

MEL KEEGAN
HELLGATE
The Rabelais Alliance



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Hellgate #1
THE RABELAIS
ALLIANCE

MEL KEEGAN

DREAMCRAFT MULTIMEDIA, AUSTRALIA

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**HELLGATE:
The Rabelais Alliance**

Chapter One

Kathleen Station, Mawson

The only way into Kathleen Station was aboard a Company shuttle. Civilians never visited the mine. Kathleen was barren, hollowed-out, toxic. Despite the romance of its name, two centuries of being stripped to feed raw materials to the Mawson colony had rendered the whole globe to cinder, dust and a thin atmospheric pall of poisonous gas.

The shuttle was a brute, big, ugly. Such heavy lifters were rarely seen in other Deep Sky systems in three hundred years, but Mawson was a backwater, buried too deep in the Shackleton Void for through traffic to visit often. Isolation impoverished the system. Most of Mawson's technology was home grown, built in the Company factories in the southern hemisphere where the climate grew so arid, even the determined pioneers of the first colony fleet were forced out by violent dust storms. A decade after colonization, the desert was home only to the factories' tangled labyrinth of girder and conduit.

Yet Mawson was the system's earthlike world, while Kathleen — the G2 star's only other rocky, hard-surface planet — was a bare, impact-cratered ball of stone and ore, where the atmosphere was long ago blasted away by a comet. The naked rock of the surface showed a billion-year history of monstrous collisions. Mining only completed the work planetary evolution had begun when the dinosaurs dominated the Earth. Kathleen was slowly being cut to pieces, hollowed out by mining machines bigger than a Fleet warship, its ore-rich rocks fired into the gaping bellies of orbital smelters.

From space the world looked malevolent, its face dark, its demeanor dangerous, and this first impression was accurate. Kathleen was a killer. Her atmosphere was too thin to be breathed by humans, and filled with native toxins. The fallout of mining had not improved the environment.

The world's three moons were reduced to mangled, tumbling boulders, and a haze of asteroids and debris filled Kathleen's skies, compelling the Regan de la Courte heavy lifter to drive into orbit with its flak screens

up and its geocannon blasting to dust anything larger than twenty meters that got into its path.

Curtis Marin tugged at the collar of his Company fatigues. He had put them on three weeks before when he signed his name to a Regan de la Courte contract, and if all went well, he would be taking them off, permanently, when he caught the starclipper out of this system. In three days the *Carina* was due to dock at the transit terminal in orbit over Mawson's capital city of Turin, and Mawson would not receive another starship on the passenger route till next month. Marin did not intend to be around that long.

The name on his lapel tag read 'Johansen, R,' and to the other members of the work 'gang' headed into Kathleen he was Roy-J, while Roy-C was Chow, the big, ditchwater-dull munitions man with the moose-like shoulders and the wide, perpetual smile. It seemed you couldn't annoy Roy Chow, no matter what was said or done. Which was fortunate, Marin decided, since Chow had specialized in munitions since his years in Fleet, and if he was so inclined, he could have blown the Company shuttle *Andover* into shards of white hot steel.

The face of Kathleen loomed off the starboard quarter of the lifter, while two hundred kilometers astern the massive engine sled, incongruously, and humorously, named *Cassiopeia*, stood on station, pulse engines idling, waiting to collect the flock of four shuttles it had just cast off into Kathleen space.

The sun was small at this distance, at ninety degrees from the planet. The *Andover's* passenger module was a single freight container converted to carry 'live cargo,' as the gangs called themselves, and perched precariously atop a stack of other containers, each loaded with fuel elements, machinery, spare parts and supplies for Kathleen Station.

The interior of the module was lit with the weird, greenish light from the planet, and Marin thought every man and woman in the gang looked decayed. None of them wanted to be here. It was the short-straw job, the ass-end of the Company's work roster. But everyone on the Regan de la Courte payroll wound up here sooner or later, and new recruits could expect to draw this duty, as if the Company thought it best to get the worst out of the way soon. Marin was not perturbed. Alone among the laborers of 47-gang, he actually had a personal reason to visit Kathleen.

He had come to kill a man.

On approach to the Station now, the *Andover* rotated around her center of gravity to present brake thrusters to the planet. The deck shifted uncomfortably under Marin's feet and he felt the familiar quickening of his pulse.

Very soon he would be looking into the man's eyes. He would draw the dart gun from a sealed inside pocket, a tiny, seemingly flimsy weapon, invisible to metal and chemical detectors, pre-loaded with five hair-fine quills, barely large enough to leave any visible puncture wound.

The slender cavity inside each quill was charged with a reservoir of venom from a thumb-sized spider, one of the most venomous creatures known, on the more than three hundred colonized and explored worlds. It was native to Amazonia, on Earth — a world Curtis Marin had never even visited — but the spider was bred, cultivated, redesigned and re-engineered, in a dozen laboratories between the home colonies and the Deep Sky.

Five hundred generations away from the original spider brought out of the fetid swamps of the Amazon Basin, the venom had become a neurotoxin so powerful, it killed a man in less than a second, and the autopsy would show only complete heart failure as the cause of death, which was entirely accurate. Every organ stopped in an instant.

No pain. No time for fear — nor for remorse. Often, Marin thought the mercy of the execution was at odds with the crime. A man called Reece Clyma surely deserved to realize his sins had caught him up: the lives he had taken were about to be paid for — and justice sometimes wore a face that did not belong to the law. The division between justice and revenge was often so fine, a man could not even focus on it. Which side of that division one stood on, Marin mused, was a philosophical question.

Reece Clyma had been Company for twenty years and when push came to shove, obviously de la Courte defended their man. Charges were never laid, though Clyma had taken at least eleven lives and washed dirty money through so many offworld accounts, even Marin lost track of the funds in an AtransaBank branch on Cimarosa. Clyma was doubtlessly a billionaire while a civilian pilot was dead. Ten other civilians were buried alongside her in the next few days to cover Clyma's tracks so thoroughly, the Company lawyers defending him had it easy.

Eight months passed in fruitless appeals to the colonial government until eventually two grieving families from Turin were delivered an official desist order. They were close to being charged themselves, for harassment of an innocent man. And Clyma banked the money, safe behind the shield of the Company legal department. He believed himself so secure, nothing could touch him. Not the law, and certainly not the survivors of the men and women he had disposed of.

It was possible he had never even heard the name of Dendra Shemiji. He could never have anticipated the grief-stricken household in Turin having the courage to make an illicit call, offworld, almost out of sector. Even less would he have suspected that the households he had gutted might have the connections, the resources, to engage the services of an elite society.

This deep in the Shackleton Void, few people knew about a guild that worked in the shadows, crossing from one side of the law to the other, back and forth, as time, place and necessity demanded. Clyma might have suspected the arrival of a private investigator, might even have armored himself against such a challenge.

But Dendra Shemiji moved in the twilight world of a half-forgotten people, and if the Resalq were unfamiliar to the public, the ancient society was simply unknown. Unknown, and unknowable. Yet it was alive, surviving even now, and flourishing after almost a millennium in limbo.

Curtis Marin smiled at his own reflection in the thick viewport of the passenger module. He was winter pale after the cold season in Geneva and his last assignment, to the ice-bound Argyll Peninsula in Velcastra's southern hemisphere. Winter seemed to have followed him for months and his eyes appeared very dark, very blue, in a face that was incongruously fair. His hair was dense, curly, dark brown with the red highlights of the old Celtic bloodline that somehow still bred true despite the centuries and the light years. He thought he had his father's looks, with wide shoulders and a lean physique, but something of his mother was there too, in the shape of his wide mouth, perhaps the straightness of his nose, the color of his eyes. Curtis Marin was not from genetically redesigned stock, but unlike many people out here in the Deep Sky colonies, it was a fact he did not flaunt.

He grabbed a handhold as the *Andover* angled again, twisting, shaking and groaning like a cheap hooker in the upper reaches of Kathleen's thin atmosphere. Vapor began to stream against the viewport and Marin lost sight of the planet. He turned his back on the finger-thick armorglass and cast a critical eye over his companions.

These were 47-gang: Chow, Roy, with the big shoulders and the indefatigable smile, in charge of munitions, geocannon shells, detonators, blasting charges. Muntzen, Kirsten, the tech-gang's leader, a short, thickset blonde with battering-ram bosoms crammed dangerously into the dust-green Company fatigues, and ice-cold eyes that told a man to back off and keep his distance. She was five years out of Fleet and retained that unmistakable toughness. Her field was maintenance of the communications arrays, the uplink.

