing joss and Marin's pale, smooth limbs painted gold and red by the lion lamp beside the bed.

The memories hung on like corneal afterimages as he returned to a present consisting of scanner screens, diamond-bright stars and the stern-tubes of the gunship. Carnival time in Dominguez beckoned like a siren but he put the fantasy away: Perlman was right. She had picked a big ship out of the civilian clutter around the nested-cartwheels shape of the Lisbon Dock.

It had headed out minutes before and was driving hard, fast, toward the civilian lanes. It was not an especially big ship — a freighter or a tender, Travers thought. Something bigger than a Fleet courier but a fraction smaller than the *Wastrel* or the *Earthlight*. And it was maneuvering at speeds which, in this corner of space, were illegal as well as irrational, on a flightpath that would eventually put it into a dive, right into Velcastra's atmosphere. It looked like a suicide run.

But it wasn't headed for the planet. The same flightpath would intersect with the civilian flight lanes, and right on cue, Sergei van Donne jinked his nose out of those lanes and, still streaming coolant, accelerated away toward the incoming ship.

"*Wastrel!*" Travers called across the chatter of the comm loop.

"We see it, Travers." That was Barb Jazinsky's voice. She had no more fondness for van Donne than Vaurien had. She might have been the one who preloaded the Chiyoda pistols, in the hopes they would soon be scraping van Donne off Mont Katherine with a trowel. "Stay the hell out of

the way, Travers. The big sonofabitch is armed, he'll swat the Eclipse like a mosquito."

"Will do." Marin cut speed and sheered off.

Travers adjusted his scan platforms, tuning out the dock, the civilian clutter, everything except the gunship, the *Wastrel*, the Kotaro-Fuente lighter and the incoming ship. It was showing as a freighter now, big and dirty. He read two Prometheus power plants in the belly, a bar of four Weimanns in the stern, a cavernous maw that would have swallowed a small town, a small crew module tacked on as an afterthought, under the chin, and an array of weapons definitely salvaged from the wreck of a Fleet warship.

So van Donne had cut up a casualty of the Drift and kept the lion's share for himself. This was probably the first time in his long service career that Harrison Shapiro had found himself looking into a startling array of Fleet gun barrels. Shapiro was colonial stock, and in thirty years with Fleet he had come up from the rank of courier pilot on diplomatic missions, to Fleet Sector Command. Few major conflicts had been fought in the colonies in thirty years, and the most field experience Shapiro had was in the running battles with privateers out of Freespace. They were a formidable force, but Fleet normally cut them up for scrap. If Shapiro were aboard a warship right now, the scene would be very different. Travers wondered at his presence on the *Wastrel*.

"That thing'll outrun us," Jazinsky warned, "and I think ... he's got us outgunned, though we're carrying more armor, and better. You want to try a shot, Richard?"

Vaurien: "We might get lucky." A pause, and then he said in a wry tone, "It's your call, Shapiro. This one's your contract."

In the back seat of the Eclipse, Marin laughed quietly. "I like it. Shapiro strong-armed him into flying for Fleet, so Vaurien looks at it as a contract."

"He swung a good deal," Travers reminded him. "All the crew he wanted off the *Intrepid*, three gunships and their warload, and a crack at van Donne. That's not a contract?"

"Take your best shot," Shapiro said tersely. "Bring the gunship back, get her under cover of your armor, and see what you can do. Fire to disable the freighter. Not, repeat *not*, to destroy the lighter. Sergei van Donne's no use to me dead. I'd rather let him go today and pick him up some other time, some other place."

"Understood," Vaurien said resignedly. "You heard the man, Perlman. Tuck in under cover and watch yourself."

"You're the boss," Perlman sang. "Hey, you there, Jazinsky!"

"Right here." Jazinsky sounded preoccupied, busy.

"I'm reading a lot of armor," Perlman warned, "and more big guns than we got between us. Don't get into a slugging match with him. The only way you're going to take him cleanly is —"

"With a shot up the ass, I know." Jazinsky was never inclined to mince words. "I'm doing it, Gill. Just tuck yourself in for chrissakes, and duck!"

Travers's eyes were wide on the scene playing out, framed in the screen at his elbow. The Eclipse was close enough to permit visuals, and he could see the tug and van Donne's freighter clearly. The freighter was hampered by the necessity to pick up van Donne, while the *Wastrel* labored under no such handicap. But the freighter was armed like a warship, as Perlman had warned, and as Travers watched she opened up on the *Wastrel* with a dozen cannons at once, an old fashioned broadside.

The *Wastrel* staggered under multiple impacts, but she was armored to work in the Rabelais Drift. Hull shielding designed to batter its way through asteroid fields and shrug aside planetoid-sized boulders withstood the broadside from the armed freighter, and under cover of its own guns, van Donne's ship was coming around to pick up the lighter.

Jazinsky's window of opportunity would be just a few seconds long; her target was the glare of the freighter's engine exhausts. A clear shot into any one of the sterntubes would cause a blowback into the engine deck. The whole system would auto-scam, leaving the freighter dead in space, drifting on inertia.

