

# The Coward's Option

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## Adam-Troy Castro

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Griff Varrick was a ruddy and furtive man, whose wooly red hair sat centered atop his egg-shaped head like a thatch of moss. He had, at some point since his recent conviction for murder, taken a swing at one of his guards, not incidentally a man who had, before the arrest, been a friend of his. As a result, he was considered dangerous to himself and to others; so for this conversation he'd been given a neural block that reduced him to a state of temporary quadriplegia, more confining than any known chains. The layer of fat he'd picked up during his months in confinement had nothing to do but sag.

He said, "I don't want to die."

Counselor Andrea Cort's expression, marked by thin eyebrows that tilted inward to meet with only the slightest gap of pure tension over the bridge of her nose, betrayed not an ounce of sympathy for his plight. The one lock of hair she kept long hung loose over one chiseled cheekbone, bisecting that side of her face like a slash. As uniform she wore her usual severe black suit, more formal than any her superiors in the Dip Corps actually required outside of courtrooms, with the addition of tight black gloves she'd adopted to ward off the chill that somehow found its way into even the warmest rooms of this embassy to a planet that was exceptionally miserable and frigid. In her ten days on Caithiriin, she had already overheard and ignored one muttered comment to the effect that these adjectives described her, as well. She would never have admitted it, but it had secretly pleased her.

She told him, "You shouldn't have killed somebody."

He grew louder, more insistent: "Do you have any idea how they execute people on this planet?"

Cort wondered how Varrick could imagine she'd been working on the case this long and not found out. "I don't see how it's relevant."

"Slow death by crushing, that's how. They strap you down and lay a flat board over you. Then they put a basin on top of that and let water dribble into it, a little bit at a time. It gets heavier with every drop. They say it takes hours before you even feel the weight, hours more before it starts to hurt, hours more after that before breathing becomes a problem, and hours more before bones start to break. They say I might live five days while in agony for three of them. Three *days*, Counselor."

Cort sighed. She was not a monster, despite a carefully cultivated image to the contrary, and she was absolutely vulnerable to the terror and desperation on the other side of the table. But she was also a realist. “I’m not saying I don’t feel sorry for you. But the matter’s been settled. You’ve run out of legal options.”

“I refuse to die that way.”

“Oh, well,” she said mildly. “You *refuse*. Is that how it works? Very well, then. Now that you’ve specified you *refuse*, I should let the locals know that you feel that way, and we should be able to clear this misunderstanding right up.”

His trapped eyes widened. “Is this a joke to you, Counselor?”

“No, Mr. Varrick. Your feelings are understood, but irrelevant. Unless you have information that casts doubt on the result, there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“And you take pleasure in that, don’t you? You . . . *bitch*.”

And that, the epithet that ended so many of Andrea Cort’s professional interactions, should have been the end of it.

She was ready to walk out and end the final conversation Varrick was scheduled to have with any human being before being turned over to Caithiriin hands.

She began to stand.

Then he said, “Wait—”

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The only reason Varrick was still in human custody at all, this many months after his conviction, was the same one that, under most interspecies treaties, allowed human beings charged of serious crimes on alien-held worlds to remain under the care of their own species until all legal remedies were exhausted. Cort was the last of those legal remedies.

The custody issue was a minor mercy, reciprocal to most species that had diplomatic relations with the Confederacy. Locals weren’t always expert in the care and feeding of human beings whose crimes were too serious to warrant protection under the principle of diplomatic immunity. In many cases they would have done any amount of damage to a human prisoner without meaning to, just by subjecting him to the same prison environment as one of their own kind.

In the case of the Caith, who preferred near-freezing temperatures and had an atmosphere only about a tenth as dense as what humans prefer, Varrick would have perished of hypothermia or suffocation long before the verdict was read.

Nobody on either side disputed the man’s guilt, not even Varrick himself. By the time of his arrival on Caithiriin, Varrick’s career had already involved three prosecutions for petty thievery from his fellow indentureds and a number of incidents of attempted robbery from the indigenes of the worlds where he’d been assigned. Thievery was in his blood, that’s all; it was something he did not possess the will or the character to stop doing.

