

The Soul Behind the Face

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The woman in the pod has just asked him: “How long do you need me to have been your wife?”

Draiken considers the contorted syntax. Not *how long would you like to be married*, or *how long are we supposed to have been married*, but *how long do you need me to have been your wife*, a construction that only fits this one situation, a contract to lie.

In a sense, it’s like coming home to a place he always hated but still suited him: the country of deceit and deception.

Still, the standards for such things have changed in his recent years of relative inactivity, and he is unused to some of the new methods.

In his day, people in this profession had names. They might have been aliases, and they might have been cover identities, but they were names, convenient handles to be used in conversation. It therefore irritates him to have to accept that the presence before him has no name and no past and is referred to only as “the woman,” as her contact people had specified.

“The woman” might be any age, from adolescence to dotage. The availability of rejuvenation treatments, for those who can afford that, renders any educated estimate from physical appearance a near impossibility. Her features are smooth, sculpted, and neutral, bereft of easy indicators like laugh lines. She wears no makeup, keeps her black hair at a length just long enough to establish, from the shadow of the stubble on her scalp, that she’s capable of growing some if some is necessary. She is Caucasian, more or less—more, given how pale she is—but with a few adjustments she could be any race; she is smooth-faced, but with few adjustments could be ancient; her physique is lithe to the point of near-emaciation, but gives the impression that she could wear fat. Right now, she’s a blank. But none of this places her vintage or her background, not in any manner he can discern.

In normal circumstances, there would be other indicators. Even in young bodies, the old move with a precision, and sometimes a wariness, that comes from long practice. The young, even in old bodies, tend to move with heedless abandon, as if nothing in the Universe can destroy them. But the woman is immobile, and those clues are unavailable.

It is not any easier to discern her character from her surroundings. She does not waste her available wealth on elbow room. Between contracts, she lives sealed in a pod no larger than a coffin, the health needs of her life, from elimination to physical conditioning, tended to by mechs and nanites. From time to time the pod swivels, vertically when she wants to stand, horizontally when she wants to lie down. It is standing open now, the top half having retracted to reveal her for the meeting. The half of her body that he can see is naked and so pale that little blue blood vessels stand in sharp contrast against her skin. There is nothing at all erotic about her nudity, which is little more than a wan demonstration of her disregard for his presence. She's a woman. *The woman*, as she styles herself. But a generic blank.

Before his recent decades of hiding on a planet called Greeve, Draiken once spent half a year huddled in a pod like hers, which, like hers, occupied a slot in a dirtside warehouse lined with uncounted hundreds of others; and he knows that when she shuts off the external feeds, the ivory internal walls can become holo screens. The interior can be rendered as large, to her senses, as she desires: a palace, a garden, a landscape out of any fantasy she wishes. Depending on her ability to accept those sights and sounds and the tactile sensations, the pod is equipped to feed her, it might even be a perfect existence. But she is so persuasively blank, right now, that he has trouble believing she summons forth any of these things. Somehow he believes that when the screen goes blank she lets her surroundings do the same, taking comfort in the void. For some reason, she prefers the nothingness. He is fine with that. Her default lifestyle strikes him as an even more extreme version of the isolation he has taken comfort in, over the decades of his own exile: a time that was *almost* friendless, *almost* loveless, and *almost* without purpose, existing from day to day while trying to avoid ever becoming an actual *person* at all. But all those years he'd lived in relative freedom, fishing from his little skiff, feeling the sun on his back, interacting with locals he permitted himself to *almost* know.

This woman has somehow arranged an existence for herself even more anonymous than his own.

She's familiar to him.

She horrifies him.

She is exactly what he needs.

* * *

The woman in the pod asks, "Do you understand what I ask?"

Draiken responds, "Yes."

"And yet you don't answer. Is this the first time you've hired an enhanced imposter?"

"I've been an imposter, of one kind or another, most of my life."

"You have traveled under false identities."

"And lived under them, sometimes at length."

"I presume this was a matter of self-preservation."

"Yes."

"I won't ask whether you were a criminal, or terrorist, or some kind of covert operative."

"Thank you. I wouldn't answer you, in any event."

"I don't need you to. It's the way you carry yourself. You have the look of a man who was trained to defend himself on a moment's notice."

"It's gratifying to know that it still shows."

"As you are contacting me instead of going through the resources of an organization, I further suspect that you are on your own, pursuing an agenda that is not supported by any established power. But it was always that way, yes? At least once, you worked for powerful people."

"That's fair."

"When you operated undercover before, you were always aware of who you were."

"Yes."

"Have you ever traveled with a woman pretending to be your wife?"

"A few times."

"These women: were they colleagues? Partners in crime, as it were?"

"Not in crime. Not as I would define it. But yes."

“Then it must have been enough, on those occasions, for them to be as capable as living the pretense as yourself. Did they also always know that the relationship the two of you pretended at was a lie? Did they let the mask slip, in unguarded moments?”

“They were professionals. They didn’t break cover, even when we were alone.”

“But in quiet moments you could make eye contact and share the knowledge that everything you did together was in service of the fiction.”

“Yes.”

Immobile, the woman cannot shrug, but she communicates her scorn with a twitch of one thin eyebrow. “If that were sufficient for whatever you have planned, you could find yourself another woman with such talents. You come to me because you need a partner who will not be merely pretending; one who will believe every lie she speaks and who will remember the past you only pretend at. You need someone to *become* the fictional person you need. That’s the service I offer. So I ask: How long do you need me to have been your wife? What serves your purpose most efficiently?”

Again, he hesitates.

The woman does not smile but gives the impression of amusement, which for all he knows might be as much a put-on as everything else she does to put a potential client at his ease. “Perhaps if I ask some leading questions. Do you intend to keep the personal appearance you wear now? In particular, your apparent age?”

“Perhaps ten or fifteen years younger. But softer. Paler. More prosperous.”

“Prosperous. Not wealthy?”

“Comfortable.”

“Complacent, even?”

“I’d be willing to go so far as vapid.”

“I can do vapid. Will you be expecting sex?”

“It’s not necessary.”

“It means nothing to me. I take it as neither pleasure nor violation. It’s included in the fee.”

“I’m not against the idea, but it’s not necessary.”

“I assure you that you do not need to be gallant or concerned about my virtue. Unless we are to be a couple who hate one another, or who have become strangers to one another, it’s best for there to be some physical affection. It maintains the illusion of a connection. We can make it rote, more comfortable than passionate; two people who know each other and have exhausted their mutual supply of surprises. An erotic handshake. I can modulate it accordingly.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Again, there’s no need to spare me. It isn’t important. Final question: will you need me by your side every moment, wherever we’re going? Or will you wish to leave me behind for extended periods, while you do whatever it is you’re using my company to cover?”

“The latter. What I need to do I’ll need to do alone.”

“So you need me for travel, only. Let me suggest: we will be an old but not decrepit couple wed for thirty—no, round numbers raise flags—thirty-two years, comfortable around each other, affectionate, in a union driven by familiarity that has long since been drained of all but the most perfunctory passion. She will have a history of accompanying her husband about, only to fall back on her own resources as he disappears for days at a time, dealing with local business; we’ll make her a reader and sampler of local color, a woman with no occupation of her own who wishes she could see her husband more but is resigned to the habitual distance between them. You will have to spend some time with her, making conversation, but you can let her carry the weight of the relationship; the lonely tend to prattle. People will feel a little sorry for her and will wish you were nicer, but they will not feel they’re watching anything inauthentic, and that’s the chief concern, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“This is how it’s done. Upon the release of the necessary funds to my account, you also provide me with your specific requirements, including our full itinerary and any specifics that must be included in our cover story. I produce a life that includes shared referents that support a past

spent together—personal secrets I never bothered to share with you, things I resent about your behavior that I've somehow never worked up enough vehemence to mention. I undergo the physical and mental conditioning that make it more than a fiction. I can have the personality in place within days. By the time we connect, I will be who I need to pretend to be and will remain that person for the duration of our contract."

"And after that contract?"

"Without timely payment to the account I provide, I revert to the person you see before you. I promise you, you will not want this to happen while anything still depends on the fiction remaining intact. My emotional investment in your well-being will be nil, or possibly—depending on how I've been treated while being the person you want me to be—even negative. In such an event, I will expose you without hesitation, regardless of the risk to myself."

"Understood."

"We can meet and coordinate specifics after you make the necessary transfer."

Curiosity overcomes him before he leaves the room. "Two questions, if you don't mind."

"Ask."

"First, does my agenda matter? Will you raise any moral reasons if it involves criminality?"

"I assume that's one question, not two."

"Yes."

"Despite your protestations, I know your mission involves criminality, even if undertaken for the most noble reasons. That's presumably why you hope to travel under an alias and use me as cover. But you are not asking me to participate in whatever you have planned. I don't want the details and will cancel the contract and keep the retainer if you offer them. If we go ahead, I will document my lack of involvement and worry about the legal repercussions for myself, if we are apprehended. What is your other question?"

"It won't happen, I assure you, but what if I were of a mind to extend our contract indefinitely? What protects you from a client who just wants a tailor-made person, to provide companionship indefinitely? Or someone who wants to use whatever bonds of love you simulate to abuse you? How do you stop that from happening?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Call it the curiosity of a man who spent too many years trafficking in lies himself, over the practical concerns ruling a business that seems to operate by many of the same parameters."

"Very well. First: this is not just a business. This is also a lifestyle. My greatest ambition is to live an existence as free of interpersonal connections, or identity, or association with other human beings, as I can afford. I want this for reasons compelling to me that are none of your business and are thus not open to discussion. If I were independently wealthy I would remain in this pod, without suffering connection to others, until I died of natural causes. I agree to take on temporary identities because it is how I finance living without being forced to do anything that is distasteful to me the rest of the time. Our contract will accordingly include an upper limit on acceptable duration, after which the personality I've assumed on your behalf will be erased, without possibility of further extension. At that time, if I find out that you have taken undue advantage of me, you will discover that I am capable of unrestrained vindictiveness. I will destroy you, if I have to. And second: I have other safeguards in place that will protect me from you if your behavior toward me ever extends outside the limited boundaries of our agreement. I am not a robot. I am an imposter. And as much as I seem to be within your power, at all times, there will always be part of me capable of declaring our contract null and void at a moment's notice. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Yes," he says. "Thank you for being honest with me."

