



Illustrated by Soo Lee

Draiken Dies

Adam-Troy Castro

Delia Stang appeared previously in “A Stab of the Knife” (July/August 2018) and “The Savannah Problem” (January/February 2019) alongside Draiken.

* * *

The golden woman is a prisoner trapped in a straight-backed chair.

She has been paralyzed by artificial means, reduced to a temporary quadriplegic by a device affixed to the back of her neck. She has been stripped to her undergarments and left only enough bodily autonomy to prevent her from soiling herself, or from collapsing to the floor.

The room is shaped like a silo, the curved walls extending high over her head. She cannot crane her neck to see the light source, up above, but assumes it's some distance away; this is how it is in the cell where they've kept her, until now.

She cannot see her interrogator, who speaks in a voice filtered to remove all identifying

signifiers.

The voice of her interrogator could be old or young; male, female, or any of the other associated genders; human, or some representative of several possible alien races. The golden woman has her suspicions. All she can determine of its character is a total lack of empathy.

“Your name is Delia Stang.”

“Yes.”

“Is that your actual name or just some alias you’re using?”

“Yes.”

“I would advise you not to play games with me.”

“I’m not playing games. It’s both my name and my alias. These are two different things.”

“Explain the distinction as you see it.”

“I was not born Delia Stang. It is the name all my associates know, the name I use when I think of myself. I could give you the one my parents gave me, but you are not interrogating a child with no choice over who she chooses to be. You are interrogating a grown woman who can be anyone she wants to be. I have used other aliases, but this is the only name I recognize.”

“If it suits me, I will call you anything I like and train you to accept it.”

“That would be exerting your techniques pretty early in the conversation, I think. I’m being cooperative enough.”

“Very well. Your name is Delia Stang.”

“Glad we have that settled.”

“Restrain from sarcasm.”

“That wasn’t sarcasm.”

“You have worked as a bodyguard and a security consultant.”

“I see you’ve looked me up.”

“We have a dossier of your activities on multiple worlds, both legal and illegal, but we are most interested in what happened on New London and afterward.”

“Don’t you already know the story?”

“We have the outline. We know that a couple of years back, when one of your bodyguard assignments took you to New London, you were involved in stopping an assassination.”

“Well, a double assassination, depending on how you do the math.”

“We are more interested in what happened afterward.”

“All right.”

“You left New London in the company of a man named John Draiken.”

“Oh, there are so many mistakes in that sentence.”

“Correct us.”

“First: we left New London together, but not by choice. We were just expelled at the same time, both in bluegel suspension, where we wouldn’t have noticed company of any kind whether it was each other, total strangers, or a fifty-piece marching band.”

“Nevertheless, you left together.”

“In the sense that one box of cargo is shipped together with another box of cargo, without input from personal volition, yes.”

“You deny a personal relationship with this man, Draiken.”

“No, I do not. We formed a partnership afterward. I only deny that we had one on New London or while in transit.”

“These are minor points.”

“You’re interrogating me, aren’t you? I would assume you wanted accuracy.”

“Why do I still suspect sarcasm?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to be helpful. You’re also wrong about his name.”

“His name was John Draiken.”

“He called himself John Draiken. He was adamant that it wasn’t his name.”

“It was the name he used on New London.”

“Yes. And before and after. But he used it for convenience. He also said that it was not his real name, that it had nothing to do with who he really was.”

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“Would you like to know his birth name? It’s in our dossier. I can assuage your curiosity about the man if you’d like to.”

“No, thank you. I believe it would be disrespectful of his wishes.”

“Regardless of your prior status as strangers to one another, it remains true that when the two of you arrived at the world where the New London authorities deported you, you did form a partnership.”

“Yes. Initially, of convenience.”

“Do you expect us to believe that it was never more than convenience?”

“No. It became more than that. But it was not when we left New London nor when we were offloaded at a shithole world on the edge of confederate space. We were still virtual strangers then. Our most significant interaction before that had been limited to a brawl in the street.”

“Who won?”

“Come on. Look at me. I’m a monster.”

“Are you saying you won?”

“You know the man was dangerous. He was not superhuman. I had him beaten in size, strength, and youth. It wasn’t even a contest.”

“You won.”

“I was embarrassed for him.”

“You won.”

“Yes.”

“And that was your most significant interaction on New London, prior to being deported.”

“Yes.”

“You were strangers forced together.”

“Yes.”

“You subsequently became more than strangers.”

“Yes.”

“Friends?”

“He wasn’t the kind of man who made friends. Companions, maybe.”

“Lovers?”

“Of convenience.”

“Again: what does that mean?”

“We spent a lot of time in tight quarters. Travel could get tedious.”

“You were not in love.”

“He wasn’t.”

“You were?”

“I was open to it but never allowed myself to feel anything he would fail to reciprocate.”

“Are you still traveling with him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I killed him.”

* * *

Earlier:

It is cold, as it always is around this isolated village known as Hallestagh.

The sun is low on the horizon, as it always is this time of year, when it never gets around to setting. It is right now well past local midnight. The light casts long shadows on the ground, a gray mixture of soot and ice. It’s usually the exact same color the few residents see when they look up, though there’s only rarely any reason to look up. This is an unusual clear day.

Somewhere beyond this abandoned industrial hell of a world known as Garelagh, beyond the glare of the unceasing day at this pole, there are stars, a universe filled with other possibilities for those who either manage to amass the funds, or who manage to indenture themselves to employers in distant places. Most locals will never manage these tricks. Most locals who would even think of it have already left.

What remains is a small cluster of buildings on a barren peninsula in an ice-bound region of an

economically depressed and environmentally ravaged planet. There are few distractions here.

Today, there is a show.

A crowd of about twenty residents follows ten paces behind Delia Stang as she storms down the center of the village.

She is one of those exotic strangers who arrives in some isolated location like Hallestagh and settles in without any obvious reason to be here.

She has not been talkative during her stay, but in answer to direct questions has said that she is waiting out the months between transports. This makes little sense, as most travelers stopping by this system on their way to more congenial destinations take account of how little there is to see on this world, and elect to remain in bluegel suspension during the stopover. Those who decide to explore the planet soon enough find that it has little opportunity for tourism and go into bluegel then. The orbital way station is full of such shelved people, preferring oblivion to a visit. This may be an insulting assessment of the planet's attractions, but it's also an accurate one. The locals don't dispute it and regard any off-worlders who come down and spend time among them as clueless and odd.

They have seen enough of Stang to know she isn't clueless, but they do think she is odd.

She has taken a little attic room—actually a storeroom—above Hallestagh's one drinking establishment for her quarters, and has spent the last three months as a quiet fixture of the place, leaving only for long walks in the hills that separate this harsh landscape from the equally frozen continent. She is a giant, this golden woman. She would tower over most human adults, let alone the people of Hallestagh, whose limited diet—some fish, mostly a species of high-protein algae that grows beneath the ice—has given them the reduced stature borne of borderline malnutrition. She has bulging muscular arms broader than the average villager's legs. Anybody who has tried to keep up with her on her long hikes has returned in a state of exhaustion, saying that she never seems to tire.

Between that and the color of her skin—not golden in the sense of radiant health, but golden as in metallic, shining in any ambient light in a manner fostering the illusion that she's actually gone and gilded herself—she hasn't had anything in the way of trouble from anybody.

This is about to change.

She is very angry.

She covers the frozen ground with deadly purpose, paying no attention to any of the locals following her.

She heads directly between the two rows of decaying houses to one home in particular, that has been pointed out to her, one with a sagging front porch lined with crates and a pair of disreputable chairs that no one may have ventured to sit on for years, because really, why sit outside and stare at the place where you're trapped, when it offers nothing capable of warming the eyes?

There is one step between the patch of ice that fronts the house and the sagging expanse of the porch. It's a rock about twice the size of a human head. It is possible that it has always been there and that the house was built in this spot to take advantage of it. The only argument against this theory is that it's the only interesting geographical feature in the entire damn town.

Maybe whoever built the house, whenever that was, said, *You know what, I need a rock there*, and wandered about for as long as he needed to in order to find one. It would have been a difficult and time-consuming project for very little in the way of reward, but this being Hallestagh, maybe no better prospects turned up. It's possible.

Whatever.

Stang renders the question moot by reaching down with both massive hands and yanking the rock out of the frozen ground.

She hauls it to shoulder height, props it against her chin, and suffers no apparent difficulty bypassing the hole she has made and stepping up onto the sagging porch.

The floor groans audibly from the combined weight of the woman and her burden.

She positions herself before the front door, contemplates the target for a moment, and hurls the rock dead-center.

It doesn't knock the door down but does make a substantial dent.

She catches it and flings it again.

This time the door falls a little out of its frame.

She catches the rock a third time and flings it again, and this time the door collapses inward.

This time those standing behind her hear clear confused cursing from inside.

She marches through the doorway and everybody hears the smashing furniture, the grunts of pain, and the indignant yelling, all belonging to a man, the house's resident.

All the screamed threats to *kill you* come from him.

She makes no sound any of the onlookers can hear, not even when something happens that they will all find out about in just a few seconds.

A naked man comes flying out the doorway, clearing the porch and landing on the ice. He hits the ground so hard that people can hear ribs breaking, but this is minor damage compared to his broken jaw, his shattered nose, and two swollen eyes.

When Stang emerges from whatever ruin she's made of the house, she has a knife buried hilt-deep in her shoulder. Blood flow from the wound has made a long black streak in her skintight, insulated blue clothing. She doesn't seem very much bothered as she strides from the door, hops down to the sooty ice, and stares down at the writhing figure on the ground, who is rather remarkably still trying to rise.

He is a black-haired bear of a man, burly and powerful, though his belly has turned to fat and so have his arms. He bears ink, some of it animated in the popular recombinant fashion; the pornographic images, especially. His flesh is covered with figures rutting. Some of it has been vandalized by old scars. This man so quick with a knife has felt more than his share of cuts, over many years; some on his belly, some on his chest.

He is the closest thing the locals have to a crime boss, which here means that he is not quite as poor as they are and has a couple of people who think they can avoid his rages by doing his bidding.

His name is Reck. It is an amusing homonym for a word in Stang's dominant language, Hom.Sap Mercantile, meaning "Wreck." This is what Stang has made of him and what she is going to continue making of him.

Stang kneels, takes his wrists, performs a little sudden movement that leaves him screaming in pain, and in the course of less than a minute does the same for his elbows.

Reck's screams stop only because he's passed out

She rises and glares at the crowd. "How come none of you ever did this?"

The answer comes from one of the oldest locals, a man with a shock of wiry white hair that seems to float unsupported above a spotted scalp. "He killed the last guy who tried."

Stang says, "I count more than one of you."