Caithiriin, a low-prestige assignment where a number of diplomatic careers had gone to die, should have been his last chance. But even there, driven by whatever motivates a man who cannot live unless he’s taking what’s not his, he’d started slipping out at night to loot a local holy site of its relics and had, with competence unusual for him, gotten away with this for weeks on end before local authorities discovered the thefts and posted extra security to stop him. On the idiot’s very next trip, surprised by the presence of a Caith guard where there had been no guards before, and where an intellect of his limitations had just naturally assumed that there would be no guards ever, Varrick had simply killed the creature with a blow to the head from a sacred figurine that was now profaned forever from its momentary use as bludgeon, thus adding blasphemy to his array of more serious crimes.

Being a compulsive thief and an idiot, he hadn’t figured that the new security precautions installed by the Caith would now include holo cameras to record every move on the grounds.

It was a petty, stupid, obvious crime, committed by a petty, stupid, obvious man, who never should have been inducted into the Corps in the first place.

The Corps had erected the usual legal barriers to trying him by local laws, going so far as to assure the locals that his betrayal of the service merited a life in prison already. But there really wasn’t any

defensible reason, short of the irrelevant humanitarian grounds, why they weren't obliged to let the locals have him.

Cort's task, a mere formality at this point, had been to handle the final review—the last-ditch effort mandated by treaty to find some loophole that might free him. She hadn't expected, or found, any procedural or diplomatic grounds for appeal. There was simply no point, principled or perverse, in even trying to prevent the Caithiriins from executing him.

With that conclusion, she had looked forward to lying comatose in a bluegel crypt for the transport back to her home base, the cylinder world New London; but Varrick, utilizing the last right of defense that remained to him, had asked to see her one final time. And so, this pointless exercise. In truth, she'd expected little. Most people who've exhausted their legal options, not just in capital cases but in every kind of proceeding from the smallest suit on up, continue to believe that they can still affect the outcome if they just keep talking. This would be nothing more than the *No, wait, wait* phase, the last desperate bargaining of the trapped man who honestly believed that his own story, the most important narrative ever written in the history of the Universe, couldn't possibly end like this. Surely, the hind-brain reasoning goes, there had to be one more twist! A surprise ending! A pardon! A last-minute charge to the rescue!

The hind-brain has never been an expert in legal procedure.

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In any event, now that she'd gotten to the inevitable *you bitch* moment, and the useless *wait* that came after it, Cort was now free to leave.

"I am sorry for you, Mr. Varrick, but if that's all there is—"

From the crafty expression that suddenly flashed on a face not built for expressions of great intelligence, Varrick still believed that he had one card left to play. "There's an alternative."

"That alternative," she said mildly, "was not to kill anybody."

"Don't get high-and-mighty with me, Counselor. You've killed."

Yes, she had. Once as a child, once in the line of duty, two more times her superiors in the Dip Corps didn't know about. Cort was well used to having her history thrown in her face, and was, if anything, darkly amused by having it done by people with no other cards to play. "I'm not the one whose fate is at issue here. I'm giving you thirty more seconds to interest me."

"It's going to take more than thirty seconds to explain—"

"I didn't say you only had thirty seconds to explain. I said you had only thirty seconds to interest me. Start and give me a reason to keep listening. You're now down to fifteen seconds."

And of course, now that the door he'd kicked open was once again in danger of closing, panic struck. He rushed through what explanation he could without pause, the words racing after one another like refugees. "Look it up. Whenever it's one of their own convicted of murder, they present the poor buggers with a choice. They can choose to be executed or they can choose to undergo this treatment they have, that supposedly fixes them so they don't kill again."

Cort felt an unwelcome prickle on the base of her spine: the sign of unwanted interest in a problem that might keep her here, on this monochrome world of frost and darkness, where even the sealed habitats kept warm enough to satisfy human beings still felt cold by sheer association with the landscape outside. She was well aware how illogical this was; after all, the temperature outside New London was the absolute vacuum of orbital space and much colder than anything Caithiriin had to offer. But New London still possessed the warmth of a place she was used to, and Caithiriin was an unlovely place with nothing to recommend it but a task she had found simplistic and unrewarding. "That sounds like an urban legend, bondsman. Nobody's ever mentioned it to me."