Strapped into the seat beside her was Marco Seitz — handsome, tall and lanky, legally handfasted but cheating on Chow every chance he got. He had soon flashed the signs at Marin, naked invitation, and Marin might have felt a second of genuine temptation. Seitz was not drop-dead gorgeous, but the man's native charm was undeniable. Curtis turned him down as politely as the situation permitted. Only a fool let himself get personally involved when his only reason to be in his place was a civil-sanction. Execution. Seitz was a six-year Company man in charge of cyber systems, computers, servicing the mainbrains under Kathleen Station. How many times had he worked a shift here? On this landing his eyes were dilated, and a shell-thin, translucent VR visor covered his upper face. The datacube's case lay on the seat beside him, garish with a sexshop poster carrying the blurb for *Manflesh IV*.

In the seat behind was Juanita Palmer, the medic, thin as a Lushi, tall as a Pakrani, and yet neither one. She was proud of the fact she was first

generation out from the home colonies. There was not a genetically re-engineered cell in her body, and she was way too good for Mawson.

Last came the new kid on this particular block, Roy-J himself, specializing in flight systems and interfaces — specifically the biocyber interfaces where human pilots and robot miners interacted. What Marin knew about biocyber interfaces he had learned in the last year of his own five-year hitch with Fleet. Injured, healing, ailing, he had not been reassigned to a carrier but was routed closer to home, to the Fleet Base on Borushek. For six months he was with Research and Development, pitting his skills as a pilot against the best sims Fleet could design, destruction-testing the department's experimental navigation systems and newest biocyber interfaces.

He had worked in, and with, those interfaces, crashed them and helped to diagnose and repair them. Regan de la Courte's civilian systems were simple by comparison. Fleet's cutting-edge interfaces placed the pilot into the mind of the machine and launched the weird, hybrid creature into a simulated maelstrom of Hellgate.

By contrast, the interfaces on Kathleen simply meshed the human pilot with the robot miner and gave the odd, mongrel form of quasi-life a planet to destroy.

"Hey, Johansen." Marco Seitz was done with the VR sex romp and pulled the visor off his head. He was local. The Turin accent was dense, the vowels long, consonants slurred. He came from the Raleigh sector, south side, where small industry blurred into rural agriculture, and a crash shop was as likely to be fixing a tractor as a skytruck. In the warren of Turin's citybottom, Raleigh was scorned as hick country, where inbreeding was rife and promiscuity even more so. Looking at Marco, Marin could believe it. He was flushed, sweated after the canned entertainment, still excited. He looked like a carnivore on the prowl.

Marin lifted a brow at him. In ten days with the Company he had soon come to realize, he did not much like the man. Seitz was handsome but arrogant about his looks. He was adequate in his work, but careless. Munzen had been covering for him for months and Marin had already started to pick up and correct Seitz's mistakes before they could cause trouble. Marco would have been more pleasant to work with if he appreciated the help, but instead of gratitude he offered sex in return, assuming his colleagues covered for him to get laid. The arrogance was rank.

"You checked the suits?" he wanted to know.

As the newest recruit on 47-gang, it was Johansen's chore to make sure the five suits and two spares were loaded and the service tags were in good order. Obviously, Marin had checked them before launch, as per schedule. If he had not, it was a reprimand and a heavy fine docked out of his wages.

"Too late to be worth even glancing at them now, if I didn't," he said acidly. "We're two minutes out from Kathleen Station. You want to turn around, go back now for fresh suits?"

Seitz made a face. "You know, you got a smart mouth, Roy-J."

"So I'm told." Marin turned away from the gang and stooped to peer through the viewport, waiting for a first glimpse of Kathleen Station. His window of opportunity to settle accounts with Reece Clyma was just eight hours long.

Then the *Andover* was leaving and Clyma was scheduled to return to Mawson. He had been on Kathleen six interminable days, working on one of the miners. He reported the job complete an hour before the *Cassiopeia* left Mawson, and if Clyma did not hitch a ride back on this shuttle he would wait three days for the next 'milk run.' It was no coincidence that he was in the same line of work as Roy Johansen. Their job specialty would throw them together, they were expected to rub shoulders, which was to Marin's purpose.

"And yes, damnit," Marin added over his shoulder to the still glaring Seitz as he caught a first glimpse of the Station, "of course I checked the crate and service tags."

He had seen the radio masts first, three towers spearing up high above the two landing platforms and the habitat dome. The miner docks straggled away into the southwest, great pits in the gray-brown surface, half-roofed and shielded, with the lifter hangars and machine bays in a crescent around the habitat. The green of trees, the reds, blues and golds of human structures showed dimly through the semi-opaque skin of the dome. The only other color in the landscape of Kathleen was the green and red guide lights on the landing platform, the winking blue marker beacons on the radio masts, the routine red and blue signage on the tank farm to the north of the dome, and the monstrous, signal-flare yellow bay doors of Dock 4, which stood open and empty when Marin had expected to see a miner berthed there.

That miner had run divergent two weeks ago, and before the pilot could shut it down it plowed nose-first into a shale cliff, burying itself. Two tugs pulled it out and lifted it back to base. Clyma arrived twelve hours later and began to burrow into the biocyber interface.

Every day the miner was docked, Regan de la Courte was losing money. Twenty of them quartered Kathleen, serviced by four tenders and two tugs. The tenders were on station-keeping in low orbit, and as the *Andover* rotated around to set its tail on Platform 1, the tug *Josephine* slid in over Platform 2. It monstrously overshadowed the shuttle, and if the *Andover* was an ugly brute, the *Josephine* was a hunchbacked giant with a twisted, deformed profile. Cranes and grapples on one side, generators and projectors on the other, high in the stern, low in the bow, cavernously hollowed out in between, riding a blistering storm of repulsion that kicked up a pall of thin gray dust.

Kathleen was not a place to be for any length of time, Marin decided. A day would be too long. Fortunately, the work of Dendra Shemiji could

be done well before the *Andover* departed. And when she took off, she would be carrying a bodybag.

The shuttle bottomed out with a jolt through the whole airframe. A thousand memories haunted Marin. They sweated his palms, made him grab for a handhold though the deck was firm under his feet. For a single split second he was back on the gunship —

Sierra Company, 245th Marines, flying off the carrier *Outbound Pioneer*. The last place in the galaxy anyone wanted to be. The first place a kid was sent, right out of basic training, ten weeks into the five-year hitch of the Fleet draft —

He blinked the memory away. Every member of 47-gang was haunted by the same demons. Every kid from Earth itself to Hellgate was conscripted for the DeepSky Fleet, no exceptions, no arguments. Fleet did not care if your father was an industrial tycoon or a garbage recycler. The service, the uniform and the simulation tank were waiting for you, ten weeks ahead of the live battlefield.

The old colonies of the Middle Sky and the raw, new colonial worlds strung out along the Rabelais Track were often ripped by infighting, torn by bloody disputes. Wreckers, privateers, mercenaries, black marketeers, corporate armies. Weeks out from the home colonies, the government of Earth became tenuous.

The Deep Sky colonies were laws unto themselves. Marin had grown up listening to newsvids about the growing unrest in those worlds. For twenty years war had simmered just under the surface, sometimes bubbling through in molten eruptions. In the colony systems, strewn like jewels in the night sky, Fleet was the last talon-hold of the Confederacy. Past Jagreth, an outbound ship was on the outer fringe of the quadrant. Ahead lay uncharted zones, and the Deep Sky colonies followed the haphazard beacon line of the Rabelais Track, wrapped around the fringes of Hellgate itself.

Grapples took hold of the *Andover* with a dull clamor, chiming through the hull, and the pulse engines shut down in the shuttle's tail. The generators were still running, up under the flight deck, though the pilots had throttled them back from full gravity resist to idle. The low-level vibration seemed part of the airframe, but any gunship veteran knew the feel of Arago generators.

Grumbling as usual, Munzen and Palmer pulled their personal gear from the compartments. They growled about the delay, about the food, the company, the work, the pay, the weather. Marin had stopped listening days ago. Seitz and Chow lagged behind, arguing quietly, and Marin shouldered his own single bag as he elbowed through ahead of 47-gang. He was at the hatch before them, watching the status screen.