"If I do not hear from you by end of business three days from now I will assume that you have made other arrangements. Good luck, sir."

* * *

Back when Draiken was an active participant in the pursuits that have recently come back to haunt him, he learned some special lessons about wealth: among them, how imaginary it is, how easy it is to manipulate, how prudent it can be to spirit some away and leave it in places where it

can be retrieved, later. He has left more than enough, in one illicit account or another, to finance a quite comfortable lifestyle for the rest of a normal lifespan; more so because he has gone so long without touching it. His recent life years of beach-combing poverty, on the edges of civilization, had been more anonymous and therefore safer than anything that might raise flags among parties that might still be looking for him. Besides, hidden wealth is mobility. A man with hidden wealth can always flee and be comfortable in poverty somewhere else, in another place where money is of no particular use.

Two of the accounts he set up years ago are no longer extant, in one case because the financial institution that housed it is gone, and in another because the entire world that housed it is gone. A third does exist and has done so well, under the investment instructions he left behind, that he suspects it to be a baited trap. He takes a few minutes to set up a small robot account to keep that one busy with small transactions, both deposits and withdrawals, and makes a mental note to examine it with greater care later. A couple of other accounts are unsuitable for other reasons, fortunately temporary. But there are a couple, quite healthy, that he feels safe enough to empty. The first he transfers to the woman in its entirety, both paying the fee for her services and providing a little extra in case an extension is required. The second he empties for his own use. It is not an unlimited amount of money, but it will enable him, and his wife of many years, to travel and live like members of the upper middle class, accustomed to moderate luxuries, for the week or so that he estimates this mission will require.

When he is done he treats himself to a rare restaurant meal, using credit in the name he currently wears, Saturnus Horst. It is a fine establishment in the shadow of the local space elevator, with a fine view of the cargo pods going up and down. In the window, the mammoth structure is a gleaming silvery thing, elegant in the purity of its lines, the only sign of a technological civilization in a landscape colored by a cloudless blue sky, a verdant plain, and distant snowcapped mountains. It is an idealized fiction. The window is in fact an enhanced image, polishing a tableau that is the technological world at its ugliest. One step outside and he would see what he knows to be there: mountains with their tops sheared off, a plain cluttered with support systems for the cargo moving to and from the terminus, a sky gray from the incidental gases the third-rate, lowest-bidder space elevator emits in everyday usage. It is only local damage—the world has mechanisms for filtering out the worst of the worst before it poisons the rest of the continent and the planet-wide ecosystem around it—but functions as a fine reminder that infrastructure is never lovely.

He knows that for the diners who eat in this establishment and take in this view, the lie is something to be believed, for as long as it remains comforting and convenient. This is the relationship human beings have with truth. He is not only used to that. He is counting on it. At meal's end, he provides the server with a tip twice the polite rate and disappears into the crowds outside, taking a zigzag route sufficient to discourage any more inexperienced operatives of the various governments that would find profit in following him. He knows that these measures would only be sufficient to deter the lowest competency percentile. If he ever finds himself faced with savants, he will have a problem.

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Later that afternoon, he keeps an appointment with one Hawne Redflower, a professional smuggler not of arms or drugs or even people but of certain trade goods subjected to high tariffs whenever shipped off-world: as minor a criminal as Draiken could find, a man who but for a few minor provisions of the export acts would be a perfectly law-abiding citizen. The authorities don't bother this man much. There's no point. Draiken can only hope this means they're not watching.

Redflower is a baby-faced man with tiny eyes and a habit of smiling after every sentence, though whether that's an attempt to be ingratiating or to show his teeth remains open to interpretation. "You've bought twenty minutes of my time. Begin."

"I want you to tell me about the orbital terminus."

"It's like any other orbital anchor point—the same as the other nine we have. Fancy by the standards of some, a rat-hole by the standards of others. Hotels, brothels both virtual and flesh,

neurec parlors, corpus storage, lots of transients asking directions of everyone they pass. But you didn't have to pay me for something you could have gotten from a guidebook, and the clock's still ticking."

"How's the security there?"

"As always, it depends on the particular offense being planned. You want to set a bomb or something, traffic anything sentient, I'll turn you in myself."

"Is that often a problem, locally?"

"You don't research the systems you pass through?"

"I do. I am interested in a local's perspective."

"This is a prosperous travel hub. People have money here. People also have the leisure time to fight their little causes. The local political structure is rancid and poisoned by stupid acts of terrorism. There have been attempts to blow up the elevators, the orbital termini. Their causes are stupid, even petty, but their occasional successes have driven Planetary Security into the realm of the repressive."

"That jibes with my information. I need to know how far you're willing to go, to circumvent them."

"Tell me what you need and I'll tell you if it's anything I'm willing to help you with."

"I need to contact a man in corpus storage."

"Not many of those, starside. The authority here runs a pretty efficient depot. Once someone's in bluegel, they tend to get loaded aboard their flights pretty fast."

"This man's been on a station shelf for fifty-four years."

"*Mercantile standard* years?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it! Is that even possible?"

"Evidently so."

"Ach. What happened? Visa problems? Ticket got canceled? His records fall through the cracks?"

"Nothing. It's his form of retirement."

"You're kidding me. He couldn't think of anything better to do, with his life, than to spend them unconscious in sticky gunk?"

"He's done some things that make consciousness an unwanted burden."

"Suicide would be cheaper and would have the added benefit of freeing up the storage space for somebody else."

"I'm told that this man believes in a hell where people who have done the kind of things he's done are tortured forever for their sins. He would rather live in oblivion, never aging, than die consigned to eternal torment."

"Ah. One of those."

"Yes."

"*Forever* I don't believe in. I've earned a few thousand slaps in the face and kicks in the gut, but sooner or later the books will be balanced, and I'll be able to get on with the good part of my afterlife. But even if I thought there was such a thing as *eternal* punishment I'd make a point of having as much fun as I could as long as my heart kept beating. Sleeping through the good part so you can wake up in the bad part is just about the stupidest decision I can ever imagine anybody making."

"Nevertheless, it appears to be his strategy."

"There are cheaper places to shelve yourself dirtside."

"I didn't come to you to discuss his bad decisions, Mr. Redflower. But I suspect that making himself harder to get to is his way of discouraging casual visitors."

"A plan that's failed, I take it."

"I'm not a casual visitor."

"I suppose he won't be pleased to see you."

"Not in the least."

"Well, then: it won't please you to learn that orbit-side does a very good job of caring for its

short-term—and, I now suppose long-term— shelved. You can't wake someone without authorization. You can't talk to him unless he agrees to participate. If he does agree and objects to anything you might have to say to him, they'll shut you down in ten seconds. If they think you're being intimidating or abusive in any way, they'll throw you out. If you falsify authorization in order to come back, they confiscate your accounts, shelve you, and find you a crypt on the first flight out, destination random. Ten seconds bothering the wrong person, and you can wake up on some industrial hell four systems away, working scut labor for subsistence air. It's nothing to play around with."

"Understood. But I won't need to spend much time with him. A few seconds will do."

* * *

Still operating as Saturnus Horst, he locates a solicitor; this one is a soft-faced, olive-skinned man named Airys Lothen, so insubstantial in his bearing that he seems to tremble beneath the air from the overhead vent.

"Fifty-four years? Really? What can you possibly have to say to him, after all this time?"

"I want to tell him that the clouds have shifted and the sun is shining."

"That's cryptic. I gather this phrase will mean something to him?"

"It will get the message across."

"Will security swarm me on all sides if I say it?"

"No."

"Will I find myself on any permanent lists because I say it?"

"I believe that any observers will understand that you are a messenger and not an originator."

"You *believe*."

"I see no reason why anybody would fail to credit you as an uninvolved party, relaying a message for a financial consideration. At worst, you will be questioned."

"Still: you are not sure."

"I would be paying you to assume a minimal risk."

"What will your corpus say in return?"

"Nothing."

"How will I contact you afterward?"

"You won't."

"So I head up to orbit, wake up this man who's been shelved for generations, utter some gibberish, and walk away."

"Yes."

"I may be crazy, but I actually believe you."

"That's what I'm counting on."

"Why do you need to hire a dirtside messenger? It's expensive to send me up there, to do this pointless thing. You'll need to pay me expenses and an hourly rate for the trip up and back. You could hire a representative up there and only pay for an hour."

"There are factors that make that untenable, key among them the need to keep my connection with my messenger as distant as possible. I therefore want to hire you now, and I need you to do this thing at 0930 station time, two days after you receive word from me that it's time to go up. When alerted, by a message containing the word Rose and the number 352, you will depart immediately, head up, and upon your arrival spend one day on-station wasting time in any manner pleasant to you. This will include a 1530 drink at the bar designated Blue Horizon. You will spend at least one hour at that bar. You will then leave, seek whatever recreation you desire, return to your hotel, have an 0800 breakfast, then proceed directly to your meeting with the corpus, deliver your message, and return home. We will not see each other again."

"You're a strange man."

"I pay in full in advance, sir."

"One final question."

"Yes."

"What if I take your money and then don't relay your message? Or, worse, take your money and go to the authorities?"

"I believe you won't, not in the least because you asked."

"But if I did?"

"Mr. Lothen: by the end of the day my name and my appearance will have completely changed. Even assuming that you managed to interest the authorities in this commission which, however eccentric, includes no obvious crime, no description of me, given by you, will ever lead the authorities to where I'm staying. They will not find me. I, however, will find my business stymied and will therefore find myself stuck on this planet, needing to find some other way to get what I want. I will know that you betrayed me, and I will be very put out. I promise you that, whether it takes one day or twenty years, no safety precautions will be able to prevent me from paying you a return visit at the moment when you have the most to lose. This is not something you want."

"Maybe I shouldn't. Something could go wrong and you could blame me."