"It exists. It's not used often, but it exists. Like I said, check it out. I'm not making up anything."

"I'll check it out," she assured him. "But if this option exists, why didn't you mention it before?"

"I was, whaddayacallit, keeping it in reserve. Hoping the case wouldn't go as far as it has. Hoping you'd find some procedural reason to ask for a retrial. But now that I've got nothing left to lose . . ." He paused, unable to shrug, but communicating the same nothing-to-lose sentiment with a flutter of his eyebrows. "The bastards never even offered it to me. At least, you owe it to me to ask the god-damned question, why."

Cort refrained from telling Varrick that she owed him nothing. "I'll let you know what I find out." But it wasn't the thought of saving his life that drove her. It was another simple question, which she found far more disturbing.

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Cort had never been impressed with any of the Confederate ambassadors she'd met in the course of her travels. In most cases they had struck her as bureaucratic placeholders, mediocrities granted titles and positions that conferred the patina of expertise without ever quite requiring it. She had in her time known one ambassador whose idiocy had almost started a war, and another whose total lack of interest in his job had left him spending much of his day inebriated in his quarters, while his run-amok staff proceeded to turn his tenure into a series of diplomatic incidents.

She was so far not extremely impressed with Ambassador Virila Pendrake either, but then hadn't expected to be. The Caith were not a major race who merited the best the Dip Corps could offer, but rather an unprepossessing little civilization that possessed only three borderline habitable worlds, all in one solar system, and a total population of no more than about thirty million; not even enough to fill a minor human city. They barely existed, diplomatically; they only possessed a place in trading circles because of some of their substantial innovations in information-processing technology. Posting here was therefore for beginners like the fresh-faced indentures who constituted most of the staff, outright embarrassments like the larcenous Varrick, or those who had risen only so far in their careers and would never ascend any higher—a group in which she included Pendrake.

Meeting and dealing with Pendrake had not given her any reason to alter her preconceptions. The woman was a tight-lipped, orange-complexioned prig whose nose and chin came to points and whose professional demeanor seemed to testify nothing more than the aggrieved impatience of a woman whose life had known little but disappointment and was now an exercise in counting down the years still remaining on her Dip Corps bond. It was a completely different form of unpleasantness than the severity Cort found useful to cultivate in herself, which she liked to consider a tool of her profession. But then, Cort was a prosecutor and had use for a fearsome reputation. Pendrake was an ambassador, which meant that at least part of her job was to be ingratiating . . . and Cort had yet to see her manage that trick. The woman had brought up Cort's own controversial legal status three times in the course of their very first briefing—and not to clarify the information, but as an attempt at preemptive intimidation, which appeared to be the only management tactic she even understood.

She was about to find out that Cort was better at it.

The embassy lounge was a lonely place that consisted of a few round tables for gatherings, a dartboard, a chess set, and an immersion tank filled with topical euphorics that didn't look like they'd been filtered of pollutants any time recently.

Pendrake was at the least of the offered entertainments, a holographic boxing simulator calibrated to a setting so low that trading punches with it was less like sparring with an opponent than beating the crap out of a weakling who didn't even know enough to protect his face. Given Pendrake's powerful arms and rock-hard shoulders, more appropriate for a soldier than the likes of an ambassador, maybe that was the very point. The simulated figure moaning with every bare-knuckled blow had been programmed with the face of a certain Dip Corps commander, known for the malicious delight he took in banishing mediocrities to low-prestige positions: a commander who just happened to be her direct superior.

Pendrake didn't meet Cort's eyes when she walked in, but instead threw a groin-punch that made the projected image squeal in breathless agony. "You done with him?"

"For now."

Another punch. "I was hoping you'd wrap it up today."

"Your man in there holds that he wasn't given a sufficiently zealous defense."