Nobody has anything to say to that.

"Whatever," she says. "You can leave him here to rot, or you can carry him back inside and appoint somebody to spoon-feed him until he's better. My personal advice is not to nurse him *all the way* back to health. He's the kind of neighbor who'll be easier to get along with if he stays an invalid. Let him be your pet, or your house plant."

Stang leaves the wreck of Reck behind and heads back toward the center of the little village, not bothering to stay for their decision. Her bearing, always intimidating because of her towering size, hasn't changed, but she knows that it must read differently to them now, once they've seen the capacity for violence that's been put back in its box. This is not something that makes her happy. This is just something that is.

The building she returns to is the same one she and the rest of the crowd left, the closest thing Hallestagh has to a meeting place. It is tavern, restaurant, general store, community warehouse, and—perhaps at some point in the past, though she's seen no sign of any shared religion in her months here—church. Her room is upstairs. The only furnishing aside from crates of one sort or another is her own inflatable sleepcube, which functions as the room inside the room. It would have been just as warm on the ice but she takes a minimal additional measure of comfort of being inside a permanent structure, even if, as she's just demonstrated, the buildings of

Hallestagh are far from fortresses.

Downstairs, in the larger space that is easiest to think of as the tavern, a knot of other locals huddle around the shivering, bruised, and battered figure of a girl in her mid-teens. She has one blanket around her legs and another around her shoulders, but they don't seem to be warming her at all, not even this close to the stove that keeps the room toasty compared to the air outside. One of her eyes is swollen shut, and she's got the lost look of someone who has been crying too hard for too long.

She is sixteen. From what Stang can gather, she is an orphan who has spent three of those years as the plaything of the bastard just now rendered invalid. Nobody in the village saw fit to interfere with this: a good reason to burn the place to the ground, in Stang's estimation. The girl had tended to stay out of sight, which is why Stang had never known of her appearance before; not before she stumbled into the tavern, naked and bearing the marks of her abuser's fists. Stang, who was there, reacted as was only natural.

Those caring for the girl glance up as Stang enters. Most look away immediately.

Stang pays no attention to them. She just kneels before the traumatized girl and says, "Do you understand me?"

The girl nods but says nothing.

"Say it out loud so I can know that the sick son of a bitch didn't leave you mute."

The girl needs a second to find her voice, and when she does, it is more of a whimper. "Yes."

"I won't always be here. I'll be leaving this place when my transport comes through. You should do the same as soon as you have a chance. Go far. Go with your eyes open, go watching your back, and go knowing how to fight. There won't always be someone like me around."

The girl nods.

"For right now, do you think you can climb stairs?"

"Yyes."

"All right. I have to go back to my room to take care of this," she indicates the knife still sticking out of her shoulder. "I have things in my kit that I can use to doctor you, too. They're better than anything else to be found in this wretched place. I can't say they'll make what happened go away, but they can heal everything that hurts."

The girl blinks. "Upstairs."

"You'll have to go on your own two feet. Ordinarily I'd carry you, but it's never a good idea to let yourself be carried by someone who's bleeding as much as I am right now. I can pass out."

The girl considers it, glances at the faces of her neighbors, and shrugs, less an agreement than a surrender. She cannot swaddle herself in both blankets and so she lets the one covering her legs fall to the floor as she stands. Revealed, they are a relief map of ugly bruises and old scars.

She walks as if each step is on fire, and her bare feet leave tacky little blood marks as she stands, still clutching the larger blanket around her shoulders.

The crowd parts to let the battered girl and the golden woman pass, then merges back together as they ascend the rear stairs. Stang lets the girl ascend first and remains close behind her in case of a collapse. Once or twice she needs to prompt the girl whenever the hesitation between steps is too long. Even so, they are almost to the second floor before it occurs to one of the people downstairs to say, "Dammit, I'm not wounded. I should have carried her."

Stang hears this but does not reply. There is no point in telling the man that she would have been able to bear the girl's weight easily, even with her wound; that asking her to climb on her own had been a deliberate choice, forcing her to gather what she needed to defy the pain.

They reach the second floor, a narrow hallway lined with doors leading to small rooms, many of which are used for the community's storage. They make it through the doorway at the far end, and beyond it to the dusty windowless storage room where some space has been cleared for the golden woman's sleepcube. She sets the girl's blanket atop one of the nearby crates, directs her to sit atop it, then enters the cube and returns a few seconds later with an object that looks like a hand weapon.

The girl says, "What's that?"

"Nanokit. It'll release a fleet of little surgical bots into your body. They'll address any damage

they find and self-destruct once there's nothing else they can do. You want to see me use it on myself first?"

The girl looks dubious. "Okay."

Stang uses her free arm to yank the knife from the other shoulder. The blade is barbed and does as much damage coming out as it did going in. The blood flows freely, and she curses eloquently before releasing a stream of nanites into the wound. At once the affected area is covered by what looks like a churning gray cloud.

This taken care of, she then goes to the girl, takes the blanket and releases more above her legs, above her midsection, and above her face. Furious clouds of gray puffery begin to roll above and inside those injured places. She inspects her work, hands the blanket back, and says, "It takes a while to work. Hours, maybe. You might want to lie down. I'm not going to force you to join me in the sleepcube, because it'll be snug in there, but you can if you want. Or you can sleep in there, and I'll camp out here. I'm fine either way."

The girl shakes her head.

"I understand. After what you've been through, you don't want to get into bed with a strange person. I don't suppose it'll make a difference if I tell you I mostly don't like girls."

The girl shakes her head again.

"Okay, then. We'll stay out here."

Stang lowers herself to the dusty floor, and lies flat on her back, allowing the nanites to do their work.

Hesitantly at first, still holding the blanket to herself, the girl lies across the top of the crates. The gray clouds boil around her bruised and bleeding places, and she watches them with fascination and more than a little disbelief. After a moment, she says, "It already hurts less."

"The bots start by blocking what pain they can."

"I never knew that there were such things. How come we don't have them here?"

Stang says, "The answer to that one would involve a complicated discussion of local and interstellar economics. You want the simple version?"

The girl nods.

"Basically: you don't have an organized government with the wherewithal to pay for them, or jobs that enable you to import them. You're what's left after the collapse of your industry, the departure of all financial interests to places still capable of turning a profit, the emigration of everybody who saw what was coming and made the smart decision while it was still easy. You're still a convenient travel hub, and that gives you some money, but little of it trickles down to places like Hallestagh. This is only going to get worse, and the key reason why you should find some other place to go while you still have a chance, because if you stay, you have nothing to look forward to but a world defined by a few square kilometers and an existence spent squeezing out children who'll have even less to look forward to than you do."

"You could use these to help *him*."

From the intonation of *him*, there's no doubt who she means.

Stang says, "I could. But I won't. I'd fight anybody who tried to make me."

"Why?"

"A man like Reck needs to know what it's like to be helpless."

The girl shifts, winces, and says, "Why are you gold?"

"Why are you pale white?"

"I thought everybody was. Do you come from shiny golden people?"

"About as far from that as you can imagine. I chose this. Next question."

". . . what's your name?"

"Delia Stang. What's yours?"

"Naline. That's all there is. Can I ask you something else?"

"Yes."

"When you leave this place, can you take me with you?"

Stang hesitates for a long time. "That would be complicated, honey."

"You don't have to take care of me forever. I know that's asking too much."

“Naline.”

“Please. There’s nothing for me here. Just get me out of here and drop me off anywhere. I’ll do anything you want.”

Stang hesitates again. “I’m not in the market for somebody who’ll do anything I want.”

“Whatever. Just take me away. I’ll make it up to you.”

Another long silence. “Sleep, Naline.”

“Is that a no?”

“Sleep.”

“Okay.”

Soon enough, the girl is silent.

Delia Stang does not take her own advice. She suffers the same problem many people have in environments without a day/night cycle. It is different in orbital environments like wheelworlds and cylinders; in most places like that, the diurnal cycle is simulated if not precisely duplicated, and the human sense of time can make do. On planetary environments where the sun never sets—or worse—never rises, and where it’s impossible to just stay inside all the time and shut off all cues from the greater world, the human body rebels, insists in its own stupid way that it is not time for bed, it is not time for waking, it is not time for work, it is not time for rest, it is not time to fight whatever war one’s been shanghaied for. It is possible to resist the effects for a while, but spread out over months, they become cumulative. They make you stupid and sloppy.

Stang is as vulnerable to this as anyone else. At the moment she’d been dragged into this, she’d been up for forty-eight hours, not from having anything to do but being unable to alleviate her growing exhaustion by sleep. When the girl stumbled in, there had been no possibility of considering the complications that would go along with getting involved.

Or, for that matter, the common-sense problems that went along with taking on an armed and violent man, no matter how second-rate, when her judgment and reaction time were so badly compromised by sleep deprivation.

Under normal circumstances, Reck never would have gotten anyway near her with that knife.

Some would have. She doesn’t fool herself on this critical point. She is tough, she is fast, she is physically as formidable as it is possible for a human being to be, but she is no prodigy. Some would have gutted her. Some would have found it no trouble at all.

But not a pathetic, out-of-shape village strongman, the kind of shit who won all his fights because he was prepared to go to lengths most ordinary brutes wouldn’t even consider.

Not the kind of man most ordinary people didn’t take on only because they worried too much about Juje alone knew what he would do to them if they lost.

There was no way a nobody like him should have ever been able to get near her.

She wonders if she still has what she’s going to need, in order to survive.

* * *

Later:

The unseen interrogator hesitates.

“You killed Draiken?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Does that matter?”

“Answer the question.”

“I choked him out.”

“With your bare hands?”

“If I said yes, would you find it hard to believe?”

“Stop answering questions with other questions. With your bare hands?”

“I used a choke hold. One arm against his throat. The other against the back of his head. Cut off his air and held that position until he went limp.”

“Did he fight back?”

“Of course.”

“He was a man who had fought for his life many times. He had dropped younger enemies,

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stronger enemies, larger enemies. He was for many years one of the greatest threats to this organization's existence. And you expect us to believe . . ."

"You're monitoring my vitals a dozen different ways. I could fool you with one or two of them, but all? I understand that he was a hardy old bastard and that news of his demise might be met with incredulity, but not blind delusion. Again, look at me. Consider my size. You don't think I could have done it?"

"How did he fight back?"

"About as you'd expect. He gave me a fine collection of bruises."

"But he was unable to break free?"

"No, he was not. Again: look at me. He never had a chance. I put him down. Why are you even surprised?"