"I am not stupid or vindictive. I know the difference between outright betrayal and simple failure for reasons that are none of your fault. If your errand fails due to factors that have nothing to do with you, I will not hold you at fault. All I request is that if you take my money, you make this effort in good faith."

"And then I go through life never knowing what this was all about?"

"Yes."

"Can you promise at least that nobody will be hurt?"

"Nobody you know and nobody undeserving. What is your decision?"

"How soon can you get me the money?"

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Afterward, he communicates with the woman, who confirms that she has received her payment and is ready to negotiate specifics. They compare notes. He gives her the broad outline of the background he wants, and she promises to concoct the personal specifics: the entire history of a marriage, complete with high points and low points, hidden resentments and unresolved arguments, love both expressed and unexpressed, dreams both fulfilled and not.

She asks him if he's settled on how long he'll need her services.

He says, "You will meet me at the hotel, after a separation of several weeks. After that you will accompany me to orbit. You will remain my wife until I tell you that my business is concluded. This should only take a few days. Afterward, I may want a conference with you, to compare notes."

"You understand that I will not be conscious of the imposture while I remain in character. When we finally compare notes, I will be the woman I am by choice."

"That's fine with me," he says. "At that point I will be able to make use of your professional input."

"That will be an additional stipend."

He says, "I don't believe that will be a problem."

"I will need a word, to signal that I should come out of cover. One tagged to your voice, that you would not normally use in conversation."

He considers the question. "Colloquy."

"Very well. When it's time for me to be myself, you will say that it's time for us to have a colloquy. It might be in public. In that case I will maintain appearances but leave the field, proceeding directly to a place of mutual safety, where we can have that discussion."

"That colloquy," he says.

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All port cities have dodgy neighborhoods. He finds one and wanders, his dangerous bearing suppressed, until he can attract the attention of opportunists eager to rob the tourist foolish enough to have wandered off the map. There are four of them, and he allows them to follow him into a dark place. When they attack, with knives and stunners, it takes him less than a minute to put them down. He loots what cash they have on them just as a matter of principle, but really, this was an exercise in assuring himself that he still possesses the old skills. He wasn't sure. Except for one recent encounter where he was able to use the terrain to his advantage in taking out a small group, he has lived a life devoid of sudden violence for so many years that

there's been noticeable deterioration in his reflexes. He's still formidable enough to take out the untrained. But professionals will pose a problem.

* * *

He moves on to an Alsource Medical kiosk to have himself altered in subtle ways. They are subtle ways because he is largely comfortable as the old man he really is, with a face that is not far from the one he would have worn if he'd come to this time and place without ever needing to change his appearance. And old people, even those who just look like old people, tend to strike others as unthreatening, even beneath notice; also a good thing, for his purposes. What he needs is to be a different old man than the one he has been, for so long. So he has his skin removed and replaced with a new covering less worn and leathery. He darkens his hair to a rust-colored mop on the verge of being swallowed by gray. He adds fat to his frame and to his jowls, moves his eyes closer together and shortens his forehead, all changes that will serve to make himself look less formidable, more protected and harmless. He replaces his voice, installs an accent with the slightest hint of the cornpone, and makes himself a man who still bears the marks of an unsophisticated youth, regardless of what degree of education he might have picked up since.

The march of progress astonishes him. In his youth, this would have taken the better part of a day. Overall, with modern techniques, he is able to pronounce the results good after only ninety minutes or so. Avoiding the telltales that will still mark him as a physically dangerous man, to any spotters in his old profession or similar ones, is a somewhat more difficult task but one he is up to. All he has to do is move like he has no idea that he might have to fight for his life at any moment.

Goodbye Saturnus Horst. He is now Calan Forrest, traveling negotiator for a firm known as Perihelion Connections that serves as go-between between industrial concerns separated by the distances between the stars. Even within the Confederacy, which exists to provide many of humanity's squabbling worlds with the illusion of a shared voice, vast differences between local laws, economic systems, currency, and cultures provides any number of impediments to contracts between corporations that want to work together. Forrest is the advance man—the fellow who brings the handshake and the best wishes before more substantial men arrive to iron out the terms. Draiken is fuzzy on what this entails or why long-range communication via the htex system would not be sufficient for the same purposes. That's all right. Companies like Perihelion Connections exist, and the role they play in interstellar trade is known. As long as the profession gives Draiken's new identity a reason to travel from system to system, doing the mysterious thing he does, he doesn't need to know any more.

He forwards a holo detailing his new appearance and identity to the woman, who will work out the psychodrama of their history together. Then he checks into a nearby hotel, not a fancy one but one a middle-class businessman like himself would find acceptable, and spends the next few days being overly voluble with the staff in the manner of a man who misses his wife and isn't used to not having anybody around to talk to. He is not obnoxious, but he is not interesting either. He is by design a bland bore.

He retires early and wakes late. He orders reading material. He jacks in and spends an hour having his grey matter strobed. He hires a prostitute, not because he wants one but because it's in character for him. The one who comes is young, with silver eyes, a leonine jaw, and a talent for hiding her boredom behind a veneer of professional enthusiasm. He acts furtive, mentions his wife, says he's only doing this because she's off on a tour with lady friends. He feigns trouble performing, ultimately fails, and apologizes. He overpays her. He shows up in the hotel dining room the next morning, with red-rimmed eyes, not finishing his breakfast, aware that the associates of that prostitute will be comparing notes and spreading the news of his essential harmlessness. He spends the afternoon in his suite, emerging for a solitary dinner that is followed by another early retirement.

That night a holo window rises from the foot of his bed, and Siondra, his wife of thirty-two years, stares back at him for the first time. She possesses some of the same DNA as the woman from the pod but is darker-skinned and much rounder-faced, with frosted gray hair that curves

along her right cheek in a deliberately asymmetrical flip. It is the hairstyle of a woman who maintains a look instead of children. She has acquired smile lines and puffy cheeks and a matronly demeanor. She looks flushed, as if she's just come running from something very important, and this is borne out from the sounds in the background, bouncy music and the whooping of drunken friends. It is a very real illusion. He has to remind himself that it's as much a simulation as she is.

She says, "*There* you are. You look like you're getting a nice rest."

"More or less," he says mildly. "Been missing you. What have you been doing?"

"The girls and I spent the day at the mists. It was lovely. The biggest news is that Beverly's finally adding a fourth to her triad; some neut stranger matched for stability, she said. Then we went to the tables. But I have everything packed and ready, to meet you for the lift to orbit. Unless," she says, it just now occurring to her, in the way it would occur to a woman who has often been told to extend one getaway or another, "you didn't finish your business? Marguerite's got the suite for another couple of days."

"No," he says, "it all went better than expected. I finished the day before yesterday."

"And you've been all alone there, with nothing to do? Shame on you, tulip. You should have called me. You could have taken a skimmer across the water and joined us."

He smiles at her. "I thought about it, love. But you deserved your time with your friends."

A little tartly: "And I suppose your dislike of Emily had nothing to do with it."

Emily is one of the fictional wife's fictional friends, who affects the fictional him like the sound of broken glass. There's been fictional conflict. He chuckles. "I didn't want to spoil your time with her."

"How selfless of you."

"Well, you see her so rarely. Am I expecting you back tonight?"

"No, I'll be headed back first thing in the morning. Possibly before you get up. If you wait for me, we can have breakfast before we have to pack."

"It's a date," he says. But it's too loud, where she is, or where she's pretending to be, for a protracted conversation of the sort he doesn't really want, so they exchange rote I-love-yous, and he terminates the call, lip curling slightly at the endearments, not because he is against such things in theory, but because he has known such things so infrequently that they sound crude and unnatural coming from his lips. He replays the conversation in his mind, wondering whether it sounded as unnatural as it felt, and supposes it hadn't. If anyone is listening, it should be persuasive enough.

He hopes.

In truth, he already has the feeling that he's been in one place too long.

* * *

The next morning, he cuts his habitual four hours of sleep to two so he can perform a couple of hours of combat drills while he waits for her. These are not exercises he can do while she's about, as they do not fit the narrative the two of them have concocted, and he has been warned to avoid disturbing her implanted memories with cognitively dissonant behavior. He kills at least thirty times, hypothetically, during those two hours; not with the same elegance he would have in the lither and more flexible physiognomy he prefers but enough to assure himself that he will be able to defend himself in close quarters, if it comes to that. Then he showers, allowing himself to enjoy the hot water that will be at a special premium in space habitats, where most personal hygiene rituals are conducted with sonics.

Siondra arrives when he is drying off. She has dressed to meet him for what she does not consciously realize is the first time, an iridescent blouse with mobile color elements that travel up and down her arms, at speeds just discernable enough to establish that they're moving. She kisses him warmly on the cheek and scolds him, lightly, for not being ready. Then she sits on the edge of the bed and chatters aimlessly about Emily and the others, people who don't exist but who are supposed to be known to him, even if their precise doings are more interesting to the fictional woman before him than they would ever be to the fictional man. He tells her that they have two hours before having to catch their shuttle to the elevator. She says fine.

Then, remembering something, he says, “Oh, by the way.”

She says, “Uh oh.”

“No big problem. Perihelion says that I have to meet someone in orbit. It won’t slow our departure by more than a couple of days.”

She places a hand on her hip. “Well, that’s inconvenient.”

“Can’t be helped. You know how it is.”

“Are you going to need me to help entertain this guy?”

“No, no, not at all. It’s boring stuff and shouldn’t delay our departure from the system for more than a couple of days. I’ll still be around most of the time.”

She sighs. “I’ve heard that before.”

The undercurrent of bitterness is just persuasive enough that he has to counter a twinge of guilt, over past sins never committed. As it is, he rolls his eyes, in the manner of man who is well used to the requirements of wife-wrangling, and takes her by the hands. “I know it’s a pain in the ass. I thought I’d be finished with all this nonsense, dirtside. But it’s the last thing we have to do before the trip, and it won’t follow us where we’re going. I promise.”

“I’ve heard that before too,” she says, but this time adds a twinkle; a hint that she’s neither as upset nor as forlorn as she lets on. Her false self has experienced a lifetime of fending for herself in exotic places while her husband tends to the mysterious unspecified business matters that have taken them to so many systems in such middle-range style; one more, even one more before what has been promised as a long break from such business, will not be all that much of an inconvenience.