"Sure he does," Pendrake grumbled, directing fresh assaults at her target's face and chest. "A guy like that thinks the defense should always be faulted, by not being eloquent enough during the summation. *Your honor, look at this poor baby. Sure, he killed his Mommy and Daddy, but we need to take pity on the orphan!*"

Cort ignored the ancient gag. "I don't believe the summation to have been the problem."

Pendrake turned away from the cowering, bloody, image without bothering to pause the program—which, nevertheless, did not take advantage of her lack of attention to score any strikes on her unprotected form. “Oh?”

“Varrick maintains that the local legal system offers an alternative punishment that you’ve failed to explore. My initial inquiries confirm that this is indeed the case. My question to you is whether you mounted your defense without first bothering to learn all his options . . . or whether you had some other reason for keeping him, and me, ignorant about them.”

Pendrake stepped away from the simulated enemy, which sputtered out and contracted to a lone dot before blinking off. “What are you implying?”

“I never imply, Ambassador. I just come out and say. When I ask you how this failure occurred, it’s only to determine what form your dereliction of duty took.”

Pendrake wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “It wasn’t dereliction of anything. The Corps holds itself to a higher standard. Indentures who commit serious crimes on alien soil put all of us at risk, and aren’t entitled to any easy out the locals let slip into their law books.”

Cort remained cool. “So it was deliberate, then.”

“It was a choice, Counselor. We can’t just tolerate this kind of black eye on our position here.”

“True. However, as it happens, the Dip Corps has its own internal legal body—of which I’m a part—and if he merits further prosecution by that body, which is likely if exercising his rights according to local law can spare him a bloody execution here, then our dissatisfaction with his behavior can be addressed via established law and not by some embarrassed ambassador just throwing her hands up and letting the locals have him without contest. That, Ambassador, is an act of gross negligence that threatens what little advancement you’ve managed during your career.”

Pendrake just seethed. “Go to hell.”

Cort flashed her least pleasant smile. “Not unlikely. Will that be your defense?”

The ambassador advanced until she and Cort were nose to nose, or as close to that position as they could get, given her superior height and mass. “You don’t want to continue this conversation right now. Look at the difference between me and you. I can break you in half.”

Cort considered taking this further and saw no particular profit in it, not right away in any event. So she held out both palms, in a gesture she hoped the ambassador would find placating. “I’ll let myself out.”

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The next morning Cort woke early, exercised, then sat on the edge of her bed and ate the tasteless compressed rations she always carried in her gear rather than subject herself to the discomfort she had long felt eating meals alongside other human beings. Afterward, she took an extended hot shower, as she spent most of her time on orbital environments and usually had to rely on timed sonic pulses rather than experience the feel of real water on her skin. When she was done, she applied a blood-oxygenation patch to her upper arm before dressing in one of her trademark severe black suits, gathering her cold-weather gear, and proceeding down to the embassy’s skimmer bay.

There she found one of the younger indentures, a dusky young woman she’d spotted in the embassy hallways but never spoken to before today, waiting for her in bulky cold-weather gear complete with furry hood and mittens.

“Counselor. I’m Marys Kearn. I’ve been assigned to accompany you today.”

Cort tossed her satchel into the skimmer. “I didn’t request a babysitter.”

Kearn swallowed, clearly dreading what her duty now obliged her to say. “I’m sorry, Counselor, but local regulations say you need me.”

“Oh?”

“The ambassador wanted me to tell you that under the circumstances she would have considered it her pleasure to accompany you herself, but feels your adversarial position has rendered this impossible.”

Cort wouldn’t have made it impossible for the ambassador, just unpleasant. But there was no reason she had to make this equally unpleasant for someone who had not yet transgressed in any way. “Very well. You can relax around me. I don’t punish Embassy personnel for the spiteful gestures of their superiors.”

Kearn remained just as stiff as before. "Understood."

"If that's actually you relaxing, we're going to get along just fine."

"Yes, Counselor."