Decontamination. Pressure equalization. His ears tightened as the passenger module came up to pressure, and then the hatch slid open and

he stepped out onto a ringing, black metal deck. The shuttle dock was a prefabricated jumble, cold, windy, half-lit and forbidding, but orange spinners beckoned new arrivals to Kathleen Station through an internal blastdoor.

The blastdoor opened onto an airlock, part of the permanent pressure skin of the habitat, and once through the lock-in, lock-out security, the Station was more pleasant. Regan de la Courte, in the form of Greg Brand, made the Company's greetings to the mine. Marin had seen him in the Company's orientation package, a four-hour holovid through which newbies sweated before they were assigned to 'the Kathleen roster.'

Brand was just short of retirement, thick around the middle though his shoulders were still wide, his arms hard, his hands tough. Towering over all of 47-gang but the lean, gangling Seitz, Brand favored them with a smile that wrinkled his walnut-brown skin, deepening the nests of creases around pale blue eyes. He knew all of them personally, traded friendly insults with them and slapped Chow's back as he invited him and Seitz for a beer when their shift was done.

In this skeleton-staffed environment, Brand was listed as both Security Chief and nominal Station Coordinator, which meant he monitored everything and everyone, kept the paperwork straight and at least rationalized the situation when gaffs were made. He alone on Kathleen wore a sidearm, yet he apologized for the formality as he ran a probe over the new arrivals.

The scan was thorough but Marin was unconcerned. Every part of the dart gun was the same kind of plastex as surgical implants and prostheses, and the tiny weapon fired a charge of compressed air packaged in a keratin sheath which scanned as biological tissue. The darts themselves were splinters of bone loaded with the venom. They would not show up on a chemical scan, since the compound was biological, natural, neither a synthetic, an explosive nor an incendiary.

The palm-sized IntelScan probe whirred and chattered over Marin in cursory fashion. The old man made the same routine apologies before passing on to Munzen and Palmer and running the gauntlet of their habitual grumbling. Their remarks were snide, cutting, but Brand seemed to have heard them all before. He ignored them utterly and turned his attention back to Marin when Curtis asked,

"You know where I'd find Reece Clyma? I'm the biocyber specialist."

"Come up to check his work, have you?" Brand snorted. He holstered the probe and straightened. "Watch out for the left hook if you let him know you're cross-checking him."

"Clyma's a sonofabitch?" Marin shifted the weight of his pack on his shoulder. "I'm not here to cross-check anything, it's just routine service on the interfaces for miners 4 and 9. They're due for it, this flight."

"I know that." Brand shoved both hands into his pockets and stood back to let the rest of 47-gang go on into the Station. They had been here

numerous times and knew the way. "And yes, Clyma's a sonofabitch. Runs a franchise on mean. You haven't heard the stories?"

"Stories? Sorry, man. I only signed with the Company a few days ago." Marin watched a crew of three techs converge on the *Andover*. They had already begun to unload. "You mean all the legal stuff? I heard a couple of clan houses in Turin wanted Clyma investigated by Tactical."

"Damn right. This way, son. You'll want to dump your gear before you track down Clyma. He's still out on 17."

"The miner?" Marin fell into step beside the old man. "I thought he'd finished the work."

"He took it out on test." Brand jerked a thumb over his shoulder, more or less due east. "He's someplace over yonder, in the Canyon 185, working the Jivaro Lode. Last time I looked his beacon was running. You can be out there in a few minutes. Take one of the trucks."

"I'll do that." Marin had seen Muntzen and Seitz, loitering on the edge of the staff accommodation blocks, opposite the dome's open midsection, which had been cultivated with what trees and shrubbery would grow at all in canned air and artificial light. The truck bay was across the park; the company offices were to the right of the apartments, beside the shuttle dock. Infirmary, quartermaster, diner and cold stores were dead ahead.

The recreation center was past the cold stores. Holothater, gym, tanning, sauna, the VR danceshop, sexshop, the usual dreamden, full of the designer drugs that had torn other centuries to shreds. The whole gamut from chimera to angel, gryphon and back, harmless now, no more than cheap entertainment, another way to blow off a month's wages before even making it back home.

He had studied the groundplan of Kathleen Station along with the geography of the mine. Despite the monstrous size of every physical feature, Kathleen was actually simple, and the planet-wide mine was picked out in marker beacons.

Canyon 185 was a rift half the size of the Mariner Valley. Shafts and pits scored it, reaching deep into the planet's crust. If a vein of ore ran too deep for a miner to get hold of it, terradynamic charges would bring the substrata to the surface, where the miner would ingest the rock and spit it out as pure ores for the smelter and a constant dump of slag blown out onto the planet's ruined surface. At either end of 185 were the mass drivers, and in orbit, the four smelters disgorging a constant supply of metals and minerals for Mawson's industry.

The technology was old, the machinery mostly outdated, the systems obsolete. But this deep in the Shackleton Void, Mawson was virtually forgotten. Only during taxation and the military service levy did the government of Earth even care to remember the colony existed, and the majority of the population, scattered between Turin and the agricultural settlements on the south side of the Durn Forest, seethed with unrest.

"You heard about Clyma, did you?" Brand did not sound surprised.

"Two Company people died, then a while later a few civvies, a pilot and some others, on the outside. He was ... the locker room chatter I heard said Clyma was the common denominator," Marin said carefully, watching the old man's profile. It was difficult to read the mood of a man he had known all of ten minutes.

For all he knew, Brand could be Clyma's blood brother. Marin had done as much research as he could, but a point was soon reached where records, archives, petered out. His own investigation consumed two weeks, a dozen computer searches, scores of personal interviews. At the end of it, Marin himself was more than satisfied of Reece Clyma's guilt, but since the man was about to suffer a mysterious end, the new kid on 47-gang must be cautious in what he said, and how he phrased it.

"Seemed to me," he said carefully, "there was a damn good reason for an official inquiry, if only at Company level. But it never happened. Somebody up high pulled the plug."

"Reece Clyma!" Brand spat into the steel decking. "When you're in bed with a bunch of Company lawyers, the gray suits and their angels, you're not going to be investigated, son, not at any level, no matter what you do. Get that through your head right now, if you want to score a Company pension fifteen years from now."

"Angels?" The term was unfamiliar.

Brand angled a glance at him. "You're not local, are you?"

"I just came across from Velcastra," Marin lied smoothly. "Same reason as everyone else. Looking for work. It was either Mawson or Cimarosa, and I'd like to stay out of that dust-hole, if I can." He shrugged. "Mawson looked like the best offer I was going to get. There's not too much work for biocyber specialists in the public tech sector."

The old man's eyes glittered. "You could always re-up for Fleet."

"I'm going to assume that was a joke." Marin snorted. "Give me a break, will you? Re-up? I look like a masochist?" He brushed the suggestion aside and asked again, "Angels?"

"Guardian angels, spooks that fix everything from parking tickets to arrest warrants." Brand had led him to the accommodation blocks, opposite the park.

Since Marin was only passing through he had not been assigned an apartment. He stashed his bag and coat in a locker and set the palm-print access. "You don't like Reece Clyma," he said warily.

"I never did, and I must've known the guy almost twenty years," Brand informed him. "Seen that sonofabitch do some pretty dirty stuff."

"You think he might have killed those people?" Marin's brows arched.

"I think it should have been investigated, and the fact it wasn't only makes me embarrassed to wear this —" Brand tapped the security badge on his lapel "— and do the job I do. Company Security covered for that

bastard. Company lawyers bought off, or bribed off, the politicians in Turin." Brand only shrugged. "Shit, boy, I don't know if Clyma's guilty or not, but I do know one thing. He'd be locked up pending an investigation if he was anybody else. And that," he added darkly, "has got to make you suspicious. Not to sound cynical, you understand."

The bitter cynicism creased his face. A lifetime in Security, a whole career invested in the Company, and at the end of it Brand saw the dirty side of his work. Marin clapped the old man's shoulder. "I'm actually only here to look at 4 and 9, but apparently Clyma asked for a bundle of replacement parts for 17. He said he wanted to field test them before he got offplanet. Save himself the trip back if it goes bad again. Makes sense. I thought I'd take the parts out there, see if I can help him ... ignore the politics and just get the damn job done."

"You got the makings of a good Company man," Brand observed.

Marin feigned a grin. "I could do worse. There's no work over on Velcastra, unless I want to go back to school ... which I don't."

Brand pointed him at the truck lot. "Take the bus on the end of the rank. They're all in pretty good shape, but the last one in was just serviced. You got a suit?"

"On the shuttle. It should be unloaded by now." Marin gave the old man a more genuine smile. "You work here on Kathleen the whole time?"