They kiss. It’s a peck, a reestablishment of the bloodless contract between them. He goes back into the bathroom and finishes getting ready. She calls through the closed door to ask a question about that day’s accommodations up the line. He answers: It’s all arranged. He comes out dressed for breakfast. She asks how she looks. He tells her she’s beautiful and is only slightly surprised to find that he believes it.

* * *

On the way down to the dining room, he contacts a service where he has left a hibernating message. Activated, it requires a series of code letters specified at the time he left the message. Thus awakened, it heads to the next messaging service in a line of four, each of which is storing its own communiqué, each of which is sent only when the last message is received. The fourth sends its message to Mr. Lothen.

* * *

Breakfast is, as planned, mostly the wife talking. She’s an expert in talking. In character, it’s because he is not, at least not with her, and she has no choice other than filling the silences on her own. Out of character, it is because he has only the broad outlines of their lives together and because it is her job to maintain the illusion. In between replies of no particular wit, he is on his internal htex, preparing himself for the confrontation to come.

The source Draiken seeks is an old field associate, most often called Thorne, from the intelligence days. Thorne technically worked for what can now loosely be called the other side, though as always, precise allegiances were fluid, and the two opposing forces had in fact been working toward a shared agenda known to few who acted out bloody conflicts on the ground. The old man counts himself as among the front-line soldiers fooled, to his subsequent detriment—even though he had never been naïve, even in youth; he sometimes thinks he was born old, too much to have ever formed many memories not crippled by crushing betrayals of one kind or another. He believes Thorne to have been fooled too.

On their last two encounters, they were allies. Maybe they will be again.

Draiken has few long-term plans right now, aside from using Thorne to get to somebody else, and that somebody else to get to somebody else, until he’s no longer dealing with personalities from the bygone era when they both served jackals and liars, and has found his way to their heirs. He sees the map as a series of concentric circles, each more closely guarded than the one before it, until he finds whatever nest of spiders sits at their center. Right now, he’s still at the periphery, edging his way toward Thorne: the first step in a journey that will necessarily define

the rest of his life, because he will almost certainly get himself killed before he makes his way to whoever's currently in charge.

He believes his chances of surviving this step, alone, to be no better than one in three.

"You're not paying attention."

Siondra has been chattering away, but now she regards him from the other side of the table, knitting eyebrows and simmering resentment.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I barely slept. Too keyed up thinking about our connections."

She takes his hand. "You need to be where you actually are, Calan. At least once in your life. At least once in our marriage."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"After this next meeting, you have to try. You have to be in the same room with me, just once."

He says, "I'm always in the same room with you, love. It's just hard to shut down the business side of me when there's work to be done."

"And there's always work to be done, isn't there?"

"Please don't do this," he says. "Let's get past this last couple of days, and we can move on."

She sighs. "I do love you. Do you love me?"

"Of course I do."

"And that's not just you saying whatever you can just to shut me up?"

"No," he says truthfully. "I'm exactly as sincere about this as you are."

"Then make time for me."

He decides to placate her. "I have. In fact . . ."

"What?"

"This meeting, orbitside? It's the end of it. I've earned enough points to qualify for retirement."

She frowns. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. I'm serious. This is it. After this, I'm done. We can go wherever we want."

Long seconds pass before she is willing to accept it. "Really?"

"That's why it's been so hard, the last couple of years. I was trying to reach this moment as soon as possible. I don't even need this last meeting; I'm only taking it because I'm the most convenient person for it. After that, I'm done. We're done."

He's impressed to see her weep real tears, the kind that come from being promised immediate happiness after deferring it for too many years. He does not doubt she feels it. At the moment, she is the person she is pretending to be, and that includes being vulnerable to disappointment, to joy, to the sadness that comes with suddenly feeling the time she's lost.

This, he thinks, is what I've sacrificed to live the life I've lived; the pride that comes with being able to provide someone with such a moment of happiness. This is what she's sacrificed by giving up all human contact in order to exist inside that pod. What was wrong with me, that I would have sought out such an existence? What was wrong with her?

There are no answers, but right now the questions are irrelevant. Right now they get in the way in the illusion.

He takes her hand and says: "When I'm done, will you marry me again?"

Her eyes widen. "Where?"

"Anyplace. We have an unlimited travel pass. You can name the most beautiful place in the Universe, and we can stand there and exchange vows again. We can do it everywhere we go, if you want. But we need to get past this one meeting. You'll have to trust me until then. Can you do that?"

The remarriage will of course never take place. There is no marriage to start with. But when she says yes, tearfully, he feels the ghost of what it would feel like to have lived this life. "I can do that," she says. "It's all I've ever wanted. You know that."

"I do," he says. "It's all I want too."

* * *

The security corridor to the dirtside terminus is a hallway without bottlenecks. Travelers pass

through it at their most natural pace, unaware of precisely the moment the hidden scanners slice them horizontally and vertically into thin sections that can be analyzed down to the molecular level. Their organs are scanned for implanted folds carrying catalysts that can be mixed together to produce deadly gas, powerful explosives, scalding acids. Their cells are scanned for non-declared nanotech, which if found are immediately analyzed for functions not within accepted medical guidelines. Their belongings are virtually taken apart and then put back together, in as many combinations as the AI can imagine, to ward against those cases where Harmless Object A can be plugged into Harmless Object B and change functions to become Weapon of Mass Destruction C. The human beings are read in a thousand different ways, their body language contrasted with their supposed backgrounds, their movements scanned for microgressions, fluctuations in their blood pressure and respiration rates and body temperature all fed to algorithms that can use such data to detect criminality. Men traveling alone are suspect; the young are suspect; the too relaxed and the too agitated are suspect. Travelers are flagged for favoring one side of their bodies. Travelers are flagged for keeping their gaze locked on the floor. Travelers are flagged for the precise shape their tension arc forms as they approach the gates to the elevator cars. A thousand separate decisions are made, and rethought, and rethought again, as the crowd proceeds up the ramp, some people never quite knowing how close they come to being unobtrusively pulled from the throng for further questioning.

The algorithms also look for specific people, some of whom are known by name, others of whom are simply figures who have been flagged for further investigation. One of those would be an elderly but still spry man, tanned to leather; a man whose physiognomy indicates a lifetime of physical labor under a hot sun but is traveling as a prosperous businessman with money. The contradiction is not proof of criminality but is worth wondering about. He was noted when he arrived on-world, using a different elevator, and was flagged as an individual who should be observed, if he shows up at any terminal seeking to leave. He seems to be still on-world, as there is no sign of him in the crowd. Security does not recognize him as the somewhat overweight, pale figure huffing along beside his wife of similar age, his tension level belied by the normal level of fretfulness she evidences trotting along beside him. She seems less fearful than irritated, in the manner of so many travelers. Her body language, which indicates decades alongside the man beside her, puts his significant tension with the margin of error. The machines decide that they're what they seem to be, decide it again another ten paces down the hallway, and decide it again another ten paces beyond that. Chances of them being anything else are ultimately judged to be negligible, and they are marked low-priority—travelers not worth more than the usual level of attention.

This gets them past the first security barrier.

* * *

The elevator car is the height of a fifty-story building. It contains a budget section the majority of the passengers use, comprised of little compartments where they travel in close quarters with as many as a dozen other passengers, who in most cases will be strangers to them. They are expected to bring their own food and drink, and they will be permitted to roam the limited hallways accessible to them only for short, approved periods. Many won't even have an external view, though even these will have a virtual window, which amounts to the same thing. For reasons lost to history, this section is known as steerage. There are three or four other passenger classes, afforded correspondingly increasing luxury; Draiken and his temporary wife enjoy a cabin in the upper midrange, with limited real water for washing and a reclining sonic bath for relaxation. They will enjoy fine meals brought to their cabin, and if they wish—which they won't—a dining room where they may hobnob with other passengers of their economic standing.

They sit together holding hands as the elevator begins its journey upward at a speed that tops out at two kilometers per minute, which means that it takes only a few minutes for the landscape around the anchor point to become a flat checkerboard map, for the clouds to flit by and disappear far below, for the horizon to become a gentle curve, and for the atmosphere to be left far behind.

Siondra releases his hand, which she has held far too tightly. The woman she is has trouble with vertigo in the earliest stages of an ascent, trouble that alleviates when the ground is too far away to look like a real planetary surface.

He says, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. But I need a drink, or a buzzpatch, or something."

"I'll see what they have."

Their cabin includes a full bar and a supply of recreational euphorics. He returns with a pair of buzzpatches, one weak and one strong, giving the powerful one to her. He is calm and takes the weak one for himself only because it is not in character for him to totally refrain when his wife is partaking. The drug makes him feel lighter, but not in any manner that he cannot compensate for. She, however, becomes upbeat, silly. She tells him an inconsequential story about her friend Emily's behavior at one of the planet's museums. He laughs politely.

They look at the onboard entertainment. Tonight after dinner there's a cabaret show involving a new genre of music he missed during his years in hiding. This is all right because she says she hasn't heard of it either. This is also in character. They are of the age when all the songs they know are old ones. Maybe they'll go to the cabaret. Maybe they won't. Maybe they'll go to the casino, maybe they won't. He lets her flip through the listings and offer her opinions. He says that whatever she wants is fine with him. She says that with their new lives starting soon she would like to just stay in.

They listen to some music, watch a silly holovid about a spy that defies everything he knows about tradecraft. The idiot makes mistakes that, if Draiken had made them in his youth, would have gotten him killed decades ago. He enjoys the fantasy. He doesn't want the real tricks—as outdated as his own understanding of them is—to become common knowledge. More, he finds that he enjoys her enjoying it, an uncommon sensation for him. He is an emotionally armored man, who has had his trust betrayed by those he once believed in, and who has more than once had to betray those who believed in him. He has not been a monk. He has had a few fleeting relationships in his time, and a couple of sincere offers of love, the most recent not all that long ago, but he has not been with anybody long enough for their relationship to become a habit, not since joining the service that would first damn him to years of fighting war by other means and then years more or hiding from those who had trained him. But this enhanced imposter beside him speaks with a weight that testifies to those very same decades of living by his side, of loving him and being loved by him, of being disappointed by him, and of hoping for more from him. He finds himself wondering what it would have been like to actually know this nonexistent life, to have been on the other side of it, in some alternate world where there had not been wars to fight.