* * *

Before:

Three weeks after the brawl in the village, Delia Stang and the girl in her care spend a day on the heights, a chain of craggy hills that separate the relatively flat peninsula where Hallestagh stands, from the mainland. It is not a hike for girls like Naline who have spent most of their lives within the confines of one small, out of the way village. She has been recovering from her injuries, and she has been getting stronger under Delia's care, but she exhausts easily and their travels into this terrain she has never explored before have had to be punctuated by many periods of rest. With her tagging along, Stang has been able to cover only a fraction of a distance she normally would, and it is already a given that she will have to turn back long before she normally would. Under the circumstances, she is okay with this. The only thing she had to establish early on is that she does not tolerate whininess.

They stop in shallow depression in the hillside, not quite a cave, but nevertheless a place that provides shelter from the wind, and there they nibble at their store of Hallestagh's food staple, algae cakes.

Naline is out of breath, but glowing. "Are these the highest mountains you've ever been to?"

"These aren't mountains. These are hills."

"But are they?"

Stang grins despite herself. "This is the key problem with spending all your life in one place. You think the small amount you've seen is all there is."

"Then what's a real mountain like?"

"Well, I've been to mountains so high they punched right through the planetary atmosphere and into space. You can climb from a tropical rain forest, all the way to permanent ice, and beyond it to vacuum. It's impossible to survive at the peaks without space suits; impossible to breathe unassisted even one third of the way up. Summiting requires several different changes of equipment. You know what they call peaks like that?"

"What?"

"Super-Chomolungmas."

"Why?"

"Do you know," Stang says, "I'm actually not sure. It's just what they've always been called, for as long as anyone can remember."

They sit for a bit, munching on their algae cakes. It is, Stang can't help thinking, a remarkably domestic interlude, of the sort that she's almost never known.

She only gradually becomes aware that Naline has taken to studying her, in the way that the girl has taken to before launching one of her regular offensives. Very well. She will accept this one, as she accepts all others: as if she's a summit herself, repelling an assault on her own stone face.

The girl says, "Will you take me to see one of those?"

"I haven't said I'm taking you anywhere, yet."

"I can't go unless you take me."

"Oh, bullshit," Stang says, with considerable irritation. "Nobody's stuck on their homeworlds. Anybody capable of doing research can find someone willing to negotiate a servitude contract. The Dip Corps will find a place for you. Bettelhine, Dejahcorp, the Bursteeni Benevolent

Fund—they'll all take anybody willing to undergo their training. A girl as smart as you can get good terms.”

“Is that what you did?”

“No.” Stang says this with a finality that immediately establishes that she will brook no further questions on this point.

The wind outside their little shelter builds to a little crescendo, the kind of angry wail that sometimes make wind sound like the cries of some animal in pain. Stang listens until it dies, then wraps up her portion and tucks it away in one of the many pockets of her insulated coat. It is the kind of gear that only prosperous offworlders can afford, that is never seen in Hallestagh, and it is notable that the girl Naline now wears one of smaller dimensions, shipped from some local supplier who had somehow ended up with one and never expected to sell it.

Naline says, “What if I indenture myself to you?”

“I'm not in the market for anything you have to sell.”

“I'll be anything you want, in exchange. Your assistant, your maid. Your toy, if you want.”

Angrily: “I told you, I'm not like Reck. I'm not in the market for a toy.”

“It's not that bad. I'm been the plaything of people less gentle about it than you would be. Not just Reck, but others. I wouldn't mind being a toy somewhere else because being one somewhere else would have to be better than being one here. We'd be using each other, really. I know I'm stupid, but—”

“If you finish that sentence, I'll never talk to you again.”

The girl shuts up instantly. Stang can see that part of this is strategic, the retreat of someone who hasn't given up but can see that she's gone too far at the moment; who sees that this approach won't work, that she has to go back down to one of the camps down the face of this particular slope, and plot another approach. But there is something else in it, something that Stang knows well, something that she hates as much as anything else she's hated in this life: cringing.

She stands suddenly and steps from the protection of this sheltered place, to the unprotected part of the hillside, where the frigid winds sometimes become gales and sometimes blow hard enough to blast an unprotected climber off the path. These are conditions she has been trained for, on other worlds in regions that had higher mountains, and even so it takes all her strength to avoid being blown a step or two back. She can bear the cold; it is one of the adjustments she's had made to her anatomy that she is largely unbothered by it. She can also bear the wind. She is strong enough to defy it. But the combination of the cold and the wind is anything but pleasant, and not for the first time since her arrival in this shitty region on this profoundly shitty world does she think, in as many words: *what am I even doing here? What possible good am I doing?*

Unbidden, John Draiken's face flits across her mind, and that does even less good, the stupid, selfish bastard.

* * *

Later:

“Very well. To summarize your relationship with this man you claim to have killed—”

“Did kill.”

“—you and he became traveling companions.”

“Yes.”

“And lovers.”

“Of convenience, yes.”

“Partners in crime, then.”

“It did sometimes involve crimes, yes.”

“These were all related to his search for us.”

“... not quite all. Some of what we did was tangential. Some of it was just survival.”

“But his overall goal remained tracking us down.”

“Yes.”

“You know the nature of his vendetta?”

“He briefed me thoroughly, early on. He said that many years ago, when you were an intelligence agency running covert ops against other political factions, you imprisoned and tortured

him. You tried to break him. He escaped and thought he was done with you, but then he found out that you were still active somewhere.”

“And you bought into this agenda?”

“I had nothing else going on and saw no reason why I shouldn’t help him.”

“But you bought into it.”

“I bought into it provisionally. I personally didn’t care all that much. I couldn’t have the same stakes in it that he did. Had he ever said, *‘You know what, Delia? To hell with this. Let’s just find some tropical biome and spent the rest of our days lazing in the sun.’* I wouldn’t have wasted much breath trying to talk him out of it.”

“You were awfully cavalier about following him into hell and otherwise, for someone who characterizes your relationship as a mere convenience.”

“I’m not going to lie about this. By then I also would have had no problem with it growing into something more. I would have been more than amenable. If I like somebody enough, I’m more than willing to make an investment of time and effort to see if that’s going to happen. But I’m no pining waif, eager to throw my considerable capacity for love at a black hole. I would have been fine with more. But I was also fine with keeping it light.”

“You put thought into this, Delia.”

“Yes, I did. Emotional self-preservation. I’ve had my share of men who can’t commit.”

“We believe among other things that you were with him on Piithkarath, sixteen months ago, assisting in the abduction of a local criminal named Jathyx.”

“I was.”

“You don’t deny it.”

“There is no point in denying it.”

“Before this moment, we had no proof of your involvement in this kidnapping. You were never actually seen with Draiken at the time of the event.”

“I’m sure you had no trouble inferring it. I was on-station at about the same time he was, left the same time he did.”

“We have confirmed that. But we found no evidence that you were working together.”

“We were.”

“Considering the destructive nature of your departure, which involved sabotage to the station, this is a significant confession.”

“Yes. If you care, I’m the one who blew the bulkhead. You should also note that I took special care to make sure it would be sealed at once. There was no loss of life. But you could return me to Piithkarath, if you choose. They’d be happy to prosecute me for terrorism.”

“We will decide what to do with you, later.”

“Obviously. I’m just saying.”

“Where is the man you took? Jathyx?”

“I don’t know. I never really spoke to him at all. Draiken took care of that. We let him go once we brought him back to some people who had been looking for him.”

“Who?”

“His family.”

“Would it surprise you if I told you that there’s been no sign of him ever since?”

“Not at all. His new keepers would have been very protective of him.”

“But you have no idea where they took him or what he’s doing now.”

“Right now, the best I could offer would be educated guesses.”

“Including?”

“He was already a fighting man. An asset in any military force. You wiped his memory, wiped out the man he once was, turned him into your own murderous tool. His mother, his wife, his children, his country, they took him back anyway, and vowed to bend heaven and earth to restore his original self. That would have taken some doing. Years, I would say, even if it was all possible. I presume they’re still working on it, somewhere; no matter what else they have him doing.”

“So your abduction of this man was just an errand of mercy, then?”

“Draiken was capable of that, and so am I. But there were other advantages. I guess you could say we got paid.”

“Delia, do you know what I find most interesting about this picture you’re painting?”

“I’m sure you’re ready to tell me.”

“Our lie detection technology has advanced tremendously since we had the man now calling himself Draiken in our hands. We’ve learned more about the mapping and manipulation of human thought than he ever would have believed. We’re prodigies at the art. It is not quite impossible to lie to us, but it is impossible to maintain a lie when it is probed from multiple directions, as we have with you.”

“I’ve already told you. I assumed as much.”

“All our vectors insist that you’re telling the truth. That you’ve been telling the truth since we started.”

“Yes.”

“And yet, despite the respect if not outright affection you had for Mr. Draiken, your willingness to buy into his dangerous agenda, your involvement with him in risky operations like the kidnapping of Mr. Jathyx, your confession after all of that, you would have given it all up and joined him in happy retirement and a life of connubial bliss had he ever been open to it—despite all that, Delia, you still choked him to death, while he fought like hell.”

“He had to fight like hell. All his instincts demanded it. It’s the same reason that people who drown themselves struggle for air, why people who hang themselves still try to relieve the pressure around their necks. It’s an instinctive biological imperative.”

“Why did you do it, Delia?”

“He begged me to.”

* * *

Earlier:

It is another day. In some ways it’s the same day: the sun is still a dull glow on the horizon, and all shadows remain stretched-out caricatures of the objects that cast them. There have been no dark nights to punctuate the separation of one span of daylight, from the next.

But even as one long “day,” it has for Delia Stang involved many, many long weeks of endless hiking, from the minimal comforts of Hallestagh to the rockier hills of the coastline.

She has been up and down these heights many times over the last few weeks, mostly without Naline, who had only slowed her down.

Surveying the landscape beyond, a stark expanse where eons of advancing and retreating polar ice have turned whatever existed before into a plain of loose gravel, Stang has seen nothing here to attract civilization—no crops, no woods, almost no wildlife. It is possible to spot the tracks left by wheeled vehicles, but there are few of them. Such scars may be years or decades old, the marks left by lives now done, living stories that reached what conclusions they had with only that for history.

Today she has found a little bit more.

It would be invisible were she any closer, but from the perspective of the hills she can see a settling of the earth, an unevenness in the dust lines driven by the wind, that seems to favor a precise square approximately a hundred meters on a side. It is ambiguous, and so she has spent the last two or three days paralleling its easternmost edge, from the top of the ridgeline, but she has come to the conclusion that those lines are far too perfect to have happened naturally.

She does not take pictures.

She just satisfies herself that she has seen what she’s seen, and having done that, retreats back down the eastern slope to the shore, and from there across the ice to the peninsula that houses the little village of Hallestagh.

It takes close to four hours for her to find the familiar and hateful grouping of squat and ugly buildings, and from there to approach the one that is her base of operations and temporary home.