"Three weeks on, two off." Brand only sighed. "Six more days and I get leave ... three years, and I retire." He gave the younger man a wink. "Then I'm out of here. Right out."

"Velcastra?" Marin guessed. The place was so favored by the sector's retirees, it had the reputation of a heaven's waiting room.

"Or Omaru, or Borushek. One of those places, just so long as it isn't any hole in this system." Brand fetched a pack of the local aromatic cigarettes from a pocket and offered Marin a smoke. Marin shook his head, and Brand lit up. He plumed smoke through both nostrils. "Casino, the track, air races, danceshops, sexshops. Girls, boys and everything in between. Body paint and gryphon smoke ... anything that doesn't look or sound or smell like a factory or a mine." Brand gestured toward the park. "You want the two dollar tour? We're kinda proud of what we've done with this old place."

"Later. I'll buy you a beer, see the sights," Marin offered. "Right now, let me get business out of the way, get the job done. Service work shouldn't take more than a few hours, these systems are easy."

"Easy?" Brand almost bridled.

"If you stack them up against military biocyber interfaces. Hellgate. That was my assignment, in Fleet." Marin gave the man a lopsided grin. "Relax, I'm not putting you down."

"Hellgate." The security man did not have to feign a shudder.

"You were there?" Marin felt that old shiver down the spine. He had

done one tour in Rabelais Space, and far too many simulations in the last year of his service. The sims were designed to destruction-test biocyber devices, so virtually every mission he flew ended in disaster, the destruction of the ship, the death of the pilot. It demoralized a man fast. Six weeks in the maelstrom of the real Hellgate was enough to last him a lifetime, and the experience made veterans of any generation kindred.

"Still trying to forget about it," Brand growled. "You'll have to forgive me if I don't limp down that particular memory lane with you."

"I hear you." Marin allowed a soundless, humorless chuckle. "Where will I find 4 and 9?"

"Somewhere south of Jason Rille, I think." Brand seemed unconcerned. "The ops rooms is that way, top of the administration block. Log on, the system should know you, and Kathleen's all yours, where that she is."

"Thanks." Marin dropped a hand on the old man's shoulder. "I'll see you later, buy you that beer."

"Just so long," Brand muttered, "as you don't want to chew over Hellgate." And he ambled away toward the park under the semi-opaque dome, finishing whatever patrol.

Marin spared the security chief a moment's regret. Greg Brand did not know it, but he was about to be hauled over the Company's coals. A man was going to die, and as Chief of Security who was also the Station Coordinator, Brand would be at least indirectly answerable for the fatality. Not a desirable episode for a man on the wind-down of a long, steady career.

If Clyma's sudden cardiac arrest seemed to have been brought about by poor maintenance or shoddy work by the Station techs, Brand would have to account for it. It was his job to keep an ear to the ground, make sure his tech crews were happy, crew leaders kept the paperwork in order, labor was up to Company standards. If Clyma's heart attack looked like the result of an outrageous accident, safety protocols would be reviewed. Any number of street-legal drugs would stop a man's heart in an overdose, and if Clyma's death looked like murder, again, Brand would be held accountable.

And if it looked like murder, 47-gang would certainly be impounded, pending the official inquiry ... this was Reece Clyma, 'in bed' with the de la Courte lawyers. His death would not be swept under any Company or political rug the way the murders of his many victims had been dismissed.

Marin had dealt with every logistic of the assignment before he took the contract in Turin, but the one element he had not factored in — how could he? — was taking a liking to an old man at the end of his working life, and dumping him headfirst in Company bullshit. Brand was big, bearish, likable, and a veteran of Rabelais Space. Hellgate. Marin felt a ridiculous kind of kinship, and knew it was foolish. Dendra Shemiji permitted no space for personal involvement.

Still, he found himself breaking and remaking plans, working through his options, as he walked along the line of white-walled, prefab plascrete block apartments. Everything on Kathleen was rough, fast and temporary. The Station was routinely picked up and moved from one area of the planet to another, as de la Courte mined out and abandoned whole sectors.

Deck plates rang under his feet as he climbed to the top level of the administration building. He might have expected at least one human on the duty shift in the ops room, but the facility was simply under surveillance, camera-monitored. One rank of machines watch-dogged another. Only Company techs were ever rostered to Kathleen. A civilian could not even get aboard a de la Courte shuttle without special permits in a time of extraordinary circumstances. It was a question of liability and insurance.

Marin's logon codes had been awarded when he signed with the Company and cleared Security. He could access any mid-level ops room in Mawson — the systems most often used by approved, 'cleared' technicians in the field. The routine access was actually more than he needed. He wondered if de la Courte were even half aware of the gaps in their firewall.

Once inside a mid-level logon, any biocyber tech right out of Fleet could trick his way around the civilian system, which was optimized around locking out hackers coming in from the outside. The more sophisticated the system, the more it was prone to glitches impossible to anticipate, and all developers left themselves two or three ways to get around a gridlock. They worked in a realm of virtual reality, in principle almost identical to battlefield simulations, but civilian systems were a walk in the park by comparison with labyrinthine military sims.

The ops room was quiet. The soft whir of the a/c was Marin's only company as he deliberately showed his face to the cameras, pulled up a roller chair and punched into the techs' terminal. The machine recognized his ID code at once. One hundred million kilometers away, a computer on Mawson would soon be listing his access in the Company log. Marin was so far on the right side of de la Courte procedure, he would be a candidate for the year's most boring recruit.

The screen came alive with a threedee terrain model of Kathleen; the miners were located by their marker beacons. Each was a robot the size of Sanmarco space city, but only a fraction of one percent of the machine was safe for human workers. A cab was perched up by the radio masts; a pilot could actually command the miner manually, but the rest of the machine was shielded, armored, a forest of probes, cannons, grapplers, drills, scoops, rams.

Miner 17 was on the screen as it came alive. The city-sized robot worked from one end of Canyon 185 to the other, where it offloaded its cargo at the mass driver then turned around and chewed its way back down 185 toward the mass driver at the other canyon mouth.

And Reece Clyma was aboard, the only human in two million square

kilometers, the only living soul on a machine the size of the orbital metropolis that was home to sixty thousand citizens of Jagreth.

The opportunity to fulfill the Dendra Shemiji contract was perfect. But it had to be meticulous. The civil-sanction was already planned. Only old Greg Brand's unfortunate involvement made Marin pause to rethink any facet of the job, and he knew he was a fool for doing it. Sentiment was one of the few unforgivable sins in his line of work. Yet his mind continued to churn through his options as he made a record of the locations of miners 4 and 9, which were his legitimate assignment before, on a whim, he turned his attention to deeper levels of access.

It was absurdly easy to worm his way through the firewall. Whoever structured it should be brought up on charges. Still, the shoddy work made Marin's passage quicker, and for that he was grateful. He only had to dig through two levels to reach what he wanted.

The command override codes for a miner were firmly in Brand's jurisdiction, unavailable even to tech-gang leaders, unless circumstances were extraordinary. The remote command codes were a maze of numbers and letters, fifteen digits long with specific hashes and hyphens. Marin took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment and called up the thousand year old routines, mnemonic rituals, he had learned so recently.

Dendra Shemiji lived on, though the Resalq themselves might as well be dead and gone, for all the colonies were aware of them or cared about their legacy.

With the codes committed to memory he backed out of the system, left no trace of where he had been, what he had done, and logged out. The system told him his wrist chrono was off by two hours, local time. He adjusted it as he shoved the chair back along the rank of terminals to Brand's station, and then he was moving.

First, he jogged back into the loading bay under the landing platform. The freight crews would labor for hours yet, stripping the *Andover* of her cargo, but the priority items were taken off first. Vital supplies, perishable goods — the incoming gang's suits.

Every individual heading into Kathleen was issued a suit, and the suit stayed close. In case of a dome rupture or local emergency inside the habitat, the suit was a man's last and only survival ticket. A pressure suit with marginal radiation shielding was just enough to hold out Kathleen's vicious UV levels, compensate for the thin atmosphere, and the rebreather was rated for four hours. Techs working outside were suited the whole time, and anyone heading for the miners or taking out a skytruck put on a suit even if he did not lock down the helmet.

It was all about corporate liability and civilian insurance cover, Marin thought acidly as he raked through the piles of crates stacked by the inner airlock. Most were labeled for maintenance, medical, catering, but the suit crates had been dumped down a few meters apart and Marin had only to

punch his ID into the lock, pop off the top and lift out the pressure suit fitted for him.