Later, inevitably, they make love.

The nameless woman was right. It feels persuasive. It gives weight to their relationship, implies the past that doesn't exist.

The act itself is unremarkable, more an expression of routine affection than any show of acrobatic carnality. It has the extra power that goes with putatively rekindled passion. But it is watched—and he knows it is watched—by the automated monitors that scan every moment of human interaction for signs of deception. They are not perfect monitors and cannot distinguish the usual level of human insincerity from that which would denote criminality, but they do add up the factors they see, and they do calculate levels of probability, updating every second, of who's being suspect enough for further investigation, and who's not. The lovemaking, rote as it is, establishes the likelihood that if this man and this woman are strangers playing parts that it is because this is what they have permitted themselves to become, over years of dissatisfaction with one another; and therefore, that they are likely what they pretend to be. The odds of them being terrorists intent on bringing down the elevator are thus reduced by a few critical percentage points, and recommendations of further analysis and investigation are lowered, even further below the security threshold than they would have been otherwise. The report the monitors produce on their interaction is deemed not important enough for human eyes, but if a human read it he would note the key conclusions: that the

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man is hiding something, that the woman is not, and that there is little danger of his secret being a danger to anybody.

This gets them past the second security barrier.

* * *

The presence at the door of the suite is a uniformed man of hard edges, hair like steel filings and eyes like the barrels of heat cannons. Seeing him is disappointing. Draiken and his false wife have been on the elevator for almost twenty-two hours and are just a couple more from docking at the orbitside terminus. It would have been nice to complete the entire journey without enduring another security barrier.

Character dictates a sleepy, stammering response, so Draiken provides a sleepy, stammering response. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Mr. Forrest. I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"No, no. It's okay." As in, you *have* disturbed me. "I hope there's no problem."

"So do I. May I come in?"

"Please."

The uniformed man enters, his every eye-flick an indication of some interior calculation. He lingers on the dried shells of the buzzpatches, on the now-shuttered observation ports, and then returns his gaze to Draiken, who has been politely waiting for a question to be asked.

They exchange basic introductions. Draiken confirms the name he's been traveling under, his recent itinerary, the nature of his corporate business. The Praetor identifies himself as one Wilgren Gunnison, of the Planetary Security Services, flashing a holographic ID that Draiken pretends to peruse. This is all very civilized and above-board, all possible courtesies observed, but it has scarcely begun before Draiken has confirmed to his own satisfaction that the man is capable of being a threat to him.

Gunnison says, "Your wife is asleep, I take it?"

"Do we have to disturb her? She's been medicated."

"I know."

"How would you?"

"We've been listening."

The innocent ask obvious, sometimes even stupid questions. Draiken asks one now. "To us?"

"And to others."

"That's not right."

Gunnison offers an indulgent smile. "This planet has a terrorism problem."

"I've done nothing."

"I am well-used to travelers asserting that their claims of innocence amount to proof of innocence. In fact, the more they insist on such claims, the more I suspect them. This need not disturb their journey, as long as I find no reason to take my suspicions further."

"We have the right to our privacy."

"You have the right to the illusion of privacy. In sad actuality, the threat our local malcontents pose to passengers on this elevator and to our facilities in orbit is so heinous that passengers give up any claim they might have to the real thing. Everyone is listened to, constantly; everyone's words and actions are constantly being analyzed for the flags of malignant intent. Most of the time, we just provide you the courtesy of maintaining the illusion."

"I see," Draiken says, coldly. "And you intrude on me now because . . ."

"We're talking to everybody."

He knows now that he's been betrayed to security forces, either by Redflower or Lothen, but it doesn't matter; he no longer wears the face or uses the name Saturnus Horst, which he used when he spoke to both.

"What can I do for you?"

"If you're traveling under false credentials, you can tell us who you really are."

"Our credentials are in order."

"So you say. Speaking for myself, I have examined them according to fifteen separate methods of forgery detection, and I find them intensely well-organized, to an extent that genuinely

and almost suspiciously exceeds the normal standards of documentation for interstellar travelers.”

“What?”

“Let’s just say that it’s unusual to investigate a traveler’s past by htex and not find a single place where some local bureaucracy cut corners or misreported a datum.”

“I don’t believe this. You’re saying our records are too good?”

“Better than I would normally expect for an unremarkable businessman, traveling with a wife with whom he seems to share only that vestigial level of warmth that remains after decades of fading and neglected habit.”

“My marriage is none of your business, sir.”

“And you are quite persuasively angry at the insult to your wife, as well. Fascinating. If you are an impostor, you are certainly a quite well-trained one.”

“Either get out or make your point.”

“The report we have received comes from a source in whom we have only limited confidence. His word was, however, enough for us to investigate this ascent’s passengers with special care. There are only five transients, strangers to this world whose identities we cannot verify independently, in the time we have before their scheduled departure from this system. You and your wife would be two of them. In fact, by most metrics you are the most likely two.”

“I assure you . . .”

“Save it, sir. It’s true that I have no hard data to pursue here. Our source is not above fabricating a false charge to obtain a momentary advantage. As of this moment I don’t know whether I’m speaking to a guilty man or an innocent one. The point is that I don’t much care as long as you behave yourself. This world’s an interstellar travel hub. People with all sorts of errands pass through here. A high percentage of them travel under some form of false flag, and a great number of them hide agendas that much of human civilization would consider criminality. But a large number of their transgressions impact us not at all. If they commit no offenses within our territory, we have no reason to detain them, let alone report them to the security apparatus of the Confederacy.”

“I’m telling you. We’re just a couple passing through.”

“Then if I were you,” Gunnison says, “I would be very certain to complete your business and pass through, before I do have more grounds to act.”

They have passed the third security barrier.

* * *

The elevator car arrives at the orbital terminus twenty-four hours after its departure. Three hours later, the Forrests settle in the hotel room that will house them for the several days it will take him to complete the business that was the entirety of the reason for his visit to this particular system, this particular orbital terminus. It is a nice room, not quite as luxurious as the one as they enjoyed during the journey up, but it has the requisite double bed, the requisite sonic shower (with water available at a price neither the real Draiken nor the business traveler he’s pretending to be is willing to pay). The scenic view of the planet, occupying one full wall, is not actual but simulated. Some people are snobs about the difference between real images and false ones. He is unable to tell the difference and could not care less, in any event.

He washes up, gets dressed, joins Siondra where she sits on the edge of the bed, arms hanging limply at her sides. An impulsive kiss on the forehead and she looks up, startled, the smile forming automatically without further indication of love.

She says, “You’re leaving.”

“Not for the meeting. I just want to have a little walk around, see what this place has to offer. Get my sense of it.”

She grins, reacting to false memories of exactly this behavior on any number of prior business trips. “A general, walking his battlefield.”

“Restlessness,” he says. “It’s an important meeting. I might be out late, just aligning my thoughts.”

“Have you ever had an unimportant meeting?”

“They’re as important as I make them.”

Her eyes flicker, but she doesn’t go for the cheap rhetorical jab. “Do they know you’re retiring?”

“They’ve congratulated me, so I assume so.”

“Have I congratulated you?”

“Every day,” he says.

She’s startled again. He has once again shown a kindness closer to his own natural instincts than to the character he’s playing—and she once again needs to reconcile it, in terms of the past life she thinks she lived. “Who are you again?”

“The same man I’ve always been,” he says, and this time tells the absolute truth. “No one in particular.”

She says, “It sounds like you take pride in that.”

“Anonymity has its charms.”

“And its limits.”

He looks past the Siondra mask to the professional impostor she really is, living nameless and friendless and without name in a pod, and he thinks: But you sought it out, didn’t you? What were you running from, that turned that kind of existence into the life you wanted, above all others? Hoping for an answer her false personality can speak, that will help to explain the broken operative beneath, he asks, “Have you really never taken any pleasure in it? All these distant places we’ve gone to, where no one knows your name? Doesn’t it make you feel free?”

“It used to,” she says, simply. “When we first started traveling, I loved it.”

“And now?”

“It hasn’t lost all its charm. But the more I’ve had of it, over the years, the more I’ve wanted to be among people who knew my name, who understood me, whose names I knew, and who I understood. I want to be a fixed point, love; I want to see the same people more than two days in a row, to get to the point where I can anticipate and treasure the kind of things they’re going to say. I want people to know me the same way, to be something other than . . . a blur, glimpsed in passing.”

“You know what that’s like,” he says. “What about those friends you just met down below?”

“Fellow travelers,” she replies; he feels a chill, because that phrase means something else in the profession he left. “They’re not fixed points, love. They’re debris like us, who occasionally match our trajectory. Good companions for an afternoon or a couple of days at a time, but then they go one way and we go another. Which is far from being the same thing.”

“I suppose not,” he says, and then, making an empty promise to an empty mask, adds, “I’ll have to do something about that.”

* * *

Finding Lothen is not difficult. The man is having a drink at the Blue Horizon, as instructed. He is also paying no attention to the drink, as he’s more occupied with trying to figure out which of the other patrons, or passersby, are spotters there to confirm his compliance with instructions.

Draiken picks a moment when another patron is easing past Lothen and uses that moment to pass by heading in the opposite direction, brushing by Lothen as he goes. He does not have to touch Lothen to plant the device; he simply has to release it, and it darts from his palm to Lothen’s skin, where it implants itself, a microscopic presence at the base of the man’s throat.

The absence of any hesitation as he passes Lothen and the other patron obscures the critical moment behind the normal jostling of two human beings trying to negotiate the same narrow space, but even so the device’s volition is critical; any surveillance would have easily picked up any attempt to deliver the device manually.

Of course, if the surveillance is too good, it may detect the delivery anyway.