It is by the clock long after midnight and before what should be dawn, but the diurnal cycle creeps for the locals as much as it creeps for Stang the exhausted offworld visitor, and so there

are people here, occupying themselves the way people do. She recognizes two of them as a pair of Hallestagh's farmers, who spend their days scraping the underside of the ice pack for the sludgy organic weed that alternates with fish as their town's monotonous home-grown food source; another as an old widow who gets through at least part of her solitary days only with the help of recreational alcoholism; a third, some guy who had once tried to be friendly with Stang but had run into the conversational barriers common to those whose horizons have never ventured beyond his life in this village.

There is also a wiry old man she doesn't know, sitting in the corner and drinking something hot, fresh enough to emit steam.

Stang goes upstairs, just to check on Naline, and finds the girl curled snoring in the sleep-cube's elevated mattress. She has the knack some sleeping partners, and large pets, have of dominating the bed space to a degree significantly beyond her own size: a serious concern for Stang, for whom the space was already cramped. She knows that she has a choice between taking the floor, using the crates as platform, or waking the kid by crawling into the cube with her. All three options strike her as unsatisfactory. She is exhausted, but in the special form of that state where attempting sleep is fruitless.

So she goes back downstairs to the bar, and asks the counterman for something to eat.

There is no mucking-about with menus. Fish are scarce this time of year. So it's just the god-damned algae, boiled the same way it always is. It will be filling, just not satisfying.

She is still waiting to be served when the old man sits on the stool beside her.

The old man has the coarse, weather-beaten complexion of a native who has spent his entire life in this region's harsh wind. His skin is leathery, his complexion red. His eyes are narrow slits.

He says, "You're gold."

Stang hates total strangers who make inane comments about her aesthetic choices. "And you're old. So?"

"I'm just saying. I don't know any other gold women."

"Unless you suddenly become a whole lot more interesting, you're not going to know this one."

The old man chuckles without mirth. "You misunderstand. I'm not here to negotiate for your favors. My point is that you're not exactly inconspicuous, to start with. Your actions with the girl have made you more so. Up and down this frozen coast, people are talking about this strange off-worlder, the powerful golden woman who avenges wrongs."

She rolls her eyes. "That's the way life works. Beat up some piece of crap, and it tends to follow you around."

"You couldn't have done more to attract attention if you'd tried."

Stang suffers the sudden urge to knock the old bastard off his stool. "Do you have a point?"

"None, really. I'm an off-worlder, too, passing through the way you are; someone who likes to put off the false death of bluegel hibernation. I like to see the places I stop at, and I appreciate enjoying the company of fellow travelers."

She stiffens at the reference to *fellow travelers*. "Oh, God."

"Not a believer myself. I abstain from questions of faith." The old man receives a bottle from the counterman, pops the lid, drops a capsule from his pocket into the opening. "Purifier," he explains. "Stuff wreaks havoc in this ancient digestive system. Also a hedge against possible mind-altering additives."

"You can save your time. I analyzed the slop food before I had any of it. It may be miserable cuisine, but it's fit for human consumption."

"A precaution," the old man shrugs, watching as the clear liquid in the bottle turns bright orange, then goes back to its previous transparency. "Ah. So it may taste like sewage, but it won't kill me. That's good to know. This girl you've taken in. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to take her with you when you left, but I presume you know that it's the kind of thing that can make serious changes to your itinerary."

"Such as?"

"A couple of transports just docked at the orbital port. One freighter, carrying staples this

broken world cannot manufacture locally, one military cruiser from the Belari Alliance. On departing, both will have cargo space for passengers. If your plan is to provide this child with a future, wherever they're going has got to be better than here. Otherwise, the best you offer her now is temporary shelter, which will certainly end if anything happens to you."

"How temporary?"

"Like I said," the old man shrugs, "You're being talked about. Your presence has caused some people to worry. Your exploits in the hills have gone noticed. This is the kind of place where people have room to be eccentric, but even here, it's possible to provoke drastic decisions. I think you're about to see that." He drains the bottle, gives a stiff little bow, and says, "I can take her off your hands, if you'd like."

Stang says, "Damn everything having to do with you."

"What's your answer?"

"I think you've told me everything I want to hear in one conversation."

The weathered old man hesitates, as if everything in him wants to say more, but whatever he sees in Stang's eyes enforces his departure.

Stang's meal arrives. It looks indigestible, a greasy, gray blob steaming from the oven, the kind of food one looks at without the enthusiasm one reserves even for the desultory filling of a void. She knows from experience that this is harsh. The food if eaten will be more than enough to keep her alive; even enough to keep up her considerable strength, as long as she bolsters it with the supplements from her kit. But it will have no flavor, and it will not relieve the exhaustion she's been feeling, for what she realizes has been longer than her stay on Hallestagh. She eats a couple of mouthfuls and then loses her capacity to continue, deciding that she wants something else, something she can't get here; something savory, something sweet, something with a flavor she'll remember and someday want to taste again. That is what life is all about, if one has a choice: the ambition for better times.

She tells the counter man she's done, confirms that she still has enough from the amount she paid on her arrival to take care of the bill, and trudges back upstairs, the stairs groaning beneath her weight. She is one of those oversized women who normally moves as if she weighs nothing at all, but right now she feels every kilo, feels as if this stupid world has a gravitational pull four times more powerful than it has.

When she gets back to the little room upstairs, she finds Naline awake and lying on the bare floor outside the sleepcube, waiting for her. She rests her chin on the back of her nested fingers, her bare legs bobbing upward.

Naline, she has discovered, is a study in contrasts: lazy and restless, wounded and invulnerable, innocent and wise behind her years. She is a child, and she is old. She sees Stang both as surrogate mother and as lust-object: that latter only understandable in this town where the men have been nothing worth coveting. The crush might well go away if Stang manages to get her somewhere where there's more appropriate company; until then, their relationship has been an exercise in parries and deflection, parries and deflection, as tricky in its own way as any street fight Stang has ever experienced.

Naline says, "You were here a while ago. I heard you come in, but you left again, right away."

This bears the whiff of accusation, its effectiveness easily measured by how thoroughly Stang feels indicted.

"I was hungry," she says, aware of the defensiveness in her voice. "Are you hungry?"

"Nah, I ate before. I was downstairs for a bit when one of the men from the village brought back some fish."

Warily: "He didn't make you do anything in exchange for it, did he?"

Naline shakes her head. "I thought that was what he wanted, but no; I think he was being nice to me just to get to you. One of your admirers, I guess. He wanted to know if you were traveling with anybody."

Stang feels a chill. "He wasn't an old man, was he?"

Naline flashes a shy smile. Most of her smiles are shy; apologetic, the kind of look that comes from being knocked around and used much of her life. Lately, they've been becoming bolder as

she feels more comfortable in the safe shadow of her protector. “Nah. Local fisherman I call Old Farthead. Never a bad man, just a pretty stupid one. He’s been talking about how you’re like no other woman he’s ever seen. I think he’s working up the nerve to, you know—”

Stang feels even more tired. She’s actually met the guy Naline calls Old Farthead, and the prospect of spending more than thirty seconds in his company is distasteful in the extreme. “I get it.”

“You okay?”

“Just exhausted. I’m going to have to ask you to leave me be for a bit. Maybe about a day or so. Nothing personal. Just some stuff I have to take care of.”

The girl has a few lesser protectors around the village, with whom she’s safe now that her past abuser has taken on the role of the community’s permanent invalid. Nobody’s going to come after her, even in those lesser havens, as long as they remember the precedent Stang set with that prior piece of shit.

Naline says, “You’re not trying to get rid of me, are you?”

“Only for a little bit. Like I said, a few days. I promise.”

Naline, who has spent many a night curled up beside Stang on the luxurious raised mattress inside the cube, is chilly but cooperative in her departure. She gets her coat and leaves.

Stang watches her go and for long minutes afterward regards the shut door, as if it’s a puzzle she can’t solve. Then she rolls her eyes and heads into the sleepcube.

A sleepcube is more than a tent. It’s closer to a safe room, a secure habitat that shuts out the surrounding environment and offers some protections from ordinary incursions. It’s far from an impregnable fortress, just one ensuring it is never breached by accident. It is a better home than this bare and drafty room, so comfortable that in some past places Stang’s been known to stay in hers for days at a time. The bed in this one is too small for her, but then almost all beds are; she’s used to sleeping in a near-fetal position, to fit herself into the available space. Beyond that, it’s so luxurious compared to everything else in Hallestagh that it qualifies as decadence.

And beyond that it has a feature she has not used on this planet, which she has never even whispered to Naline.

She releases a hidden latch, and crawls inside.

* * *

Later:

“... clarify that, please. Draiken asked you to kill him?”

“Begged me to, I said.”

“It’s almost impossible to reconcile that with the man.”

“Am I lying? You said you could tell.”

“... you are not lying.”

“There you go.”

“Draiken begged you to kill him.”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

“Why?”

“Why am I telling you or why did he beg me to kill him?”

“I have warned you that I have no patience for games.”

“I’m telling you because I’m your prisoner and I have no choice.”

“Why did he beg you to kill him?”

“You’re the very last people in creation who should have any trouble understanding that.”

“Answer the damn question.”

“The Draiken I met on New London and partnered with, afterward, was a very formidable man. He could endure almost anything his enemies threw at him. He could survive hardships that would shatter most other people. Enduring the worst was his superpower. You should know that, because your predecessors—who may include some of the very same people standing with you, still involved in your enterprise all these years later—did everything they could to break him, and failed. At least that’s the way you’ve always understood it.”

“Yes.”

“But what if you didn’t fail, after all? What if the one man you always put in your loss column was actually one of your most extravagant successes?”

“He wasn’t broken.”

“He was.”

“He escaped. He remained at large for decades.”

“And yet, throughout all that time, it never once struck you as odd that he didn’t come after you?”

“We were an organized and powerful group. He was one man, with no allies he could trust. He probably saw such a mission as futile.”

“Does that strike you as the kind of judgment the man you knew would have made?”

“He was not a fool.”

“True. But countering that, he did, after many years, get off his complacent ass and come after you. Does that strike you as the act of a man deterred by futility? Hell, what about all the defiance he showed you, while still your captive? Is *that* the behavior of a man deterred by futility?”

“This is nonsense. The man was not broken.”

“He refused to give you the satisfaction of knowing you’d broken him. Which is not the same thing.”

“He escaped!”