The two of them boarded the skimmer, taking opposite positions in the passenger bay after the pilot, a blandly handsome young man Cort found of no particular interest, took his own position at the nav console. Their flight above the wind-blasted, functional, architecturally bland Caithic city would represent a distance so miniscule that on any more temperate world more congenial to human life, Cort would have likely just gotten up a little earlier and covered the route in a brisk walk. But on this frozen, effectively airless hell, embassy personnel didn't go for extended constitutions unless they were survival junkies or masochists . . . and today, with the squat gray buildings that were the Caith's unimaginative idea of architecture being slammed by one of those intervals of hail, sleet, and driving wind that typified this world's demented idea of weather, Cort was not sufficiently confident that travel on foot would leave her in shape for a potentially unpleasant negotiation.

As the open skimmer escaped through a sliding panel in the embassy roof, its invisible and intangible ionic shields maintained a toasty and oxygen-rich environment for passengers expecting a far chillier and more suffocating atmosphere at their destination.

The relative warmth of the cabin led Marys Kearn to lower her furry hood. She was slight of build, but taller than Cort by a head. Her round face featured full lips, a squat nose, a high forehead, and brown eyes that glittered with specks of gold. She wore her wooly brown hair tied behind her neck in a thick braid, dangling to her shoulder-blades.

Her clear discomfort with Cort prompted one of the counselor's rare compassionate thaws. "What's your field, bondsman?"

Kearn replied with the stiffness of a new diplomatic indenture well-accustomed to being interrogated. "Exosociology. Still in training. Yet to receive a career grade."

"Is this your first posting?"

"Yes, Counselor. I only arrived only three months ago."

*Great Jufe, she's a baby.* "Then I congratulate you in joining the great farce known as interspecies diplomacy."

"Thank you, Counselor. It's been . . . interesting so far."

"In what way?"

"Well, my homeworld had a much less . . . uniform climate. We had places like this, but I never saw any of them. I lived in the tropics. Where it was green."

Cort grinned. "So naturally they thought you well-equipped for immediate assignment to a frozen wasteland."

Kearn needed a few seconds to decide how she was expected to respond to that one. "The . . . perversity of it did occur to me, Counselor."

"As your career continues, I think you'll find that your postings will continue to be that perverse, indeed malicious, unless you excel enough to be able to enforce your own preferences. Otherwise, you'll have twenty years or more of hating wherever you are, and you'll likely end up being as nasty a person as myself. But with that speciality, I presume you've already had extensive contact with the locals?"

"Yes, Counselor."

"Good. I have not. My interactions with the Caith have been minimal, and I therefore have little expertise in what they're like: what they consider required protocol, what they consider simple etiquette, and so on. I'm aware that your ambassador probably believes that she's punishing me by forcing me to have you trail about wherever I go. But if you can just feel free to share your superior knowledge on this one issue, you can justify your presence and earn a positive evaluation from me that may well shorten how long you'll spend in purgatory before having input into your assignments. Is that clear?"

Kearn's lips dared the ghost of a grin. "Yes, Counselor."

"Don't limit yourself to answering direct questions, either. Volunteer information when you believe it to be useful."

The grin broadened and, for the first time, displayed a dazzlingly white set of teeth, lighting up her face and transforming her from serious young thing to beautiful woman. Then she seemed to remember herself and pulled back, to a more neutral expression. “Understood. In that case, I might actually have something for you now.”

“Don’t make me wait.”

“These people,” she said, “The Caith? They’re polite enough, but don’t make the mistake of thinking that they’re welcoming.”

“Elaborate.”

“Well . . .”

“Piece of unsolicited advice,” said Cort. “*Well* is a hesitation word. It apologizes for your temerity in daring to share your thoughts. It implies that you’re holding back, even suggests that you might be lying. Strike it from your professional vocabulary, as I have, and people will be more inclined to value your input.”

Kearn stumbled over her next thought, no doubt because she had almost said *well* again, but recovered. “They’re hard and cruel people. So direct, so unforgiving, that they’re almost sadistic. Not just in their execution methods, but in all their dealings. They don’t like off-worlders, any off-worlders, and they particularly don’t like human beings; something that a number of them won’t hesitate to share with you. They only accept off-world commerce at all because their environment has always been so marginal that their history has been a series of catastrophic famines. Their civilization has fallen multiple times, and they’ve come within shouting distance of extinction on a few of them, most recently within a hundred years of their first contact.”