* * *

He returns to the hotel and finds their room empty; Siondra’s obeyed his instruction to make her own arrangements. He could go out and try to find her, or he could stay here and rest up for tomorrow. Instead, he does neither. He leaves the room, departs from the hotel, and makes his

way across the bustling public thoroughfares of the station to another lodging place, one meant for travelers on a much tighter budget than his own. It offers no suites, no clean sheets, no comforting amenities: just shelved cubby holes only large enough for one, where travelers can lock themselves in and spend the hours lying supine or prone until the time they've paid for has passed, and they need someplace else to store their bodies. He crawls in, his palms and knees making indentations in the space's lightly padded floor, then seals himself in and gets to work.

The first thing he does is activate a personal hiss screen that fills the cramped quarters with white noise to complicate surveillance for anybody who might have perverse reason to listen in on the doings of solitary indigents. Then he taps his ear and activates his connection to the listening device he placed on Lothen's neck. The soft liquid drumbeat is Lothen's pulse, confirming the viability of the connection.

There is no fortuitous immediate delivery to a conversation Draiken needs to hear; just the background sounds of a bar that might be the very same one where Draiken left him, or one very much like it. He hears music, a woman's high-pitched laughter, the clink of utensils, Lothen exchanging the proper amount to pay his tab, and some time later, a muttered, "Okay."

Lothen leaves the bar and is for some time surrounded by the sounds of a busy pedestrian space. Somebody asks him where he can find Grauski Square. Lothen says that he's a stranger here himself. He continues to wander. He makes two stops, one at a snack kiosk and one at a public restroom, the latter providing Draiken with more auditory evidence than he ever wanted to possess about someone else's digestive system. Afterward, he wanders some more. There is no way of telling that he has any destination at all.

By the time he arrives anywhere at all, it is early station evening. Then he enters a place with crowds, laughter, and the sound of a soloist playing a stringed instrument; Grauski Square, Draiken supposes. Lothen's pulse calms enough to establish that he's at rest, possibly sitting. Draiken presumes a bench.

Draiken waits through another twenty minutes of inconsequential background noise.

Then he hears: "Don't turn around."

In his cramped little cubby, Draiken almost laughs out loud. He's listening to that most mortifying tradecraft cliché, the two park benches with their backs to one another, and the two operatives who sit facing opposite directions so they can have an allegedly discreet conversation while instead making a public spectacle out of two idiots who think they can fool passersby into thinking that these two people they don't care about are each talking to themselves. By resorting to that old gag, these new players reveal themselves as relative amateurs.

Lothen underlines the general impression of half-assedness by saying, "Is that you?"

"Tell me," the other voice says with grim amusement. "Is there any being in the entire Universe who could say no to that question?"

"It is you."

"Yes, it's me. And that man buying a fruit tart is whoever the hell he is. And you're lucky you're a useful idiot because if you weren't, we would have shut down your operations and had you in a prison cell a decade ago." The hint of a snarl helps Draiken recognize the voice, which was heretofore camouflaged by the veneer of amiability: It's Gunnison, the security-forces man from the elevator. "Let's move on to something useful."

Lothen's voice takes on a whining quality. "He hasn't tried to contact me."

"Not so you would notice it, no. But we have so far catalogued eighteen different points of close contact with people who were on the last cars up, including two who were in the bar with you and passed within five feet of you at one point or another. Any one of them could have been your mystery figure checking up on you. We now believe that you were not sent to that location for any reason other than to provide the person who contracted you with confirmation that you had arrived and were ready to do his bidding. He didn't need to know anything other than that. He'll now retreat to a place of safety until you've communicated with his friend the corpus."

"So I haven't done anything wrong?"

"You haven't done anything right or wrong, not as far as we're concerned. You've just had a

drink and taken a walk in the park.”

“He could be watching us now. He said he’d kill me if I betrayed him.”

“We’ll be collating the list of elevator passengers within sight of us now with the list of those you’ve encountered earlier today. I see six from where I sit, none particularly suspect in my eyes. I suspect that if you’re under his surveillance at all, it’s through an intermediary, somebody who was already on-station following his instructions. But I have no particular reason to believe that because he would then direct that individual, or another, to speak to his corpus. Any further surveillance will be tomorrow, during that interview.”

“Oh, God. What should I do?”

With derisive amusement: “Return to your hotel. Have a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow morning, follow his instructions to the letter. We’ll have operatives all over the docking ring, ready for action in case anything unfortunate tries to happen. We will make sure that nothing does. And then afterward, you will be able to return planet-side, and your petty criminality, secure in the knowledge that you have continued to earn our kind indulgence.” An audible smirk. “Who knows? If it is sufficiently entertaining, we might even tell you what this was all about.”

The pause that follows is not exactly a moment of silence, not with all the playful energy of the park audible in the background. But in it Draiken can discern Lothen, casting about for a reason to object, a reason why he should demand more in the way of assurances of protection.

Then Gunnison says, “You’re dismissed, sir.”

Draiken inactivates the hiss screen and vacates the cubby.

* * *

He should not return to the hotel at all, but he does, and by the time he does, he finds the suite dark and Siondra lying on her side, with her back to him. She’s wearing a slip that bares her shoulders and has ridden up to reveal her buttocks. Her breathing rate suggests inebriated sleep.

He gets undressed in the dim light and makes his way to her side, lowering his lips to her ear, which he blesses with a little kiss. She stirs and murmurs enough to establish sleepy acknowledgment of his existence.

He strokes her shoulder and whispers: “I’ve given some thought as to where we can go, to renew our vows.”

“Mmmm?” A query, from someone still too groggy for speech.

“There’s a place I’ve read about. An engineered world called Jiraiatin, built on spec for the wealthy, home to only two hundred families, all of whom live together on one continent while the other two are left unspoiled, as engines for the planetary climate. It’s hard as hell to get permission to visit; they only allow a couple of thousand visitors a year. But I think I can arrange it. There’s one spot, an island of green surrounded on both sides by violent rapids, rich in a certain local algae that gives off a bright orange phosphorescence whenever it’s agitated. They say that if you stand on the island it’s difficult to resist the illusion that you’re surrounded on all sides by a raging inferno, an entire world on fire in every direction—while you remain cooled by the river breeze, enjoying perfect comfort and security in a place where the flames will never touch you.

“It’s all engineered, Siondra: the island, the river, the local temperature, even the particular phosphorescence in that algae, just to create that illusion for wealthy people, amusing themselves. A false front that might never have come about, in nature. A trademarked Dejahcorp production. But still beautiful, in its own way—and the locals keep it as a place for newly wedded couples to spend their first nights together, so they can make love in what looks like the fires of creation.”

He kisses her on the upper arm.

He whispers: “We can go there if you like. After that, we’ll settle anywhere you prefer.”

The change in her respiration rate establishes that she’s awake now, listening to him, reacting to him as either Siondra or the nameless woman who’s living life as Siondra for a while. But she doesn’t stir. She just murmurs and, after some time, falls asleep again.

He does not.

* * *

The next morning he rises early, dresses, leaves a note to the effect that he has left for his meeting, and heads out, heading for the same transient hotel where he rents a cubby much like the earlier one, where he sequesters himself in privacy. There he activates the hiss screen and listens to Lothen eat breakfast at the instructed time, before heading off for his rendezvous.

Lothen doesn't speak much during his commute to the industrial sections of the station, but it is difficult to travel across any civilized expanse without saying something, even if only an occasional excuse me, or request for directions. His few short sentences reflect a quaver that only someone who's spoken to him before will bother to notice; everybody else will just think he's a nervous guy, and there are always plenty of those around.

That quaver disappears once the man reaches corpus storage and navigates the various low levels of bureaucracy he needs to pass in order to get to the vaults where various travelers awaiting their passage from this system have had themselves placed in corporeal stasis as they await their passage off-world. The vast majority of them, Draiken knows, will remain in their respective crypts for only a matter of months before they are loaded, still insensate and motionless and for all practical purposes dead, aboard freighters as cargo. A few others seek transport to more exotic places and may remain in storage for as long as five years, over and above travel time. Usually, corpi only stay longer if they're forgotten about, or if, as in this case, their rental of the space has been paid so far in advance that there are no practical impediments to them becoming permanent installations.

Listening to Lothen's echoing footsteps as he is led to the most isolated section of long-term storage toward shelves that have not been disturbed for years, Draiken grins on imagining something which is likely very far from the actuality, a stone mausoleum pinky-deep in dust.

Eventually they reach their destination, and the attendant says, "I never would have believed it. Fifty-four years."

"Yes."

"I guess that explains the vault. It's a real antique. We've traded up to a number of newer models since then. Lemme check his condition before you tell me what you need done with him."

"All right."

The attendant does something that makes a beep. "Well, the good news is that this baby's been doing its job for him. He hasn't aged more than six months in the last half century. The sensors say he'll be in fine shape both physically and mentally. You want a full waking?"

"No. He wanted to remain a corpus indefinitely. He's only being disturbed to receive a message, after which you can put him back under."

"How coherent do you need him?"

"Enough to receive the message. I've been told not to expect a response."

The attendant reacts with the standard fascination of any human being encountering a novel problem in a mostly tedious job. "Wow. Must be some message!"

Lothen speaks sharply: "Can you wake him?"

"I should be able to get him up to minimal consciousness in ten minutes or so. It would normally only take two, but he's been under for so long that his gray matter might be a little resistant."

"Do what you need to do, then. I'll wait."

Draiken listens for several minutes as the attendant utters the various subvocal sounds common to anyone concentrating on a task.

A few minutes in, those sounds become puzzled.

A few minutes after that, they become irritated, then worried.

The attendant calls a supervisor, who calls a trouble-shooting technician. The problem, they explain to Lothen, is that the life readings are remaining constant and unchanging in outright defiance of the various external stimuli being applied. It's possible that the controls are non-functional, that the buttons being pressed and adjustments being made aren't actually affecting the body in the box. They remove the control panel, improvise a brilliant interface that allows

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the introduction of a new panel to this ancient equipment, and find that isn't working either—or rather, that it is working, but that the corpus isn't responding.