As Travers watched, the *Wastrel's* guns rotated into alignment. The lighter was coming up fast, still streaming coolant. Even Travers's instruments — of necessity light and unsophisticated by comparison with the scan platforms on a big ship — blipped a warning about critical engine temperatures. Sergei van Donne was losing it, but he was gambling on the fact he was losing it *slowly*.

Still staggering under the pounding, the *Wastrel's* own guns opened up. Ten cannons ranged across the dorsal hull spewed five rounds each, fifty tracks all converging on the freighter's sterntubes. Travers heard Jazinsky muttering on the air, and then she was cursing as lividly as Fujioka as the freighter's tail defenses picked off the projectiles and flung a storm of heavy chaff into the path of the particle beams. Forty detonations in under a second filled space with cartwheeling shards of blazing, phosphor-bright debris, and the chaff caught and scattered the particle beams in a rainbow confusion.

For crucial moments every sensor Travers had went wild. He could have hoped the scanners on the *Wastrel* would yield better images, but

Jazinsky and Perlman were shouting at each other in a sensor-blind fog filled with boiling vapor and windmilling shrapnel. The expanding storm completely shrouded both the *Wastrel* and van Donne's freighter, but distance gave Travers and Marin a better view, and it was Travers's turn to swear.

"Forget it, Richard," he called into the chaos of the comm loop. "We can see him from here. The big guy's got van Donne in tractors, taking him aboard right now." His eyes sped over the instruments. "Relax, the engine just shut down."

"And that freighter's going to haul ass," Perlman added. "You want to chase, Richard?"

"Not my call," Vaurien said, and his voice was taut with anger. "Shapiro? And remember, we've already taken a beating. We've got ten kinds of hull damage." The warning was underlined in every stony syllable.

"Stand down, Captain Vaurien." Harrison Shapiro never sounded flustered. Travers wondered what it would take to ruffle his feathers. "We've got the client from Omaru. Good enough. Bring your gunship aboard, and the Eclipse, and put this ship right into the Borushek Fleet docks."

"Repairs on a Fleet account?" Vaurien was a fraction mollified.

"You were on a Fleet contract," Shapiro said evenly. "In fact, you still are. Borushek, Captain." And then, "Lieutenant Travers?"

The Yamazake was even then looping down toward the ridge spine of the *Wastrel*. "Coming up fast on your position," Travers reported. "We'll be aboard right after the gunship." He paused to peer at the limp body in the acceleration couch beside him. "You better have your medic stand by, Richard. I gave Berglun a shot, and the wound didn't look serious to me, but he's still out cold and he's the color of old gym socks."

"Alive?" Shapiro demanded sharply.

Travers reached over, feeling for a pulse. "Alive."

"Then bring him in," Richard Vaurien invited. "Bay 4 is waiting for you. And, Marin?"

"What?" Marin was busy, locating on the bay.

"A message for you just came in from Mark Sherratt," Vaurien said cryptically. "He's headed for Borushek right now."

"What a coincidence," Marin said with a certain cynicism as he took the Yamazake eclipse in a backbreaker loop around the big, ugly shape of the salvage tug and dropped into Bay 4, "so are we."

Chapter Two

*Salvage tug Wastrel,
Velcastra high orbit*

Richard Vaurien was so angry, he was tight-lipped and both fists were clenched on the side of the deep well of the threedee navigation tank as he listened to the damage report. Travers had never before seen him so furious, and he admitted to a certain fascination. Vaurien had mellowed a good deal with the years, but in his youth he had often shown a knife's edge in his smile, a dangerous quality one was foolish to ignore, but which Travers had always found perilously fascinating.

Half-forgotten scenes coalesced from the murk of ancient memories, and Travers could only mock himself with a chuckle for the sudden rush of ridiculous desire. Richard was magnificent when he was angry — Marin had certainly noticed. His eyes were bright with rueful amusement, though Curtis had little experience of Vaurien as yet, and accepted the bright halo of anger as one of the Richard's normal faces.

Brusque with annoyance, Barb Jazinsky was reading the damage report off a handy as it came in from the ship's drones. The hundred or more tiny machines were busy patching and vacuum welding on the worst sections of the hull. Moments before, the tug's medic had whisked Frank Berglun away to the Infirmary, but the man from Omaru was still deeply unconscious. He could have no idea where he was, or even that he was a captive. More than likely he believed he had been picked up by a squad from Dominguez Tactical and would wake up in Fairview Memorial Hospital, the major crash-shop on the south side. He was due a nasty surprise.

The hyperlight transition was neither smooth nor seamless, and for a moment Travers was uncomfortably aware of that sinking sensation in the pit of the belly, a crawling under the skin, an itch on the inside of the skull, before the *Wastrel* was in e-space and cruising. Marin gave a grunt of reaction, and Travers felt a hand fall on his shoulder. He stepped aside

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