“And what did he do after he escaped, all those years ago? He spent a lifetime in hiding. He let decades pass without claiming any of the emergency funds he’d stashed away in various accounts and without exercising any of the other options he had for living a comfortable life well beyond your reach. Instead, he gave up. He spent all those years living on Greeve, a backwater planet of little distinction, eking out a living as a fisherman. He was beneath notice there, and he still lived with the emotional armor of a fugitive. He resisted all lasting relationships. He did nothing to escape an existence where every day was like the day before it. That behavior does not say, *I am a free man.*’ That behavior says, *‘Maybe, if I keep my head down, they won’t hurt me.’*”

“The world was a tropical paradise.”

“So he said, when he spoke of it. And yet, from all indications, he lived there without joy.”

“You quantify things you have no way of measuring.”

“I quantify things by context. Greeve was the closest he’s ever come to a home, and yet he was only as happy there as any man can be happy when all the ambition’s been beaten out of him. He was protected, but he never felt safe. He was respected by the locals but never did anything to make friends. He was even loved, by a woman who all but begged him to stay, and yet he refused to love her in return.”

“There exists doubt that he was attracted to women at all.”

“Trust me, one who experienced it. That’s nonsense.”

“Our intelligence tells us he had a male assignation, on New London. That would indicate—”

“He was nothing if not adaptable. But the fact remains: on Greeve, at least, he went many years without partners of any kind. It was exile not only from his enemies, but from the human race. Does that strike you as the life lived by a man you hadn’t broken?”

“He interfered with our operation on Greeve. He destroyed one of our operations on Liberty. He led your mission to capture Jathyx. He’s harassed our enterprises in a number of small ways.”

“Alternatively: incited by his first chance encounter with one of your people, after many years of keeping his head down on Greeve, he fled the closest thing he’s ever had to a settled life and turned the rest of his existence to the pointless resumption of a cause that had left him behind. Has it occurred to you that everything he’s done in the last few years could be seen as an extended exercise in suicide by an old enemy? Embracing the futility of it all in the hope that the struggle would swallow him whole?”

“He was not suicidal.”

“I’m telling you that he was, in every important way. He rejected any pathway that offered the hope of a normal life. He resisted a way out on Greeve. He resisted another way out on Liberty. He resisted a way out with me. Instead, he spent years trying to track you down. He grew old inside, banging his head against that wall. At the end, he begged me to kill him.”

“Your presence here documents that he knew where to find us.”

“On New London he found out where to find you; after Piithkarath he found allies to help him come after you. He was instants from this next phase of his quest. And yet by then he'd found out something else that exhausted him: that even if he won this crusade of his, there was another war waiting on the far end of it, one that would inevitably trap him even more irrevocably than this one had.”

“You reference the coming conflict with the other sentient races.”

“You know about it. Your pursuit team did too.”

“This by itself persuaded him that there was no longer any purpose in living?”

“Consider how many times he's been through rejuvenation, how limited its effectiveness can be, for a man of his advanced years. His gifts were declining. If revenge against you motivated him, he was like a creature dying of thirst in the desert, cresting one dune after another, and finally getting to the summit of one with what amounted to the last of his strength, only to see the dune sea stretching out before him, to the horizon and beyond. Draiken knew he would never survive that journey. He told me, *I have to die.*”

“You really are telling the truth.”

“You know I am. You're just having trouble accepting it.”

“So this man who had survived decades of persecution and hardship . . . begged you to kill him.”

“I don't know how many other ways I could say it.”

“And you obliged.”

“Yes.”

“Do you ordinarily take requests from every friend who expresses a suicidal impulse in your presence?”

“Of course not.”

“But you took that request from him.”

“Only after it became clear that nothing else would fit the circumstances.”

“Even though you loved him.”

“Even though I would have been open to loving him. Which is not the same thing.”

“You still haven't explained why you obliged him in this madness.”

“I saw that he was right. He had to die. We talked about how best to go about it. He voluntarily put himself in my arms. And then I choked him out. Do you require me to describe what it was like, in full sensory detail?”

“I find I must believe you, Delia Stang.”

“Good.”

“What was it like to kill a man you might have loved?”

“It was stressful. I don't mind admitting I cried. I've gotten over it.”

“You're a monster, aren't you?”

“You wouldn't be the first to say it. As I said before: just look at me.”

“We have. Your history, your obvious physical capabilities, the damage you've recently done to a number of our men. We have no doubt that you're a dangerous person. We had no idea just how formidable you are. It is possible that, unchecked, you could have done us the damage the late Mr. Draiken could not.”

“Yes.”

“And that leads me to my most immediate concern.”

“Go ahead.”

“Knowing just how thoroughly we destroyed your friend's life, why would you then come here to give up your own?”

* * *

Earlier:

There are common-sense limits to the usefulness of stealth, in places where the sun never sets. One hour is the same as any other hour. Under the circumstances, it cannot be said that they come after her in the dead of night, and certainly not while advancing from one patch of

darkness to another. They come fast, hoping she's asleep, hoping she won't have time to react. They come prepared to take her alive but have the comfort of knowing that they're allowed choice if circumstances demand.

The advance team consists of a man and a woman, both sensibly chosen for their above-average size, even though neither of them is as large as Stang. They're both armored, both equipped with noise-suppression tech that doesn't quite eliminate the sound they make coming down the creaky hallway, but does distort and muddy it, making them seem more distant than they actually are. The woman wears what looks like a backpack, the man a gas canister. Both wear breathing filters.

They slide open the door with the most glacial care and peer in on the banal, peaceful tableau inside: a dusty sleepcube, sitting by itself in a room stacked with crates. Not quite translucent, it still glows a bit from internal illumination.

The woman consults instrumentation mounted on her wrist. It confirms that the flexible walls of the sleepcube are subtly expanding and contracting to a degree imperceptible to the human eye, but consistent with the respiration rate of a sleeping human being. She nods at her partner, who unrolls some ultrafine line from a spool at his belt, clips the end to a little device resembling a handheld crossbow, and fires. A flexible line flashes across the room and imbeds itself in the side of the cube, halfway up.

It would take excellent hearing to discern the hiss of gas exiting the canister on his back, and being forced through the line into the enclosed environment of the sleepcube.

The gas is a favorite of the organization these two professionals represent. It is colorless and odorless, and it brings rapid unconsciousness without any risk of death by aspiration or anoxia. The human body just doesn't want to stay awake in any environment that contains much of it, and recovery is so swift that there's honestly nothing better for subduing subjects who might be capable of violence.

The woman waits the suggested half a minute for the gas to do its magic.

She then waits another half minute, just to be sure.

Then she nods.

Her companion retracts the line in a flash of silver.

More men and women in black join them, until they number half a dozen in all, all armed with weaponry to match their respective specialties. They carry devices that can paralyze, that can burn, that render comatose, that can kill. It is the dictionary definition of overkill.

The woman with the wrist device makes a gesture, sending another woman to breach the sleepcube.

That one darts forward and undoes the seam that makes the cube a sealed environment.

She rips it open.

Stang's not there.

Her confusion lasts for all of one second before she is enveloped by a billowing white mass.

It is like a soft explosion. The mass has the texture of fabric, and it expands to fill the available space, building more of itself as it goes, swallowing the woman whole.

She feels herself being swept off her feet, carried backward, colliding with her partner, and then coming to a stop in what feels like a dry gel. Her mouth has fallen open during with surprise, and whatever it is rushes in, not cutting off her air but depriving her of the ability to close her mouth.

She cannot scream.

* * *

Later:

"Is that what you think? That I came looking for you because I'm as broken or as suicidal as Draiken was?"

"You came to this world alone. You found lodging in the nearest town, alone. You explored the hills, overlooking our facility alone. These are suicidal acts."

"They are risky acts."

"You imagined a positive outcome."

“Yes.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Do I have your permission to use a parable?”

“If it is sufficiently illustrative. Be brief.”

“All right. Imagine two people, a man and a woman, traveling in the same vehicle. Their destination is a distant city where he spent some years in his youth, and which she has never seen. He wishes to go there because to him, the place is a loose end, representing responsibilities he shirked years before. The woman has never been there and is therefore not a signatory to his obsession. She goes because she wishes to remain in his company. They have the same destination, the same trajectory, but entirely different motivations. Okay?”

“You admitted partnering with Draiken in his search for us.”

“Yes, I did. His cause seemed just, and I had enough affection for him, to want to help him out. *But that was only going to last for as long as he lived.*”

“You still came.”

“Returning to the metaphor: the man and woman have little in common except in the broadest possible outline. He dies, and she presses on. But that does not mean that her motivations are exactly the same as his.”

“You want us to believe that you are not a threat to us.”

“Since you will only believe what I say in declarative statements you can assess for their truth: I have never been under the illusion of being able to do you any damage on my own. As one woman, however formidable, I can do nothing. Right now I’m only here to talk.”

“We are talking.”

“You are interrogating. I am answering.”

“You traveled alone, many light-years, to an isolated location on a ruined Industrial Hell of a world. You came without protection, without allies. You settled in the disgusting conditions of an isolated and poverty-stricken village, spent months scouring the region for the hidden outpost manned by the actual, organizational descendants of the forces that once imprisoned, tortured and—you say—irrevocably broke your friend.”

“Yes.”

“You did this in the full knowledge that your activities would be monitored almost from the first moment of your arrival. You did this knowing that we could take our own action against you at any time.”

“Yes.”

“You did this knowing that if we imprisoned, tortured, and broke him, we could imprison, torture, and break you. You did this knowing that we now possess mind-control techniques that could strip from you everything you are and sculpt you into something we can manipulate. As we did to that man you robbed from us. Jathyx.”

“Yes.”

“You likely know that, by finding us, you made that fate a near-certainty.”

“I believe I can avoid it.”

“This conversation you seek, it must be more important to you than your freedom.”

“At the moment, yes.”

“I see you’re still telling the truth.”

“I am.”

“Then why did you put up such a fight, when we came for you?”

* * *

Before:

Stang and her acquired companion Naline have not been sleeping on an air mattress, when inside the sleepcube. It looks like an air mattress and is as comfortable as one, when employed for that purpose, which it might well have managed for its entire lifetime, if not activated for its secondary purpose, an aggressive measure in personal security.

As an air mattress it left open the question of why it rested on a fixed platform, that seemed pointless except to add a half meter or so of elevation.

It's actually a nano-structure resembling the terrestrial sponge, in that it is compressed when not saturated by its medium of choice. Lightweight, as it is still mostly empty space, it gives just enough, as a surface to lie on, to produce comfort. There's absolutely no indication that it only maintains this shape because it's contained by a mattress housing; but when that housing disintegrates, the super-thin nested structures unfold and expand, invading all available empty space in their vicinity before locking in place, with the solidity of girders.