By the time they finally resort to cracking open the vault, for the emergency resuscitation procedures they believe the situation calls for, Lothen is frantic.

Somebody cries out. Somebody curses.

At two hours twenty, somebody calls it. "He's dead."

"He can't be dead. The display says he's fine."

"The sensors aren't active."

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I. Hold on a minute." A minute later: "I'll be damned. Look. See this little disk, here? That's feeding data to the system. That's what's telling the external displays that there's a living man in here. That was set up to provide us with all the day-to-day readings of a long-term corpus, without triggering any of the automatic alarms. It was even set up to reflect the degree of aging long-term storage can't stop—which considering how unlikely it was that anybody was ever going to pay any attention to this poor guy, is a level of thoroughness I don't even want to think about. They *expected* him to go undiscovered for decades, and they installed this thing to make sure the readings kept lying to us for at least that long."

"That doesn't make any sense. How long as he been dead?"

"I would say exactly as long as he's been here, plus a little bit longer. This guy was dead when he was put in the box. He was dead when he was put in storage. He's been dead all this time. This guy's not just dead, he's *aggressively* dead."

Lothen, sounding dazed: "But then why would anyone hire me to deliver that message?"

"What message?"

"The clouds have shifted and the sun is shining."

The only response to this is a general, ruminative silence.

And then one of the attendants says what only Draiken knows to be the absolute truth. "Mister, that sounds like a great big stinking load of bullshit."

* * *

Draiken leaves the cubby, heads out into the flow of pedestrian traffic, and makes his way to a disposal unit, where he discards his listening device and every item of contraband technology on his person. Then he calls Siendra.

She says, "How's it going?"

"Oh, it's almost over. I just wanted to say that there might be complications, and it may take me longer to return than I expected. Don't worry. Tomorrow we'll head out, and it will be a new world for both of us."

"I'm glad," she says. "I love you."

"I love you too," he says: and then, tellingly, "Stick around a while. I think I'll need you for a while yet."

"That's a strange thing to say," she says, still in character. "Where else would I go?"

"I just need to understand that it's not done."

"I understand. I'll wait for you."

"I love you," he says. The automatic, absent, content-free goodbye of a businesslike conversation.

"I love you too," she says, with a similar rote lack of compassion.

He terminates.

Then he returns to the cubby and waits for the security squad to come and arrest him.

* * *

Every society has its black rooms: the places where those in power can demand answers from those who have none. Draiken has seen his share of them. He remembers the simulated drownings, the beatings, and, for one extended period in his long and checkered past, a level of psychological gamesmanship that came closer to breaking him than any other trauma he's ever known. It is customary, he knows, to leave a suspect alone and waiting for an interrogator before one shows up, both to underline the overall feeling of powerlessness and to

establish just how much he now depends on the decisions made by others. Some are broken before they're asked to.

Draiken takes his several hours of solitary imprisonment the way an innocent man can be expected to: with increasing, incredulous nervousness. He does this because, while he cannot discern a monitoring device, he knows that one almost certainly exists. He also knows from experience that false identities are to be maintained constantly, even in the absence of surveillance. He must be the person he pretends to be, an unremarkable businessman who has run into trouble into a strange place.

At long last, a security officer, not Gunnison, brings Lothen in to see him. Draiken blinks at Lothen without recognition. It is necessary that he show no recognition; modern surveillance techniques are able to identify many subtle physiological means of detecting that one person knows another. They take Lothen away and bring in Redflower. Draiken again shows the man no recognition. He demands to know why he's being held. They leave him alone for another two hours, then return and tell him that he's free to go, offering no further explanation. This is a tactic used to fool lesser men into believing that they're out of danger. Draiken is used to mind games played by interrogators. He is not fooled, but he leaves in a hurry, visibly too frazzled to even threaten a lawsuit.

* * *

On the way back to the hotel, he summons Siondra to one of the station's finest dining establishments, and she has donned a spray-on gown for the occasion. She is not beautiful, because it is part of her nature that she's not, but she is glowing, glowing from his assurances that he has completed the last of his business and that his attention will now be focused, entirely, on the rest of their lives. After the meal, he tells her he's booked passage to Jiraiatin.

She says that she cannot wait to get him back to the room and give him a night he'll never forget.

Then she says, "You look sad."

"Do I?"

"You're hiding it. But that's sadness. Are you sorry you're retiring?"

He offers a complicated half-smile and in speaking the next part tells the absolute truth. "It's just the passage of time, love: the awareness that once life shuts a door, it's shut forever. I know that a phase is ending. I also know I'll miss it."

She takes his hand. "It's up to us to make the next part better."

He knows, of course, that for the two people seated at this table, there will be no next part. "I know."

Then, without warning or leave, a third party pulls over a chair and joins them at the table.

It is Praetor Gunnison.

He is not wearing his uniform, now; instead, he wears a red suit, cut to a fashion unknown in this system but impeccably tailored to his frame and appropriate for the reserved formality of the dining room.

Draiken tosses his napkin down in disgust. "Now, *this really is too much!*"

"Forgive me," says Gunnison, behind a gaze that offers more speculation than apology. "I know this is as a trespass. I would normally never dream of violating such an intimate occasion, between a couple enjoying the rewards of a prosperous retirement." He glances at Siondra. "And congratulations to you, madam. I hope the rest of your life brings you nothing but joy."

"Thank you," she says, hesitantly. "Calan, who is this?"

Gunnison tuts her. "Just a nameless interruption, my good lady. But there have been some new developments on the matter your husband and I discussed the other evening, and I'm afraid my duty does require me to address them with him, in private, before releasing you to the evening's pleasures. It should not take more than a few minutes."

She's still unsure. "Are you . . . telling me to go?"

"It's all right," Draiken says. "Go to the room. I'll be right up. It's time for that colloquy we talked about."

She is good. She does not drop the Siondra personality all at once. She doesn't even falter. Only

a man who has been with her for so many days could even tell the difference is more than a brief moment of uncertainty. But it's there. She nods, collects her bag, and departs, leaving Draiken with the odd sensation of having just committed a little murder, of someone who had never known true happiness and was now being deprived of her only chance.

By the time she's left, all the false traces of warmth have vanished from the Praetor's features. "I should summon a security team. I should have them drag you from this room and beat you senseless and have you spend the rest of your life in a cell so tiny that you'll never know what it's like to not have some part of you touching a wall, ever again."

Draiken sips his wine. "You're dressed in civilian clothes. My guess is that you don't have any interest in doing that—or official permission, rather."

"Where terrorists are concerned, I don't need permission."

"You don't honestly believe I'm a terrorist. There have been no acts of terror."

"I don't need to suspect you of being a terrorist. I only need some reason to argue that you might be. I've likely imprisoned any number of innocent travelers whose only sin was falling within that zone of probability, on any given day—travelers who may have been doing nothing but passing through this system on the way to another, but will now be property of the state for the rest of their lives. I lose no sleep over them. I would lose no sleep over you."

"Yes, you would," Draiken says. "Because you're a man who loses sleep over unanswered questions."

Gunnison's ready to throttle him. "Are you saying you'll talk if I let this pass?"

"I'm saying that I'm willing to discuss any difficulties you think you have with me in a calm, measured, and wholly theoretical basis. Why don't you tell me what you think you know, and I'll help you in any way I can?"

"You're in no position to offer deals."

"Perhaps not. But it is possible that if we have this entirely hypothetical conversation, you might find it more advantageous to your system's security needs to let me go than to put me in that cramped cell. And I find it just as likely that you've already considered this. After all, you're meeting me in civilian clothing."

Gunnison faces him with the measured regard that one master chessman shows another. It takes him less than five seconds to decide that the game can be played out under the suggested rules. Before he begins, he calls the waitress over, orders a drink, then orders the table placed under a privacy screen. When white noise and fractal light patterns turn what happens at the table to static, for anybody motivated to eavesdrop, he glares at Draiken and begins: "We believe that you took on the identity of a man named Saturnus Horst and hired one named Airys Lothen to deliver a message."

"That's not a crime."

"No, it is not. Neither is brushing by Lothen in a tavern, or spending the better part of two days locked in a cubby in transient quarters, where we believe you to have been monitoring his progress of his errand. We may not be able to prove that you were the one who implanted the listening device we found on your person, or how you spent your time in that cubby, but we can show that it was you in that cubby and we can establish that your activities in that space were hidden by his screen—both reasons that would normally warrant additional questioning, when a dead body is involved."

Draiken takes comfort in the word *normally*. "So far none of the activities you describe qualify as any worse than odd."

"True. Since you've arrived on station, there's been no substantial contact between you and Lothen, or that corpse. You've been well isolated from the corpse throughout your time on station, and I would suspect for some time before it. It is quite possible that you've never known the man while he was living, as he's been here for decades. An interesting footnote, by the way: a subsequent inventory of long-term storage has confirmed the presence of four other dead bodies, all in vaults paid up for decades and similarly rigged to provide readings that indicate that they're still capable of being revived. The most recent was placed here a little more than a decade ago. The one Mr. Lothen attempted to contact with a ridiculous message differed from

the others only in that it had been here the longest.”

“I’m afraid that I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gunnison says, “I’m clearly talking about a well-established, well-funded organization that’s been around for decades playing hide-and-seek with dead bodies.”

Another sip of wine. “If you have a point, I’d like you to go ahead and make it.”

“Your wife is not your wife.”

“Oh?”

“This is a security-conscious system, sir; a system that allows criminals like Lothen their petty misdeeds, in exchange for their assistance tracking down bigger game. Did you really think that we were not also aware of the activities of a woman who contracts not just her body but also her consciousness to the highest bidder? Did you not notice on the elevator, or even now, that we question you but leave her alone? She is known to us, sir. No alteration in her appearance is sufficient to hide her from us. We have followed her to any number of malefactors, over the years; also to any number of harmless types whose only substantial sin is needing a counterfeit companion for a while. Allowing her to believe that her enterprises go unnoticed helps us immeasurably while hurting her not at all. The only question that left us with, from the beginning, was just who in Confederate space *you* were, and later when Lothen came to us, whether you were the same fellow responsible for giving him his assignment, and why.”