“I thought they had more than one world.”

“They have three. You’re on the most pleasant one.”

Cort winced. “Continue.”

“Confederate food imports have already gotten them through a few bad years . . . but they consider needing our help a stain on their honor, or something. They *want* to execute one of us, just to get some of their dignity back. It means something to them.”

Cort chewed on her thumbnail. It was a nervous tic that she fell back on whenever she was particularly deep in thought. “Will that stop them from offering this alternative punishment Varrick talked about?”

“I’ve heard a very little bit about it, myself. I never really believed it was real. Even if real, it’s been my impression that they don’t like it any more than being executed, and only request the option if they have life responsibilities they can’t bear to abandon. Career. Family. That kind of thing.”

Cort’s teeth snapped together as the thumbnail parted. She was about to ask something else, but by then the skimmer was descending through the open roof of the Caithirini government building, and it was time to see how well those oxygenation patches worked.

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The sad answer was *not very well*. There were some marginal worlds with human residents who grew accustomed to wearing oxygen-concentrating patches from birth, but for Cort, who had spent the entirety of her life on congenial planets and in an orbital environment set to optimal human conditions, it was a medical solution that failed to address actual psychological need. Her brain, reacting to data provided by her lungs, kept her fully aware that what she took in by inhaling was not enough to keep her conscious. She was at the same time prevented from actually losing consciousness by the patch that absorbed what atmospheric oxygen there was and concentrated it enough to keep her bloodstream supplied with everything it needed. The conflicting sensations—the certainty of imminent suffocation combined with the alertness of oxygen surfeit—kept her fluttering about the outer regions of panic, and fighting the natural impulse to hyperventilate, a solution that paradoxically might have caused her to pass out from breathing too much.

Only the presence of Marys Kearn, showing no apparent difficulty with the same instinctive contradiction, staved off panic. Cort would not show weakness before her, even if every cell in her body insisted that she was drowning. So she endured, and thought, *I hate planets*. An old complaint.

The Caithriin government building was suffocating in more ways than that. It tended to low ceilings and looming narrow spaces, all lit in a manner that accentuated shadows, and all no better heated than the average tundra. Before leaving the controlled environment of the skimmer, Cort had bundled up in cold-weather gear that included her own bulky coat, furry hat, and thick gloves, but deeply regretted not also bringing a face mask, because her cheeks took no time at all to go numb, and even as she followed their Caith escort through labyrinthine hallways that seemed to be more about making the journey a lengthy one than providing an efficient route to the chambers they sought, she had to frequently rub her face to restore feeling.

It was a few minutes before the Caith escort arrived at a point not obviously different than any other, slid open a panel that was not visible until the moment he moved it, and instructed them to wait for the Xe.

Cort's hynet link did not translate the phrase for her, but then, she'd been warned it wouldn't. It was simplest to just think of the official they waited for as a judge and the specific word *Xe* as an honorific, giving him credit for long years of experience and wisdom. It was also useful to think of it as a term of dread and fear, as the Caith world had no use for juries and a *Xe* was not just the sole arbiter of guilt or innocence, but also the being personally responsible for carrying out executions. From her hurried reading of the prior night, a *Xe* had to study half his life to merit his lofty position, and then had to give up all family, all friendships, all sex, even his birth name, plus all of what the Caith considered luxury, to dwell in ascetic squalor in a small cell in what amounted to a basement, enjoying no recreation except for what relief he enjoyed whenever he got to ruin some unlucky bastard's day.

Cort was not unaware that this meant that *Xe* must have been psychologically inclined to savage misanthropy, as they gave up everything they had in exchange for whatever they got from being figures of fear.

Mercy would not be in a *Xe*'s vocabulary.

Good. That would make him easier for her to understand.

The room where they settled in waiting for him was therefore the exact opposite of a human judge's chambers as could possibly be imagined. There was no dark gravity, no atmosphere of ceremonial dignity: just featureless gray walls and a pair of stone blocks, low enough that some human beings might have mistaken them as places to sit. Cort's reading had warned that using them as seats would be seen as an act of gross disrespect and another capital crime.