They bundled down into a small space, with the rebreather slid up inside the helmet and the kevlex fiber bodysuit folded on itself. Four layers of heating, insulation, radiation shielding and the pressure skin made the suit bulky as a small suitcase, but easy enough to tuck under his arm as he resealed the crate.

He cast about for the case of replacement parts for 17. It had been 'priority loaded,' meaning it should be among the first items taken off the shuttle, and sure enough the blue plastex box was stacked with the small pile of other priority items. 17's replacement modules were only a fraction of the contents of the crate, packed in their own handling unit, and Marin pulled them out without delay.

He paused for a moment to watch the gang unloading the *Andover*. The bass rumble of steelrock came from the cab of one of the grappers. The repulsion field on which the red-shelled, crab-like machine rode was a warm breeze in Marin's face. The driver looked his way, wondering if he was waiting for something specific, but Marin only waved up and left the loading bay before he got in the way.

He saw nothing of 47-gang as he jogged along past the apartments and facilities. They would be settling down to their maintenance shift, and so should he be. The weight of the suit under one arm and the crate of spares in his other hand reminded him, he had a legitimate job to do as well as the odd journey work of Dendra Shemiji.

The Station's cycling systems constantly blasted furnace-heat air into the dome but the temperature remained chill, and the further he jogged from the apartments and park, the colder the air became. Marin stooped, touched the deck plates out of curiosity, and felt the instant freeze-burn in his fingertips. Kathleen was a killer. The ground froze the instant the sun was down, and when it was up the UV sizzled. There was no safe time to 'go out,' and the Company regulation — that suits were put on before any excursion — was by no means paranoid.

Away from the park and apartment row the lighting was dim, the compartments were weirdly silent. The skytruck lot was barely half-lit, cold as a meat locker, and Marin's footsteps rang hollowly. Brand had offered him the standby vehicle, the first blue-and-yellow Company 'truck on the rank, and sure enough, the instrument lights were already on. She was powered up, ready to go.

He punched his ID into the lock and the hatch whined open. The cab heating was on; a warm draft greeted him as he climbed up by the handholds and dumped his gear inside. The cab seated eight and the seats swiveled sideways, leaving Marin just enough space between them to hunch down and struggle into the suit.

The 'truck was a two year old Weiss Montaro, heavily battered and

thoroughly patched. They were already overpowered as they left the factory in Hydralis city on Omaru, then they were modified by Regan de la Courte until these 'scud-buckets,' as the tech gangs called them, were as powerful as most sport raceplanes. But the hull design was brick-like, blocky, the aerodynamics lacking. Power aside, these 'trucks were the workhorses of every industrial development in the colonies.

Marin wriggled into the pilot seat, ran up the belts and settled a combug in his ear. As soon as he punched his ID into the lock, the 'truck had logged in with the administration; the moment Marin brought the flight systems alive the onboard deck flagged the Station's control computers for takeoff clearance. Very little here was left to chance. Reece Clyma's death would catch everyone unawares.

Red spinners kicked in and a siren howled through the 'truck lot for thirty seconds before the inner doors rumbled slowly shut. The doors were a hand-span thick, shock proof, blast proof. In the vastly unlikely event that the hotcore power plant in any one of the 'trucks should detonate in this parking bay, that door would hold. Marin laid his hands lightly on the yoke, keyed up the repulsion and folded the struts up into the Montaro's belly.

She backed out, rocking on the gravity resist cushion, and he waited while the bay purged. Breathing mix was sucked back into the cycling system, and at twenty percent pressure the outer doors rumbled open.

The poisonous gas mix of Kathleen's thin atmosphere stormed in, too feeble a force to even buffet the Montaro. When the outer door locked again the cycling system would purge once more and the cyclers would blast enough furnace-hot air into the cavity to have it human-habitable in under a minute.

The sun was still up, and the outside air temperature was 3°C. The wind speed was over sixty kilometers per hour, which was unimportant, since Kathleen's atmosphere was so thin. UV levels were in the red zone and the distance-shrunken sun was a yellow-orange ball, low on the horizon and setting. Marin took the 'truck up to five hundred meters and rotated through a full three-sixty to get his bearings.

From that altitude over Kathleen Station he could actually see the near end of Canyon 185. The steady blink of the piercing blue beacon on the mass driver drew the eye and the navscreen in the panel before him marked the location of the five miners nearest to base. 4 and 9 were working way south of Jason Rille, as Greg Brand had known, while 17 was near the far end of Canyon 185, a thousand kilometers over the horizon, due east.

He keyed the radio and called once, twice, "Kathleen Station to Miner 17. 'Truck 44, calling for Reece Clyma."

There was no response and he had expected none. Radiation flash off the miner's own power plant and the mass driver interrupted radio more

often than not. If human pilots aboard the miner needed to contact the station they would hop out by pod, beyond the mass driver, and call from there. The miner carried ten transport and escape pods, enough to whisk a maintenance crew into a ballistic arc, away from whatever impending disaster.

The purple twilight sky was clear of traffic. The *Andover* was obviously still on one platform, the tug *Josephine* squatted like an immense deformed troll on the other, and Marin's 'truck was the only vehicle out of Kathleen Station. According to the data feed whispering over the combug in his ear, at this moment only two humans were outside the Station. Himself, and Reece Clyma aboard miner 17.

A prickle of sweat tickled Curtis Marin's ribs and he felt the subtle acceleration of his pulse. He and his quarry were the only living things in this barren, blasted world, and one of the two was marked to die. Clyma had marked himself, and only some unspeakable arrogance would give him the belief that he was beyond justice.

The skytruck dropped down low over the broken line of the Lomond Mesas, four fragmented table mountains. He threaded between the cliffs and took a navigation bearing on Beacon 94, on the highest. His 'truck would have dropped off the Station's tracking network as soon as he passed through the one hundred meter line, but with the glare of Kathleen's sun on the horizon, the lower altitude saved his eyes since it put the star behind Mount Aaron. Any ex-Fleet pilot flew this way, and the only reason de la Courte had hired an outworld stranger like Marin was his service record.

That record was meticulously built into the quadrant archive, the master computers at Borushek Sector Control. The access codes were changed every twenty days — being a month on Borushek — but with Dendra Shemiji connections, gaining entry to the archives was not usually a problem. Marin knew those computers as well as the specialists who installed them.

He had built an entirely new service record for a man called Roy Johansen: a native of Velcastra and thirty-three years old, Johansen served on both the carrier *Chicago* and the tender *Ariel*. He flew with the carrier close defense wing for two years, until injury took him out of the field. After six months in the Infirmary and retraining he was rotated to the tender and finished out his five year hitch as a courier pilot, flying the fastest raceplanes operated by Fleet.

The couriers spat themselves into the hyperflight envelope, or e-space, like wraiths that did not even exist in normal space, and they were flown in the VR environment, a biocyber interface. Any specialist pilot, ex-Fleet in the last ten years, knew his way intimately around the interface, and Marin was simply in luck. Regan de la Courte had advertised for a biocyber maintenance tech just ten days before Dendra Shemiji received the civil-

sanction from the city of Turin, Mawson, and gave him the assignment.

Since there was so little demand for these specialists, biocyber techs usually soon requalified in other, more lucrative fields. Regan de la Court was not quite inundated with applications, and Marin had made sure his own was so exemplary, his Company contract was not a subject of debate.

All of which brought him here, to the godforsaken, plasma-cannon blasted Sebastian Plateau in the northern hemisphere of Kathleen, where Canyon 185 was ripped like a talon scar through the ore-rich surface — the Jivaro Lode. Before him was the mass driver, half-buried in the rock, with a hundred-meter track ‘barrel.’ The smelter was in fixed orbit, just twenty kilometers above the horizon, so low, Marin could actually see the wink of its running lights.

He aimed the skytruck eastward into the kilometer-deep gouge of the canyon and opened the throttles wide, looking out, now, for the miner. It was working the other end of 185, and he picked up its radio marker first. Inside of two hundred kilometers, it was worth calling again.

“Kathleen Station to Miner 17. ‘Truck 44, calling for Reece Clyma.”

A blast of static white noise, and Clyma was there at once. “This is 17. Who the hell is that?”

“Johansen, just got in on the *Andover*. I’ve got the replacement parts you requested for 17. How’s she handling?”