Draiken picks a breadcrumb off the tablecloth. “I see. And what is your conclusion?”

“We cannot prove your connection to Lothen. Nor will we ask him or Redflower to pretend that they recognize the face you wear now. But if you are the party responsible for hiring him to send a message to a dead body, we do have some educated guesses as to why.”

“At the rate you’re going, I might not have to answer any of your questions at all.”

“The message Lothen carried was *‘The clouds have shifted and the sun is shining.’* You had best believe that we did everything we could to analyze it for meaning before permitting him to deliver it. Aside from its generally optimistic flavor, it appears to be nothing more than random poetry—which rendered it most likely a password or substitution code that only relays a meaning because of prior arrangement between sender and recipient over what particular sequence of words happens to mean. It might be the only such phrase or it could be one of hundreds; either way, it cannot be decoded without access to the key. We were therefore very interested in seeing what happened when the corpus received the message.”

“And?”

“You know what happened. The corpus was dead; the corpus was always dead. The phrase in question was not delivered to anybody capable of registering it and therefore had no meaning.”

“So?”

“So we rethought the problem, sir, reexamined what our sender told Lothen, and realized that he had always been quite open about what to expect. Inherent in the very contract was assurance that there would be no reply. So was that one sentence the message? Or was something else, something that happened in direct response to the discovery of a dead body in corpus storage?”

A waitress arrives, passing through the privacy screen, and refills Draiken’s water glass, taking the opportunity to ask Gunnison if there will be anything else. Gunnison says no. The waitress departs.

Gunnison’s stare has not faltered for a moment.

“It’s very clever,” he says, finally. “In the end, it’s just another preset substitution code, like that sentence . . . except that the message is not carried by a phrase, but by the normal station chatter that would accompany the discovery of a dead body. The subsequent corpses planted ten years after that and ten years after that and ten years after that, all serve to establish that the organization responsible for planting the first still exists and is still out there somewhere, doing whatever it does, its mission something that evidently does not include much respect for human life.

“From all the trouble and expense involved, I suspect that the message is something they take

very seriously, most likely a contingency they've been aware of for many, many years: something that the sender would also have had to have been willing to wait many, many years before activating.

"One thing's for sure, though: It's been going on for far longer than I've been alive, and it's nothing I want to have to deal with."

He drums his fingertips on the table, looking restive and disturbed.

Draiken says, "You could drop the matter. As I've committed no serious crime, you assume that I'm not your man and let me leave the system, unmolested."

"I could," Gunnison agrees. "I know I should."

"What's stopping you?"

"Those sleepless nights. I'm a security man. I solve mysteries for a living. I don't think I can live with all the unanswered questions. I need *something*."

"Ah. Then what if you knew the gist of the message? If not the identity of the recipients, or the exact nature of the business the sender has with them, then at least the meat of it—the nature of what he means to tell the people responsible for planting those corpses."

"That would be something," Gunnison says. "I'll let you know if it's enough."

Draiken sips his water. "The problem, Mr. Gunnison, is that if I were this hypothetical person, I would have to contrive some way to share that content with you, *without* providing you with actionable proof."

"Yes."

"Very well. Still speaking hypothetically, let us assume that the sender and this organization have been out of touch for many, many years. Their last meeting was acrimonious. Harsh words were exchanged. Much malicious mischief was inflicted. The sender's freedom was compromised.

"Let us further assume that after much struggle and more pain than we need to contemplate, he succeeded in extracting himself but not without lingering trauma—trauma that has hobbled him, all the subsequent years of his life.

"For a long time he is satisfied to have had a clean escape. He sought no reunion, happy or hostile or otherwise. In all the years that followed he spent that time off by himself, staying out of their way, hoping only to live out the remaining decades of his existence without any trouble. You can picture this, yes?"

"I'm with you so far," says Gunnison.

"Then one day he discovers that he has never been truly free, not all his years of living simply under a distant sun. His enemies have always known where to find him. They have simply not bothered to come after him, because they don't care enough. The appearance of this terrible truth provided him with the epiphany that in all these years of illusory peace he's been evading his duty to himself. His very willingness to leave their conflict in the past means that they have won; they have neutered him, they have made him less than he was; they have done what they always sought to do and eliminated him as a threat.

"Perhaps it's pride. But he cannot live with this.

"There's the moral question, too. They're still blighting the lives of others, the way they blighted his. He cannot allow it. He must find them and bring them down.

"The question," he says, raising an eyebrow, "is just how does he go about doing that, when the people we're talking about have unlimited resources and might be anywhere in civilized space, and a great number of places outside it? Even this old, grisly one-way messaging system he knows about, that he can activate through some hapless intermediary, doesn't provide him anything in the way of the information he needs. He needs some other source of intelligence, something that will provide him with his next course of action. But that's a concern for the future. Right now, he is satisfied with just sending the message."

Gunnison appears fascinated. "And that message?"

"In the old days, I suppose, it would have been a discreet way of telling his superiors at the organization that he was on-site but in trouble and unable to communicate more. In the current context it would have a different meaning. It would tell them something else."

“What, damn you?”

“We are, I remind you, speaking hypothetically. After all, I’m just a man traveling with his wife, or, if you insist, a woman who was willing to play the role of his wife. I’m sure I can’t speak authoritatively about the content of any antiquated secret codes. But now that I’ve mentioned that dear woman, I am reminded that I really do need to make sure she’s all right.” He taps his throat to activate his connection to the station’s local network, and navigates through the decision trees to his hotel’s concierge. “Yes. Excuse me, but I was wondering if you could assist me with a problem. You see, I’m a guest at the hotel, and I’ve been trying to reach my wife, but apparently she’s out and about, and not accepting calls right now. She said she might stop by your desk before heading up to the room, so if you could please take a message for her? Yes. *A message.*” Pause. Then he smiles, thanks the unseen service professional, and provides his room number and the name he’s been using. “Just two words, if you’d please. *I’m coming.*” Pause. “No, no specifics. I’d prefer to leave it a surprise. Thank you ever so much.”

He terminates the connection, and then bores his gaze into Gunnison’s. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“You’re *coming*? That’s it?”

“Two words that can carry any number of emotional connotations. To a beloved wife, it indicates that her husband will be by before long, and that they may now resume their lives together. To an organization of old enemies, it might mean that an antagonist they thought neutered has not forgotten them and will not be letting their old business pass—an indication, perhaps, that they should be afraid.”

Gunnison appears to be sickly fascinated. “And will they be afraid?”

“Still speaking hypothetically, sir, I have absolutely no idea. I suspect that such an organization, if it exists, possesses reserves of overconfidence they haven’t even come close to exhausting. I can, however, assure you that in the heart of the man sending the message, they should be. And that’s enough.”

Gunnison considers that and shakes his head. “No, it isn’t. I need more.”

“If I were you, I would too. You are a powerful man in this system, and you’re not used to having your concerns denied. I have no doubt that you can slam a cell door shut on my face, with or without evidence. But think: if you imprison me, any *purely hypothetical* threat I might pose to the people who planted those dead bodies is eliminated.

“That’s the choice you face, sir: taking a long-shot gamble that I can address this injustice well outside your reach, or being satisfied with the prize you have and by so doing eliminating any possibility of closure.”

Gunnison leans back in his chair, an unresolved rage burning in his rough-hewn features. Then he says, “Will I ever find out what happened?”

“Under the circumstances, almost certainly not.”

“Will your war with these people ever bring you back to my system?”

“I don’t have any further business here. Not in this lifetime.”

“Then we don’t either,” Gunnison says. He stands, smoothes his red suit with a brush of his hand, and utters one last sentence before he leaves Draiken behind: “Whoever these bastards are . . . I must say I don’t envy them.”

* * *

Draiken lingers at the table for another fifteen minutes, palms flat on the tablecloth. Then he shudders, like a man waking, thumbs payment for the dinner and drinks, and departs the restaurant, heading back to the hotel and his last night with the nameless woman he has known as his wife. He takes his time but does not make any stops.

He should feel ebullient at the successful conclusion of his business with Gunnison. But he is a man who measures goals versus accomplishments, and he is uncomfortably aware that to this point he has only managed to pull off a feat of theater: the sending of a message that might or might not be taken seriously by whoever receives it at the house of his enemies. He knows that they won’t shake in fear. If they feared him, up until now, they would have already done something more concrete to stop him. The most likely response, he suspects, will be amusement, in

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which case he can only hope that they will have other cause to look back on that early error of overconfidence and curse themselves for fools.

It is still early days, yet.

But the more critical mission on this station still awaits him.

He heads up to the room and enters.

The room is dark. She is swift, she is deadly, and in the span of time it takes him to register that this is the tack she's taking, she's struck two blows that rob him of much of his ability to respond, blows that trap him between the door at his back and the engine of pure fury before him. She robs him of his breath, of his strength, and of his ability to resist as she searches him for hidden weapons. She finds none, of course, because he has brought none; it is easier to let her look, more profitable to let her satisfy herself that he has come to this colloquy unarmed, before she turns the lights back on and retreats to the room's table, a sullen mask waiting for him to rise.

Ultimately, he does and sees that it is all gone—the warmth, the loneliness, and the dreams of a better future—leaving only the empty, unsympathetic gaze of the woman in cruelly imposed self-exile. The only difference is that when he spoke to her before, she had regarded him as a client and treated him with the dispassion with which she would have addressed any other stranger. Now, that cold emptiness is now replaced with an anger that has burned for all too many decades, glaring at him through false matronly features that don't belong to the woman who earned it.

“You son of a bitch. I almost came out of cover when you mentioned Jiraiatin. The only reason I didn't is that I couldn't risk disrupting your operation, not without knowing what it was.”

“I didn't think you would,” he says. “You've always been such a professional.”

“It was still a near thing. You have a hell of a lot of nerve, invoking that place. To *me*.”

He winces, because his ribs are still on fire, but she seems approachable enough, and so he hobbles over to the table and collapses into the seat opposite hers, feeling all his years draining him like a mortal wound.

He takes a few seconds to catch his breath, and then he says:

“Hello, Thorne.”