At full expansion it looks like a cloud, and that's appropriate enough, given its overall density. It's incredibly light by that point, and so porous that it's fully air-permeable, and that means anybody captured by one needs not fear being suffocated by one. There are other dangers, though. When it's employed outdoors, anybody who finds himself imbedded in one needs to worry about their own mass being insufficient to weigh down a structure that is almost completely empty space and buoyant in most planetary atmospheres. Prisoners need to worry about the whole mass being batted about by errant winds, being carried for miles, or at densities ascending to true cloud-height, where if suffocation becomes an issue, it's because the people carried within cannot compress the high-altitude mixture into amounts sufficient to sustain life.

Stang has therefore done her assailants a favor by activating the device indoors, beneath a roof. They'll still have their imprisonment to worry about, within a structure so solid that they will need others to come by with diamond or energy drills, to cut them out. With luck, their superiors will care enough to make the effort. Not that Stang cares much.

The reason Stang is not imprisoned, herself, is that, tonight—again, if this is indeed night—she didn't retire atop the mattress but in its base, where she'd dozed under the protection of an air filter. This habitat inside a habitat was designed to protect her from breathing anything but the natural mixture of gases one normally expected to find, on this particular planetary surface. It could have filtered out gases significantly more lethal and caustic than the one her assailants pumped into the sleepcube; that compound, which is known to her, was no problem at all.

The enclosed habitat had also been sealed against the exploding nano-cloud. The cloud, unable to expand downward, instead expanded upward and out, engulfing the room while leaving her conscious and free, beneath it.

The solidifying mass would be as impermeable to her own movements as it would be for the assault team, but then she'd never been limited to exiting the same way she'd entered.

She blows the escape panel at the position that would be the headboard on a traditional bed and shimmies out, the operation being less than graceful given the cramped space and her own unusual size. She emerges into the rear of the storeroom, where she rises to her full height, armored for a fight, masked in a rebreather and regarding the translucent fog bank with grim amusement.

In the hallway, the compatriots of the two she's trapped exchange shouts of dismay and suggested tactics for a follow-up assault. Given time, they will break through the ceiling.

She sets off the second batch of explosives.

These charges have been in place, camouflaged to look like imperfections in the outer wall, since the day she moved in. They are arranged in a rough square and they blow an exit of exactly that shape, leading to the outside. This she dives through, at almost the same moment. It is a fifteen-foot drop to the ground, one that would hurt like hell and possibly break some bones if she allowed herself to fall straight down, but she takes it at a shallow dive and rolls, distributing her points of impact. It still hurts, really, but the trick, as someone once said, is of course not minding that it hurts; arranging that it hurts no more than she can take, and she can take quite a bit.

At the end of the roll, she is back in a standing position, in what any town of more adjacent houses would be called an alley. In Hallestagh, not so much a planned community as one that has congealed with only grudging respect toward parallel lines, it is nothing so formal: just a brief interruption between crap houses.

She hears shouting from above and to her left, in the direction of the central thoroughfare. Some of them come from the people she's known these past few months, astonished at this interruption in the overall boredom. Others come from the strike team, alerting others to her position. This is not unexpected. Her escape from the upstairs room was never ever going to

involve stealth.

Why, here comes one of them, charging around the corner of the building.

There's always one.

This guy's compact, thick-necked, slit-eyed, determined, also appalled, clearly registering even as he draws near just what Stang looks like this close up, that she's armored and ready for him.

He holds a teemer.

This crowd control weapon can overload her nervous system with a fractal image and render her catatonic for days.

It only works in direct line of sight, and she's already countered it. Her goggles represent all three-dimensional objects before her as detailed line-drawings, which is nowhere near enough detail to transmit the fractal.

So he fires, and she registers a bright burst of light but is not affected by it, and he is left scrambling for another weapon as she puts him down with a blow.

She does not take the teemer. It's likely useless as any force armed with them will wear countermeasures to protect themselves; she steps over him and comes around the front of the building. She makes no attempt to run away but instead stands in plain sight as spotters from the roof alert anybody inside the building of her movements.

A dozen armored figures swarm from the building, circling her.

They all wear smoky visors, rendering them less individuals than faceless aspects of the same collective. From their bulky clothing, gray and white in a weak stab at camouflage against the local terrain, it is next to impossible to tell how many of them are men, how many women. They all carry themselves as professionals, and it is quite likely that any one of them could present Stang, larger than any of them, with bruising opposition. Size matters. But even a much smaller foe can inflict damage before being put down.

But this was never about defeating them. Even as she first arrived at Hallestagh, she knew that she would not defeat the force that would eventually be sent against her. Nor is it about getting away. They are an organized army. They have vehicles and can chase her from the air until she collapses from exhaustion.

Continuing to resist is a waste of time.

The only argument against immediate surrender to the inevitable is her recent long span of crushing boredom.

The closest member of the squad detaches from the circle and approaches her with open hands. "Don't waste your time, Stang. We didn't have to try gas. We were always willing to do this without violence."

Nice of him.

She brings both fists down like clubs. They impact his shoulders, just where they join the neck. Padded armor disperses some of the impact. The force still drives him to his knees. The crunch means he will probably need some time with a surgical nano-fleet. Right now, it must hurt like hell, and she hears the murmur of dismay coming from all parts of the circle, as others charge from her left, from her right, and from behind, intent on eschewing the fancy armaments and instead bringing her down with brutality and weight of numbers.

That too, is going to hurt, and again, as that old sage said, the trick is not minding that it hurts; instead taking what satisfaction she can in putting as many down as she can, before her inevitable capture.

Because it is inevitable of course. That action-adventure cliché of the single unstoppable fighter taking out an entire mob of assailants, coming at her in waves: that is largely wishful thinking, a total myth. It almost never happens, not even with people as formidable as herself. As dangerous as she is, she's only managed it three, four times, tops.

So she breaks the arm of the guy coming at her from the right and smashes the next one coming at her from the left and uses one guy she picks up from the left wrist and ankle as a flail against the others.

She puts a couple down and has a grand old time with this before she realizes that she's doing

so well that she might well be having one of her really on days, one that would leave her in a field of unmoving bodies with absolutely no change in her overall predicament.

All that would happen is that they'd upgrade their weaponry and send even more, and this time maybe take down some of the people of Hallestagh.

She hates contributing to collateral damage.

She slows, staggers, feels a jab of sharp pain in her lower back and allows it to take her down, though she lashes out with one massive arm and slams one of her last assailants in the crotch, just to show that she's not quite out.

"You maniac," one of the wounded says. "You didn't have to put yourself through this."

No, she thinks, her eyes closing, *I didn't.*

She could have spent all this time somewhere other than this anal pore of human civilization, enjoying the comforts of a place with room service, and the company of someone who gave a damn about her. She's an amiable person, at heart. She's never had any trouble collecting lovers, or a circle of friends. Instead, she had to tilt at windmills.

Coming to Hallestagh at all is best seen as a pathetic cry for help, really.

Somebody rips off her goggles and teems her at point-blank range.

* * *

Later:

"Do you know? For an interstellar conspiracy to manipulate human events, some of your questions strike me as really naïve."

"You must have known you had no chance against our assault."

"May I use another metaphor?"

"If you must."

"In one of my previous jobs, I was hired to carry a message to one of the leaders of a powerful criminal organization. The particulars of this message are irrelevant to the point. They came from someone who had been at violent odds with this organization for some time, and was finally meeting their terms for a truce. He did not trust them to give him enough time to speak his surrender before executing him on the spot. So he sent me. All above board; these people often did their business through intermediaries granted safe passage, as the alternative was showing up personally and being murdered or tortured in ways less elegant than your own. My employer sent advance word that I was coming, and that I was to be left alive afterward, to bring back the response."

"The response could have been your own throat, slit, and your corpse, returned in multiple small packages. That would have been sufficiently eloquent."

"Yes. It had been known to happen. But I was a very well-paid courier. Hazard pay upped my rate."

"Continue."

"I showed up with empty hands and, because there are any number of weapons I could have been carrying in otherwise, naked. The site was a walled compound, under surveillance by a number of snipers, and as I approached the boss, I saw that he had fifteen guards with him, each armed with knives and ready to slice me to pieces if anything went wrong. These guys were famous for their creative slicing. I wanted no part of it. I just moved when they said I could move, stopped when they said I could stop, and kept a respectful distance until I was given permission to talk."

"And?"

"One of the stupider men chose that moment as his opportunity to impress the boss by taking me down."

"I would assume this a bad idea."

"They were later able to grow him a new leg."

"And the others?"

"I was obliged to continue defending myself."

"Charming. What is the point of this digression?"

"Just this: I entered that compound as a supplicant. I came with all due humility, perfectly

willing to be polite about it. But there were some trespasses that were beneath my dignity and the dignity of my employer, that I was not obliged to accept. Enduring them would have lowered his status, as well as mine, and weakened his bargaining position in the future. One could say that by disrespecting my rights of free passage, those idiot men were testing my sincerity. One could also say that by demonstrating my insistence on my own dignity, I established it.”

“You’re not dead, so I assume everything worked out.”

“I delivered my message, accepted the compliments of the recipient, got the hell out of there, and accepted my payment, all in good faith. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“Tell me why you believe this relevant to our current situation.”

“The assholes you sent could have knocked.”

“You were a threat.”

“I came to this planet alone. I came here prepared to defend myself, but I otherwise made no avert hostile acts, didn’t even send any messages. I waited for you to contact me. You could have sent a messenger, had her sit down for a one-on-one, over one of the shitty little tables in the tavern. I was certainly there waiting for you, long enough.”

“You expect us to believe that you would have greeted her with open arms.”

“Open arms? No. I don’t like you. You ruined a friend of mine. But with closed fists? No reason for that. I was a messenger myself. I don’t beat up messengers.”

“What would you have told her?”

“What I’m telling you now: that my business with you dies with Draiken. That with him gone there’s no need to hunt me, target me, or interrogate me.”

“You’re telling me you’re done.”

“I’m proclaiming that I’m done. I’m telling you that after today, you and I have no further business.”

“This is why you stuck around, in a place this dangerous to you? To declare a truce?”

“After today, I want nothing more to do with this.”

“You could have just hidden. Draiken successfully hid from us for decades.”

“So he did. And he also said that when he ran into your organization again, the agents he met claimed that you’d known where he was all along. He was just . . . no longer an asset you were interested in. I believe that, and I don’t want to be like him, spending the rest of my life looking over my shoulder.”

“You really did come here to declare a truce.”

“To be truthful, I was of two minds. I wanted out. And I also couldn’t wait to kick you in your collective teeth. But then something made up my mind.”

“What?”

“Naline.”

“The local girl you’ve been sleeping with.”

“In the nonsexual meaning of the phrase, yes. I’m more of a big sister.”

“Why is she important?”