“Like a beached whale,” Clyma called through the shattering white noise generated by his own power plant. “I rigged the autonav to get her back out here, routed it through the drill temperature monitors, but it makes the whole system dog-slow. You got a 14BPQ module?”

“They sent two,” Marin told him. “Have you seen the last tech hand-out? The whole BPQ series is flawed. They found a bug in the chipset.”

“I saw it,” Clyma shouted over the static. “Where are you?”

“Coming in dead astern of you. You won’t see me through your exhaust flare,” Marin said loudly to get over the increasing white noise. He keyed the autocorrect on the comm, and again, but nothing would get over the radiation flash from a Prometheus plant. They were banned on inhabited worlds, or any globe with a viable ecosystem, and most often used by Fleet and industry in zones where the superhot, toxic outfall of the immense generators would not even be noticeable.

The miner was the biggest piece of hardware loose in civilian hands. The size of Sanmarco, signal-flare yellow with red and blue chevrons and the Regan de la Courte logo up on the flank, under the starboard side cranes. The tail was wide, engine cowlings glowing red even in this thin, oxygen-poor atmosphere; the nose was blunt, scooped, and seemed to be filled with fangs. Probes, sensors, drills, geocannon, charge launchers, vacuum hoses, high pressure hoses, all gave the miner the look of a malevolent, city-size, fang-mouthed armadillo.

It was the first time Marin had been up close to such a machine and he

had to admit, he was impressed. "Which dock do you want me in?"

A howl of radio noise, and then, "Use Dock 3. Repeat, Dock 3. You hear me?"

"Dock 3," Marin shouted. He had already throttled back and was almost at the hover, two hundred meters off Clyma's left rear hull. He angled the 'truck around, dropped down to fifty meters altitude and looked for the dock.

It was already open, waiting for him. Dock 3 was just under the cab. Clyma himself was probably in Dock 2. The 'truck was not much smaller than the bay, and the miner was moving, albeit slowly, making a steady ten k's per hour into the east. As Marin watched, the landing lights kicked in, floods angled out of the bay, and red running lights began to rip lines left and right of his landing lane.

The skytruck nosed down, and in. As Marin brought it to the hover and unfolded the struts the hatch growled shut. He released the belts but sat tight, watching the instruments as decontamination began. After its approach to the miner, the 'truck was hot enough to be treated as low-level radioactive waste. It was scrubbed for a little over three minutes while red spinners cast goblin shadows around the bay. Then the spinners changed to blue and a light on Marin's panel winked green.

Feeling clumsy in the suit, he swiveled the seat out, reached back for the crate of replacement parts, and he was climbing down by the truck's handholds when the bay's inner hatch rumbled open. Reece Clyma himself was framed in the doorway. Marin felt a familiar, prickling thrill of recognition.

Hunter and hunted, predator and quarry.

Did Clyma feel hunted? Had he been looking over his shoulder since the weeks, not much under a year ago now, when he murdered a civilian pilot whom he had forced to fly a mission, and then went on to murder her technician, who was also her handfasted partner, their neighbor who witnessed the second murder, and so on, in a cascade of track-covering. At least eleven lives had been taken while dirty money was laundered through so many accounts, so many offworld hands, even Marin lost track of it.

Dendra Shemiji knew where it was. A specialist had been working to access the locked trust account for the past week, and though the grieving clans in Turin did not know it, they were about to be mysteriously, and appallingly rich. Rich enough to move across to Velcastra or Omaru, if that was their fancy. Wealthy enough to make the move to Earth and not be eaten alive by the society sharks to whom 'true blood, old money and good family' were the three mainstays of the Terran Confederacy. The incredible wealth Clyma had murdered for would cut like a plasma torch through the society that scorned and spurned colonials, with their re-engineered bodies, outworld thinking and coarse, hardworking hands.

So this was Reece Clyma. Tall as a Pakrani, pale as a Mazjeet and yet neither of those, with his ice-green eyes, red-blond hair and the soft palms of an executive. He was Company, a twenty year de la Courte veteran, and he had been up on the elite level for half that time. Murderer or no, he was the best biocyber man the Company had, and the only specialist senior enough, qualified enough, to perform brain surgery on a miner and take it out on test without supervision.

Blind luck brought Clyma to Kathleen at this time. It made Marin's job easy. Clyma was itching to get out, eager to get aboard the *Andover*. He had obviously been working on 17. He wore the obligatory suit but had shrugged it off his shoulders and tied the arms around his waist, and the helmet was abandoned, upside down on a seat in the back. Under the suit he wore plain clothes rather than the dust-green fatigues. There was no name tag on his lapel, and he never needed to punch in his ID, since the Company machines right across this system knew his voice print.

But out on the ailing 17, in the comprehensive sensor-blind of a Prometheus generator, Clyma had been alone, isolated and invisible for several hours now, and the miner was little more sentient than a mountain. He could have been dead for hours already, who would know? Only the question of Greg Brand remained on Marin's mind, and as he hefted the case of spare parts and followed Clyma into the lift, up to the cab, inspiration hit him.

"If the 14BPQ module is replaced, she should come good," Clyma was saying over his shoulder as he made his way into the cab. He glanced back at Marin. "So you're Johansen. I saw your service record. I recommended you. You haven't worked in the industry since Fleet, but the equipment hasn't changed."

"Civvy systems are still trying to catch up with Fleet," Marin said glibly. "I spent a few months working with some R&D people from Omaru. Your gear won't surprise me."

Clyma gave him a hard look. Calculating, not exactly approving. As if he had expected his recommendation of the civilly inexperienced Johansen to win him a lackey, and Marin's glibness rubbed him the wrong way. Marin lifted a brow at him and waited for the challenge, but Clyma said nothing. He held out a hand for the crate, and Marin gave it to him.

The cab seated a crew of six with generous space and a wide work bench in the middle. The crate popped open on the bench and Clyma rummaged for the module, a fist-sized object, sealed into a gray shell like an ostrich egg. One curve was molded to fit snugly into a housing in the guts of the open control panels, and as it clicked into place the shell was pierced, denuding the hair-fine, filamentary connectors.

The module either worked or it didn't. There was no way to test it without installing it, and once it was installed, the shell ruptured, the delicate mechanism was exposed to air and dust, it could not be installed a

second time. So the Company had sent two 14BPQs, while the entire series was being returned to the factory for an in-Company product recall.

The old module was already gone, the receiver socket was empty and 17 was piloting itself using shared circuits in the engine monitors. Dog-slow, said Clyma, handling like a beached whale. He was cursing under his breath as he pulled a pair of skinthins over both hands — one never touched a module bare-handed; the faint traces of oil in human skin denatured the shell and the static charge in a man's hands could skew the microelectronics within. Clyma turned the module, slid it gently into the receiver and pressed it home.

A discreet chime issued from the panel; a telltale shifted from amber to green, fluttered, stabilized, and Clyma issued a grunt. "Looks like she's going to work."

"I'll check out the others." Marin watched Clyma start a diagnostic of the whole autonav board. "4 and 9 are on the roster for this trip. Base sent 14BPQs for them all."

"They're working Jason Rille." Clyma did not look up from his task. "There isn't four hours' work between the pair of them."

"Then I'll be on the *Andover* when she leaves," Marin said quietly. *And you won't.* He cleared his throat silently as he opened the pressure suit. Left handed, he reached into the sealed pocket inside the Company fatigues and drew out a weapon so small, it was invisible in a man's palm. He said to the back of Clyma's bowed head, "The households of Sanchez and Gorodin sent me."

For a long second there was no reaction, the names were unrecognized. Ten months had gone by. Time and arrogance had certainly begun to dull the memories. Then Clyma gave that faint flinch of recognition and straightened slowly from the diagnostic board. He saw Marin's leveled hand, but it must appear to be empty.

The ice green eyes flickered to the pointed fingers and then returned to Marin's face. "You're not the biocyber tech?"

"I can do the job," Marin told him. "But I signed a different contract months ago, and it superseded the de la Courte labor agreement." His brows arched. "You want to tell me what happened?"

Clyma's throat bobbed in a swallow. "Who are you? *What* are you?"

"For what it's worth, my name is Curtis Marin," he said quietly. "Have you heard of Dendra Shemiji?"

"They're a myth," Clyma barked, "like the Resalq, they probably never existed, and even if they did, we don't know a damn thing about them."

"Wrong on all points," Marin said in the same quiet tone. "Dendra Shemiji is justice, Mister Clyma. Blind justice, impartial, dispassionate and, in the end, unavoidable. But it *is* justice, which is why I asked you a moment ago, do you want to tell me what happened?"