“Nothing. She’s a girl from a piece-of-shit village on a piece-of-shit planet, who before I stepped in faced no future other than as the plaything of the local, piece-of-shit rapist. There’s absolutely nothing important about her, not that people like you would recognize. But I have a different moral compass, and she’s asked me to take her along when I leave. I can’t say no to that and still be a human being. So I said yes, and that’s where I am. Taking her somewhere better than this—and there are so many, despite the efforts of pieces of garbage like you—has become the overriding mission of the next part of my life. And that’s why, upon leaving, I will be of no further threat to you.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“Are you really stupid enough to believe that any part of this fairy tale is ever going to happen?”

* * *

Before:

Teeming is a state of living death.

The fractal image overwhelms your mind. It renders you closed off, unable to summon conscious thought, unable to explore the outside world through the portals known as your senses. All you have is that image, stamped on your brain like a tattoo.

It can last for days, and for that time, you are wholly at the mercy of whoever has custody of your body.

The two significant consolations are, first, that while in this helpless state, you are not aware of the passage of time. You do not suffer through the period of your greatest helplessness. Second, the human mind is too resilient an instrument for the process to paralyze it forever. It finds its way around the image, regains control of itself, then wastes no time expunging the image so that life can resume. There can be aftereffects, flashbacks, but in most cases these are not worth talking about, and they do not bother Stang as she wakes, wearing gray clothing not her own, in a cylindrical room with padded floor and walls.

She is surprised not to find herself strapped to a gurney, or lying in a soup of her own bodily waste. Teemed people are incontinent. Either this room is regularly cleaned or her keepers knew she was due to come out of her helpless state and moved her to this cell once they knew she was ready.

She rises.

The padded room is multiple times her height. All the light comes from the ceiling high above. There is no visible door. She is barefoot, and she is hungry; no wonder, given that it must have been some time since she last had solid food.

She doesn't insult her captors by calling to them or herself by trying to beat her way out the room. She does explore its perimeter by walking in circles, but this is more to stay active than anything else.

She thinks of Naline, who may soon fall into the hands of another abuser. She thinks of Draiken, the desperation which with he kept elbowing her in the ribs, as his survival instincts clicked on. She feels the panic rising—with her size, she's never been fond of enclosed spaces she is not empowered to leave, but she calms herself with controlled breathing, and she continues her endless circuit of the perimeter. She even takes pleasure in the soft texture of the padded floor against her feet.

She sits. She meditates.

This is the toughest lesson to internalize, for anybody training to fight for their own survival: the advantages in waiting. Helplessness, if actual, is an energy trap, a means of tricking you into expending your energy without purpose. It is better to wait until circumstances change, even if the opportunity, when it comes, is a minor one.

She waits so long that she begins to fear that they'll never offer her so much as a trip to the facilities.

Then a section of wall swings outward, and a man steps into revealed doorway.

It is the same old man who approached her in the tavern, now dressed in an institutional onesie.

"Hello, Stang."

She doesn't get up. "Eat me."

"I see you're upset with me."

"I'm upset in general," Stang says, "but you're not on my list of favorite people right now. Am I supposed to go with you, now?"

"Not quite yet. Arrangements for your interrogation are still being made. I don't think I have to warn you to be truthful."

"Will you be listening?"

"I'll be busy at the moment, but I'll be sure to."

"Well," she says, spitting venom, "I'll make sure I'm sufficiently forthcoming."

He starts to turn away. But then he hesitates, and says, "I want you to know: the girl caused our people some trouble."

"I'm not surprised. I've been teaching her how to fight."

“She did show talent. Got a lick in. Or two. Our acquisition of her got a little rough, by necessity.”

“If she’s hurt, I’ll hurt you.”

“I’m sure you’ll have your opportunity, soon enough.” And he goes to close the door, but before it’s shut, he hesitates and says, “She’ll never be you.”

“Who the hell says I want her to be?”

He regards her for some time but leaves without another word.

Stang is not a woman ruled by fear. She knows the emotion well but has never let it cow her, never let it dictate what to do or not do. She knows without undue ego that in any facility geared to the shattering of human will, she will be a significant challenge. And yet, something breaks in her now: something that she’s held close for a long time, treasured, and harbored hopes for. It has been brittle for some time, but it has been there, capable of repair. But now she feels the last of it crumble into nothingness. Her vision blurs as tears overflow and plummet down golden cheeks that have only rarely known them. It is not despair, not quite. It is the knowledge that this thing she embraced to herself for so long will never come back.

Beyond that, she does not stir.

And then she hears the telltale distant hiss of the room filling with gas. The edges of her world turn gray. She could fight it, could hold on to every scrap of consciousness with the last of her strength, could rage against the dying of the light. But there is no point in expending one’s strength on inevitabilities. She makes it easier for herself by lying down, and is only dimly aware that by the time her eyes close she has contracted into a fetal curl.

She knows nothing more until she’s imprisoned in the straight-backed chair.

* * *

NOW.

The anonymous voice has just asked her, *Are you really stupid enough to believe that this is going to happen?*

Stang says, “Give me a good reason why it shouldn’t.”

“You know our location.”

“This is part of what I’ve come to tell you: that the approximate location of this facility is not a secret anymore. I may have only possessed a rough approximation, the general region, but I knew it was near Hallestagh; I even knew the approximate distance, and map direction. That much hasn’t been a secret for years. It’s common knowledge.”

“This is not possible.”

“How many times do I have to remind you that you know I’m not lying? The exposure of all your secrets is not only possible but inevitable. It has always been inevitable.”

“Nonsense!”

“Your organization has not been a secret for years. What I knew before I set foot on this world was revealed to Draiken a long time ago, by a Confederate intelligence analyst named Tasha Coombs. She’s has a very thick file on your activities that she’s distributed to all her associated agencies and also to her counterparts in allied governments. Don’t you get it? You may think you’re playing hide and seek, but you’re playing it in the middle of an open field. In truth, you’ve been spotted by, almost literally, everybody.”

“Shut up!”

“The main reason she’s never urged her people to come after you is the same reason your predecessors never went after Draiken during his self-imposed exile. He was, by their considered judgment, old news, a loose end not worth cleaning up. That’s the same way almost all relevant decision-makers feel about you. In their eyes, you’re insignificant.”

“Nonsense!”

“I’m speaking absolute truth. As your instruments can tell.”

“We’ve been manipulating human events for centuries.”

“Big deal. So have a lot of people.”

“We’ve made dangerous advances in mind control.”

“Again: so? If Draiken’s research over the years confirmed anything to his satisfaction, it’s that

the mind-control genie is out of the bottle, everywhere. Multiple alien races are working on it. Multiple governments are employing it. It's being used to twist individual will, and it's being used to manipulate entire populations. It's going to be a factor in human events for a long time to come. What you are, with all the capabilities you're so proud of, is just one small irrelevant bunch of cranks who may have been important once, but who are now just employing the same tools as all the other players who came after you. You're not just irrelevant, in that context. You're boring. In fact . . ."

"What?"

"What the hell. I still have time to shatter your illusions. You're not the power behind any throne. Maybe you were, once. But for now, you're just a criminal gang. This drug cartel you propped up on Piithkarath . . . that was just a revenue stream, a way to keep your enterprises afloat a little while longer. You're a jumped-up seventh-rate mafia. You really want to know what's kept you alive for this along? Because I'd be overjoyed for the chance to tell you."

"Amuse yourself. It will just go harder on you later."

"There are habitats, all over the natural world, where wildlife must contend with limited access to water. In some places it's just a single muddy puddle, forming in the same place every year. Predators who are normally in vicious competition for prey, who would in any other location attempt to tear each other apart, here drink side by side, because only this arrangement makes their shared water source available for all. Conflict ensues only when one gives in to instinct and snaps at the others, some of whom were bigger and stronger and able to kill it all along. Do you get the metaphor?"

"Don't say it."

"You have been tolerated this long only because you've fallen below a certain threshold of nuisance."

"Shut up!"

"You live only until one of those other powers decides to take your existence personally."

"SHUT UP!"

"If I went after you alone, I would die or give up everything I am. If I spread the news of your location to people motivated to destroy you, I would only make them stronger. And if I left this planet tomorrow, with or without Naline, I would have absolutely no reason to bother with you again, only in part because you've been dying all this time and you don't even know it."

". . . this is wishful thinking."

"You know it's not. You have nothing to lose by letting me go."

"I think you've given us all you're going to. So let me tell me what's going to happen to you next. We will take you to another room and commence breaking you."

"No, you won't."

"We will strip you of your personality, and we will rewrite you to our own specifications."

"No, you won't."

"Perhaps we'll test your loyalty then, by bringing this girl Naline before you and ordering you to kill her the same way you killed Draiken."

"No, you won't. Would you like to know why not?"

"Enlighten me."

"First: by threatening the girl, and by threatening me personally that I would be turned into an instrument to harm her, you have sacrificed any claim you might have had on my mercy. When everything else that's about to happen is done with, you will be given to me and I will do far worse to you than I did to that piece of offal, Reck. This is truth, and it is damned important for both of us, at this moment, for you to know that every single statement I've made to you, since being put in this chair, is truth: including that one. I promise you. You are going to die very badly, very soon."

"You're not the first person to threaten me from that chair. It registers as truth only because you happen to believe it."

"Quite possibly. But that brings us to the second relevant piece of information. Keeping in mind that it, too, is absolute truth."

“Proceed.”

“Your overconfidence in your own fearsome techniques have made you a wholly incompetent interrogator. You’ve listened to everything I’ve told you, and missed everything.”

“What do you imagine we’ve missed?”

“Just because I was telling the truth when I said I was no threat to you alone did not mean that I was alone.”

“You said that you came to this world alone.”

“Just because I said I came to this world alone does not mean that there weren’t others who arrived separately, or later.”

“Were there?”

“Just because I told you I didn’t know where the man you called Jathyx was right now did not mean I did not possess knowledge of the cause he was now fighting for.”

“Jathyx is here?”

“Just because I told you that my own purpose coming here was to have this conversation with you didn’t mean I thought this conversation would be sufficient to put an end to it.”

“That’s . . .”

“Just because I told you that I intend to put this business behind me and move on with the rest of my life did not mean that I expected to leave this job undone.”

“. . . but . . .”

“Just because I expressed my sincere belief that Draiken was a broken man doesn’t mean that I thought he was impotent.”

“. . . I don’t . . .”

“Just because I said that my purpose coming here was different than his doesn’t mean that getting what I want wouldn’t involve accomplishing the same things.”

“You said he begged you to kill him!”

“Just because I said that he begged me to kill him doesn’t mean he actually wanted to die.”

“You said you killed him!”

“And just because I said I choked him out and felt his heart stop doesn’t mean he’s dead.”

“WHAT?”