"Give you my side of the story, let *you* decide whether I live or die?"

Clyma spat into the deck plates. "Christ! Who in hell do you think you are, you bastard, to hold the sword over me?"

"I'm the agent with the civil-sanction," Marin said in a harsher tone. He cocked his head at Clyma. "Justice and the law are frequently two different things. No one knows that better than you. I've already investigated you, Mister Clyma. I chased your money from Hydralis to a holding company on Velcastra and a private account on Mazjene. I lost track of it when it was passed between business fund accounts on Cimarosa, but Dendra Shemiji continued to pursue it. They know exactly where it is, and you ought to be aware, in your ... absence, the two houses you gutted are about to become extraordinarily wealthy."

"You slime," Clyma breathed. "You want me to justify myself to you? As if it would do any good — you've already tried and sentenced me. All you have to do now is pull the bloody trigger, and the rest of this — this goddamned Resalq *moralizing*, is just so much bullshit."

"Perhaps it is," Marin allowed. His aim never wavered. "I'm an assassin, Mister Clyma. I don't nominate the individuals to be executed, but I do verify the civilian justice contract. It's part of the job."

"The job?" Clyma's face twisted. "You're a murderer!"

"Is the executioner a murderer?" Marin permitted a faint smile. "That's a philosophical question which has haunted humans down the millennia. I'm not about to deliberate it further. I've given you two chances to tell me what happened. I'll not ask again, Mister Clyma."

The green eyes narrowed and a sheen of fresh sweat shone on Clyma's brow. "I don't need to justify myself to a killer. But I will tell you this, Johansen, or whatever your name is. They were scum. Every one of them was so stupid, putting them in the ground did the gene pool a favor." His brows arched. "I put it to you, Johansen —"

"Marin."

"Whatever." Clyma's fists clenched. "I put it to you. Three billion dollars, there for the taking. I needed a pilot, a good one, not Company. Fly a dumb-ass mission to Haagen and keep your mouth shut. So what does she do? She brings along her mechanic, her handfast. And the mechanic pulls a gun on me."

"Because to coerce the pilot, Boronia Sanchez, to fly to Haagen for you," Marin said slowly, "you took hostage her kid brother and his lover."

"And the brother, and his pretty boy," Clyma said nastily, "were tucked away safely, skulled out, doing the chimera trip of a lifetime. Good quality shit, Marin, same as I use myself. They'd have been dumped back home, never even knew what happened to them."

"But Sanchez panicked, she refused to be suckered into making a flight that could put her on the wrong side of the bars for thirty years, so you grabbed her family off the street in Turin, used them to force her hand. Then you killed Boronia Sanchez and her partner, Karen Ewan, who was

her mechanic ... and then you killed Heath Sanchez and his lover, and the neighbor who saw you deal with them. And five others in the next three weeks, who were either witnesses or stumbled over the evidence, including two individuals within the Company."

"Seven," Clyma growled. "There were seven. Two weren't Sanchez, nor Gorodin nor Company, and their houses took hush-money, shut their mouths and got rich on the silence."

"So it's thirteen dead," Marin concluded. "And you didn't think that at least *one* of the survivors might take matters into their own hands?"

"I told you, they're scum," Clyma repeated. "The gene pool would thank me."

"I don't think so. And I'm sure no one in those families agrees with you. And they," Marin said levelly as he thumbed the palm gun's mechanism alive, "are the holders of an approved civil-contract with Dendra Shemiji." He lifted the tiny weapon into line. Clyma's pale face was no more than four meters away. Missing the target was impossible. "I investigated you myself, Mister Clyma. In any court in any colony, you would have been charged with serial murder, and executed months ago. You're alive today only because Regan de la Courte protected you. It's probable you have a partner, placed highly in the Company.

"My investigation didn't probe so deeply, because Dendra Shemiji policy is, one crime, one life. Yours." He gestured with the weapon. "Your partner, your 'angel' as you call it here, the one who protected you and diverted Turin Tactical and the Mawson Justice Department, won't benefit by so much as a dollar, and perhaps another Dendra Shemiji contract will be negotiated in due course."

Clyma's tongue flickered, snake-like, over his lips. "For godsakes, Marin, stop and think about it! You want a piece of the deal? You want a percentage? Jesus! Put the gun away — I can get you thirty percent, an equal cut, that's almost a billion!"

"Which means you *do* have an accomplice pulling legal strings inside de la Courte," Marin mused. "Thirty percent of funds raised by selling Regan de la Courte flight systems to the black marketeers who are supplying the colonial insurrection on Omaru. I don't have a bone to pick with you for selling top quality avionics to colonies trying to shake off the shackles of the Confederacy, Mister Clyma."

"So you support colonial republicanism," Clyma said tersely. "Good for you. Then take the money, for chrissakes, get rid of the gun!" His voice sharpened with the cutting edge of growing panic.

"Blood money, paid for with thirteen lives." Marin shook his head. "Doubtlessly you think it's a very generous offer, but I believe I'll pass. I'm only the instrument of justice — call me a contract assassin if you want to ... do you know what the name of Dendra Shemiji means? And no, I'll not have your blood money. Goodbye, Mister Clyma."

The man's eyes widened almost as if he were hypnotized, but he never even glimpsed the tiny weapon, and it was doubtful if he heard the quiet burst of the compressed air charge. A bone quill, hair-fine and needle-sharp, slid into the side of his neck, lost among the shadow of twelve-hour stubble. The sensation would be like an insect bite, closer to itch than smart. The tiny puncture wound was no larger than a pore. And then death, so swift, he could not even scratch the mosquito-like itch. No time for fear or pain, nor even for remorse.

Marin watched Reece Clyma topple at his feet in the aisle between the seats, and thought of the six men and five women who had died, about whom he knew, and the two others Clyma had confessed, who had already been forgotten by bribed families and an uninformed, overworked city Tactical unit.

He felt no rush, neither elation nor satisfaction, only a sense of achievement, knowing that a small fraction of the pain which still tormented the Sanchez and Gorodin houses would be assuaged. Odd, he thought as he began to wrap up the job, that an ancient Resalq society, born in the teeth of war — created as a weapon for that war — should survive against the odds into an alien future and become an instrument of human justice.

Since he boarded the miner he had deliberately touched nothing, and before he began to work he pulled on a fresh pair of skinthins. With exceptional care he drew the dart cleanly out of Clyma's skin and peered closely at the wound. It would show up under a microscan of follicles and pores, but to the naked eye it was invisible among the stubble of a beard which would continue to grow even when Clyma was sealed into a bodybag.

Both the dart and gun slithered into the disposal chute. The miner fed waste directly to the Prometheus core. In seconds, the tiny weapon might never have existed at all. Marin stooped over Clyma's body, lifted it by the shoulders and sat it up against the nearest seat. He swore as he untangled the suit's arms, tugged the pressure skin up around Clyma's thick torso and sealed the front seam.

He snatched the red Company helmet off the seat, jammed it on over Clyma's loose, uncooperative head, locked it up and turned the gas mix on full. Ostensibly, the rebreather was feeding Clyma eighty percent oxygen at ten liters per minute, and if CPR had failed after Clyma fell dead at Marin's feet, the last option was to head back to the Station as fast as the 'truck would fly.

17 was back on smooth autonav. The miner would work to the end of the canyon, offload at the mass driver, and return to its normal schedule. Human presence was unnecessary.

Clyma was heavier than he looked. His weight compressed Marin's vertebrae as Curtis carried him back from the cab to the lift. Getting him up into the 'truck was an exercise in ingenuity and no little pain, and Marin was swearing fluently before he climbed up after the dead weight. The

straps ran up and he cuffed sweat from his face while the Montaro sealed itself and the bay purged fast.

He was out in seconds, throttle open wide, and the 'truck lived up to its reputation. It accelerated like a raceplane, looped up away from the blistering power plant too fast to get hot, and he sent the Weiss through a high-G arc, lofting over Canyon 185, back toward the base.

Well out from the miner he hit the comm. "Truck 44 to Kathleen Station, Johansen calling for Greg Brand. Medical emergency on the miner. Brand! For chrissakes, where are you?"

The security man carried a comm on him at all times. Marin had barely finished when Brand spoke thinly over the combug. "Calm down, Johansen. What's your emergency?"

"Clyma. Your man looks dead to me," Marin said with a deliberate sharp pitch in his voice. "Get your Infirmary in gear — I'm coming back like a missile, but there wasn't much I could do."

"Clyma?" Brand echoed. "An accident on the miner?" The old man was incredulous.

"No." The 'truck was still accelerating and Marin had visually picked up the marker beacons on top of the Station's radio masts. He braked hard, fast, felt the Montaro shudder under the stress. "He was alive when I got here. Your man just dropped dead at my feet. I think it's his heart. Brand!"

"I'm still here. Get a grip, kid. It's too late to panic if he's dead. The Infirmary's cranking up. Just get yourself back into the truck lot and hand him over. How long since it happened?"

"Six, maybe eight minutes," Marin guessed. In fact, it was ten.

"That's way too long," Brand said quietly. "The man's brain-dead." He took a breath. "Look, bring him in, let the medics have him, report directly to me."

"Will do." Marin had brought the Montaro down to zero altitude and was cruising on repulsion toward the 'truck lot, waiting for the outer door. He was inside before the hatch was fully open, and nosed the 'truck back to the very place from which he had taken it not an hour before.

The Station med squad was waiting for him. Two figures in dark blue fatigues bolted into the lot while the a/c was still thrashing, and Greg Brand was a pace behind them. The last Marin saw of Reece Clyma, the suited figure was strapped to a gurney and the medics were working on him right there, in the corner of the 'truck park.

Juanita Palmer, 47-gang's own medic, leaned over the body, setting up an IntelScan medical unit to measure brainwave activity. She need not have bothered. Clyma was sixteen minutes dead, and no technology Marin knew would unravel the damage done his brain. Chow and Seitz hovered by the truck lot's blastdoor. For once Chow had stopped smiling. Seitz was feeding junk food into his mouth and his eyes were wide on Marin.

"You got all the luck," he muttered as Marin passed him by.

"Meaning?" Marin stopped and arched his brows at Seitz.

"Three years, I been wanting to break Reece Clyma's face," Marco Seitz told him brashly. "I'd pay a week's wages to see him fall face down."

"What he do to you?" Marin asked wryly, "bust you for screwing up on the job?"

"He didn't even recognize me." Seitz's face darkened. "Citybottom in Turin, a head shop, name of Leonardo's. Okay, I was skulled out. That's what Leonardo's is about. Reece Clyma's favorite hunting ground."

"Hunting?" Marin echoed.

"He's a predator," Seitz growled. "He *was* a predator." And he spat into the steel deck plates in the general direction of the gurney, where Palmer had just uncoupled the IntelScan set. Oh yes, Clyma was dead.

"Johansen!" It was Brand, bellowing from the broadwalk in front of the apartment blocks.

"Yo." Marin gave Seitz's shoulder a mock punch. "Later, man." And he jogged toward Brand.

"Smoke?" Brand offered a crumpled pack of Special Gold.

"No. Thanks, but I don't. There's times I wish I did." Marin rubbed his arms, cleared his throat. "The, uh, miner's up and running. 17's autopilot-ing, no problem, soon as Clyma put the new module in. He lived long enough to do that."

"He looked okay when you boarded?" Brand lit a Gold and beckoned Marin out of the half-lit, chill 'truck park. "Get the report out of the way, kid, let me file-and-forget."

"File and — forget?" Marin echoed, hesitating as he began to peel out of the pressure suit while they walked. "The man's dead!"

"Poetic justice," Brand said sourly. "My old man used to say, you can bet your sins'll come home to roost." He cast a glance back over his shoulder at the med squad. "Heart attack?"

"Looked like it. He was ..." Marin chafed his hands, which were genuinely cold. "He was pale as a Mazjeet when I boarded. I thought he was mad as hell — that, or skulled out on something. He used to do that?"

"Oh, yeah." Brand made a face and streamed gray smoke through both nostrils. "He'd be up to his eyeballs in chimera or angel, maybe gryphon if he could get it. Gryphon's illegal in this system, you know?"

"It is? Why?" Marin had not known and was surprised.

"Still on the books as a controlled substance." Brand gave him a lopsided grin. "Mawson's got to be ten years behind the rest of creation. Government in Turin moves with the speed of a glacier."

"Then Clyma's been begging for the heart attack," Marin said slowly. "You use enough of that crap, legal or not, you're going to cut the insides out of yourself."

"That'd be my guess." Brand sounded oddly satisfied. "Nature has a way of evening the score, kid. Don't lose any sleep over Reece Clyma. You

just got here. You don't know what a bastard sonofabitch that guy is. Was."

Marin took a breath. Brand was making it simple. "Just let me get the report down. I have to get over to Jason Rille."

"You in a hurry?" Brand took a last drag on the Gold and stubbed it out.

"I want to be on the *Andover* when she pulls out," Marin said shortly. He gave the inside of Kathleen Station a hard look. "No offense, man, but this place gives me the willies."

"No offense taken," Brand said affably as they reached the administration block. "Took me a long time to get used to Kathleen, and I still can't say I like it here." He palmed the lock and the door opened with the asthmatic whir of a burned-out servo. "Step into my office."

Like Marco Seitz, the old man scorned and despised Reece Clyma, Marin observed. In fact Brand seemed almost jovial as he folded out a monitor, pulled a chair closer and called up a form from the system. Even a thorough autopsy would simply reveal heart failure as the cause of death. Things would only get complicated if the Turin city coroner was suspicious for some reason, and began a molecular examination. A pore by pore scan of Clyma's blood and skin. Then the designer venom would be apparent, and eventually they would find the minute puncture mark.

But even then, before Turin Tactical was alerted Curtis Marin would be so far from Mawson, they would not know where to begin looking for a foreigner they knew only as Roy Johansen. A man who had never existed outside the Fleet Archives and the de la Courte personnel files. When the death was being called an assassination in the newsvids, Greg Brand would be hauled in to give account of himself and his security cordon around Kathleen — but Company recruitment had cleared Johansen, and the paperwork was straight as an inner city freeway.

Marin was satisfied. He completed the forms, offering more data than was called for, until Brand was exasperated and drew the line for him.

"Enough, son. You still have work to get through, if you want to haul your ass aboard the *Andover*." He nodded at the chrono. "You know where to find 4 and 9?"

"I logged on before I went out to 17." Marin signed off on the Company form, sat back and looked up at Brand with genuine curiosity. "You knew Clyma?"

"Not well." Brand countersigned the form and sent it without a moment's hesitation. "Enough to know I didn't want to get any more sociable." Brand lit another Gold. "Enough to know Clyma ran with the wild bunch, Turin citybottom. His heart finally quit on him? What a surprise. Beats hell out of me how he lived so long." The chair squealed under him as he leaned back and frowned at the man he knew as Johansen. "Don't waste your grief on him."

"All right." Marin got his feet under him, helped himself to a styrene

beaker of water from the cooler, drained it and lobbed it into the disposal. "I'd better get out to Jason Rille. The new module is working just fine in 17, incidentally. She'll take care of herself."

"Chill out, kid." Brand dragged smoke to the bottom of his lungs. "Look on the dark side. The medics could have gotten hold of him in time. He might make it."

"No." At the door Marin paused, though he did not look back at the old man. "No, no chance. I saw Palmer take down the scanner pack. He's dead."

Very dead, he thought as he headed back out to the 'truck lot. He frowned at the time and quickened his pace. They would load the body onto the *Andover*, and then the launch waited for no man. Marin must be aboard.

Chapter Two

Turin, Mawson

Ninety million kilometers from Kathleen, under the burnished blue sky of an oxygen-rich world that was lush and green with life, Curtis Marin lay flat on his back on a dense carpet of jupiter spruce needles and looked up into the thick, dark canopy of the Durn Forest.

He had been there for an hour. The rented Volvo stood off one side of the road, a splash of scarlet in the middle of a world of deep green. He was listening for the sounds of a vehicle, any vehicle, and the rendezvous was overdue. The survivors of the Sanchez and Gorodin houses had broken up and gone to ground as soon as Dendra Shemiji picked up the Clyma contract, and they were still in hiding, pending this meeting.

It felt good to be out of the Company fatigues and back in civilian clothes. White slacks, black shirt, boots that actually fit, a gray and dull red jacket bundled up under his head, a little expensive jewelry which, ridiculously, was banned by Regan de la Courte for anyone in the uniform fatigues. His few weeks in the Company ranks had reminded him strongly, and unpleasantly, of being right back in Fleet.

The birds of this world were closer to flying reptile than true birds. A

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