“You’re such an idiot that you think a woman planning to expose herself to interrogation by people with flawless lie detection wouldn’t first arm herself with a fine collection of truths, all the things that her targets wanted to hear.”

“He’s alive?”

“If you ever did move against me, we had no way of knowing just how long I’d be in your custody. I had to be able to tell you a story. He said that his death would make a dandy story. So I choked him out, under the full supervision of a trained medical team tasked with reviving him. I told the truth when I said he had to beg me before I agreed to do it.”

“You little bitch—”

“Well, you’re half right. I’m far from little.”

“You—”

“Let me explain something to you. Taking down your little nest of rats was always going to be a complicated operation. We always knew that the two of us couldn’t do it alone. So we went to Piithkarath and obtained just one of many human beings you’d twisted into your instrument. Jathyx was dangerous as hell, a multiple murderer, and there were any number of other people we could have obtained as the proof we needed to bring to our potential allies; many who would have been significantly less trouble to get. But there was something especially useful about this particular victim of yours. His original self, the one you obliterated, was beloved of people who happened to possess warships.”

“. . . who . . .”

“You must have heard of the Belari warship that docked in orbit, a few days ago. You thought they were just here to refuel, to allow their forces shore leave. You were wrong. It was here to drop a support team. The rest of the fleet is entering this system now, to follow up. Would you like to know who’s commanding it?”

“D-draiken?”

“Don’t be stupid. No, it’s commanded by the woman we delivered Jathyx to, one General Lena Arkhem. She is, among other things, the mother of the man Jathyx once was. She has no reason for mercy either, and was hard to talk out of bombarding this site from orbit. But she was in our debt and willing to give us a few months of lead-time. Draiken’s spent it directing an infiltration team, getting inside your perimeter, obtaining your files, and sabotaging this installation in so many ways I bet I can’t even count them. I’ve spent them being the highly visible, highly conspicuous, known associate of Draiken blundering about trying to find you. I bet I got you nice and frustrated waiting for me to finally do something worth interfering with. It was not half as frustrated as I got, in that crap town, waiting for you to act.”

“You’re lying!”

“That quaver in your voice is easily recognizable as fear. I bet you’ve experienced some anomalies recently, gaps in your security grid, little system failures, that sort of thing, easily written off but retroactively making sense to you now. I bet you can see them coming in even now.”

What Stang hears instead of a reply is the growing commotion in the background, of the unseen chamber where the voice originates: distant alarms, shouts of confusion, curses, a high-pitched wailing that must be someone realizing the end is near.

Stang presses on without waiting for a prompt. “You didn’t even know that he came to me in Hallestagh, wearing the face of an old man. Unrecognizable, he was. Had to pretty much knock me over the head with clues before I realized who he was. He let me know that you were about to send an acquisition team after me. Even offered to have his own forces pick up Naline, place her under their protection to prevent any attempts at reprisal on your part. Later, after you captured me, he showed up at the door of my holding cell, in so doing documenting that his people were all over your facility; letting me know that they had her and that everything was in place for the final stage. Knowing him, I’ll bet he’s been monitoring every word of this interrogation, just to enjoy the moment when you finally realized that it was me, interrogating you.”

The voice finally speaks up again, though the words are not meant for her. “. . . oh god . . .”

For several minutes, the golden woman just listens to the sounds of things being smashed. Soon she is no longer limited to hearing them as a transmission; soon, she is hearing them through the walls. The impacts are so close, before long, that they shake her where she sits. She cannot feel them in her quadriplegic state, but every few seconds or so, coinciding with distant rumbles, her eyesight blurs, reflecting the tremble of a paralyzed body shaking in a chair that is itself shaken by shocks transmitted through the very floor. There is nothing left she can do, so she just waits.

After far too long, the door opens and a man enters, trailed by wisps of smoke. She recognizes him as a man she’d met briefly, a man who had been ratlike and vile then, whose features still bear some mark of the character imposed on him then. They have softened some, in the time since she’d last seen him, probably reflecting whatever therapy, whatever treatment, he’s had in the interim. Humanity has started to creep back in.

But to her he will always be what she now calls him.

“Jathyx.”

“Stang,” he replies the only greeting he gives, as he does what he has to do to undo her neural block.

She hears a click in the back of her neck, the sound the little device makes when removed. Sensation comes rolling back, and it as unpleasant a sensation as any she’s ever experienced, a wave of pins and needle irritation, rolling up and down her limbs like a swarm of acidic ants.

She doesn’t wait until it’s over before she stands and says, “Where are we? Just starting or wrapping up?”

“Wrapping up,” Jathyx says. “There are some pockets of resistance here and there, but they’re being pacified. About all that’s slowing us down is the care we’re taking with killing any. We don’t know how many are true believers, and how many are imposed.”

“Uh-huh.” She finds she doesn’t care. “And where is *he*?”

“Draiken?”

“Right now I couldn’t give less of a damn about Draiken. I want the piece of crap whose time I was wasting. I made him a promise.”

Jathyx grins. It’s a grin she knows, from their brief prior association; a grin that takes pleasure in vendettas realized, a grin utterly appropriate to what he tells her now, a set of directions to a room where a certain person, a man it turns out, had performed his dull little job and hectoring her while she was helpless.

There is no doubt in her mind that Jathyx’s bumpy rehabilitation into the man he’d once been, if fated to be completed at all, will be slowed just a little bit by the pleasure he takes in providing Stang with this useful information.

Stang suffers no attack of scruples upon processing this small price to pay.

She just goes and takes care of what needs to be taken care of.

* * *

Later still:

Delia Stang has, for the moment, returned to the village of Hallestagh. It will be the end of her time in Hallestagh. She did not need to return, as she’s left nothing behind that she cares about, but closure has its place, and as she stands in the center of the small knot of ramshackle buildings taking her last look at the place’s dimensions, its flavor and its character, she feels the paradoxical sense of loss that one always feels, upon the closing of the doors that separate one phase of life from another. For those living here, their days will proceed in much the same way that they always have, with little in the way of change, with little in the way of hope for change, the battle that was just recently fought in their proximity nothing more than a slight punctuation, the day that there were plumes of smoke rising into the air, in their west. She finds that while she cannot leave this place quickly enough, she feels a little sorrow at the knowledge that it will now be left behind.

She talks to the few locals she ever had any real interaction with, including the one she only knows as Farthead, whose moist eyes reflect the inner sorrow of a man who honestly believes that he’s losing the love of his life.

Ah, well, Farthead. You’ll find somebody.

The skimmer that brought her back here, that will be bringing her back up to orbit, sits hovering waist-high just outside the circle of buildings. Naline sits in the back of it, enjoying the novelty of a vehicle, any vehicle. She sees Stang looking and waves, flashing a bright smile of the sort only the very young can manage, when they think of the future as a land filled with bright possibility. It is not a look quite at home on the girl’s face, but it looks like it’s settling in. Maybe that is what makes all this worth it: the settling of that foreign emotion known as hope, on the features of someone who had never before had reason to feel it.

Meanwhile, a familiar presence settles in beside Stang. “Are you ready to go?”

Draiken still wears the face of the wizened old man she’s met twice: one of many faces he’s worn in the time she’s known him, and one that reflects both his nature and his actual vintage. It will soon, she knows, be replaced with a new one; one that will likely be a new category of lie. It occurs to her that faces are all he has, now, maybe all he has had for a long time. Whatever he wears next will be a stranger to her, and this knowledge is bittersweet; enough that her eyes water, in a manner they rarely have.

He prompts her: “Stang?”

“I heard you,” she says. And after a moment, because the silence needs filling, she adds, “I may not have liked this place, but I’m sure as hell going to remember it.”

He regards the shabby collection of houses with open dislike. “If I were you, I would devote everything I had to forgetting it.”

“Maybe that’s your problem,” she replies. “You remember things you should forget and forget things you should remember. It’s possible that if you handled your life the other way around, you might have wound up living a more satisfying one.”

“Oh, I have no problem taking satisfaction in what we’ve accomplished here. You should, too. Our allies are going through all our acquired intelligence. We have a list of the organization’s other outposts, on multiple other worlds. Assets they’ve planted. Operations they’re running. There

may still be plenty left to do, enough to last for years, but for the first time ever, I have them on the run. They won't be able to hide."

"I won't be with you for the rest," Stang says.

His expression softens. "I suspected as much. Everything you said during that interrogation: you framed it quite well, but it all had to be true, because they would have known if you were lying. I understand you walking away while you still can."

"And doesn't that leave you with any more to say to me?"

The wry smile this old man offers her now is the only expression he's made so far that looks anything like the companion she's known. "Believe me. After everything I've been through in my life, I'm the very last person in the universe who would ever give anybody, let alone a friend, any trouble over tendering a firm resignation."

She waits for more, but that appears to be all there is. Then she exhales. "Good to know."

After a moment, he does give her more. "Some of the other stuff you said hurt, though."

"It was all true."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about." She all but snarls her words, and anybody who hasn't been with them during their journey would think this hate, and not one last lifeline tossed across an abyss. "It's all true. That in my judgment, they broke you after all. That your life since you started this crusade has just been an extended exercise in suicide. That you've been offered every possible opportunity to walk away for real, one offer after another, one chance of happiness after another, and that you've never been able to accept it, even now that you know you've started to decline. That you're running a race with death and that there's no way to win it."

"What would you suggest of me?"

It appears to be a serious question.

What the hell. Already suspecting it to be a waste of time, but needing to make this one last attempt before moving on, she turns to face him. "That since you've done all the hard work, and gotten others you trust to take on the job, you could walk away. You could come with me and Naline, to wherever we go in search of something better. Maybe even back to this world you keep talking about, Greeve. I'm not asking you to feel anything for me that you might not be capable of feeling. But I'm willing to help you build yourself a life, find some peace while you still can. Come on. I've fought my wars, so it's going to be hard enough for me. Maybe we could help each other."

"It's a . . . breathtaking offer, Delia." He spreads his hands, palms out: a gesture of acknowledgment, of understanding, and of wholly unreasonable imprisonment in his own agenda. "I've never been a man to leave a job half done."

"I know you're not," she says, her anger spent. "Not even if you have to keep redrawing the mission parameters, to make sure there's always another 'half' still left to do. Not even if the others we've brought in are more than capable of proceeding without you. Not even if you scar everybody you get to trust you, and not even when you know you won't live long enough to see it done."

"No," he agrees. "Not even then."

And just for a moment his mask slips, and reveals the truth she has seen, the one that he normally keeps hidden even from himself: that the prisoner has himself become a cage, in which something never destined to be free wails, forever.

It is in the voice of that poor trapped thing, and not the one of the man she's come to know, that he says, "I'm sorry."