Upon entering a few minutes later, the *Xe* did not sit. He paced. He was, like the rest of his kind, a vaguely ape-like humanoid, with stubby arms and legs and a coarse layer of yellow fur that must have made him far more comfortable in this environment than any human could possibly be. His facial features included a secondary orifice of unknown purpose above the pebble-like, barely perceptible black eyes. His clothing had been designed to cover areas other than his prominent genitals, which included a flowery object that was likely his penis. That Cort could deal with; not every species had to be modest over the same body parts. What bothered her more was the ambiguity of his expression, the way it was impossible to tell whether the scowl he seemed to affect reflected his actual mood or just the natural geography of his face; probably both.

He did not permit any of the formalities Cort had prepared for. "Yes. Yes. All respect, all greetings. Forget that disgusting offal. It is unpleasant enough for me to be in the same room with sentients who smell the way you do. What excuse do you offer for delaying the execution now?"

"No excuse," Cort said. "Forgive us. We are visitors to your world, and there are many aspects of your system on which we remain ignorant."

"Human ignorance is not the problem. Human criminality is the problem."

"Forgive me," said Cort, "but I must take exception to that. We're not dealing with the level of criminality in human beings as a class, but about the specific criminality of one individual who also happens to be a human being. The rest of us, including myself, are just doing what we can, trying to treat you and your laws with respect, and are entitled to receive the same degree of respect in return."

The *Xe* froze in mid-step, cocking his head as if noticing Cort for the first time. For several heartbeats, it was unclear whether he would laugh, attack, or banish them from his sight. Then

he made a guttural noise and muttered, "I will cede that distinction, while noting that the despicable criminal in question is not yet dead."

"If you will permit us the answer to this question, it remains our intention to resolve this unpleasant matter with all possible speed."

"Had your people been interested in resolving this matter with all possible speed, the disgusting Varrick would have been dead already." He grunted, paced from one end of his stone room to another, scratched himself, then advanced past the stone blocks to Cort, who he subjected to a few strong sniffs before retreating. "I haven't met with you before today. Is your embassy so dissatisfied with my verdict that they must bring in a new human to waste my time?"

"You have a point. I should have introduced myself. I'm Counselor Andrea Cort, a prosecutor for the Confederate Diplomatic Corps. My task here is not to delay justice, but to confirm that the case of the human murderer Varrick was resolved with full access to the provisions of Caithiriic law."

A snort. "The case was already resolved with full access to the provisions of Caithiriic law. I declared him guilty and ordered his execution. How many more delays must I tolerate before his filthy life is surrendered according to that decree?"

"Again: just the resolution of this one issue, Xe."

The Xe rolled his eyes, in his most anthropomorphic expression yet. Like many alien expressions, any congruence it may have had with similar human expressions was coincidental at best, and yet Cort formed the unmistakable certainty that in this particular case, the exasperation it communicated was not just accurate but exact. "Then ask."

"I have been informed that your race possesses an alternative to execution: a medical treatment that preserves the criminal's life while preventing any further offenses. This was not offered to Mr. Varrick at his sentencing. My question is whether this option is still available to him . . . and if not, why not?"

The Xe grew agitated, like the ape he resembled confronted with an invasion of his territory. He began to pace in circles, a dervish driven by nervous energy. "Does the criminal Varrick have a family he wishes to support? Responsibilities he cannot bear to abandon? Legal or professional obligations that would be violated by his death?"

"As far as I know, Xe, he just wishes to live."

"Then he's a contemptible coward, with as little respect for himself as he has for others."

"I agree," said Cort. "I do, however, believe it his right to be a coward."

"That would indeed go along with his right to be a thief and murderer." The Xe stopped in mid-step, cocking his head as if disturbed by a sound only he could hear. "This is interesting. I do not know whether the process will work on a human being. To my knowledge, it has never been attempted with one of your species. In truth, it would have to be the decision of those educated in the procedure."

"If they testify that the treatment will work on a human being, will you permit it?"

"A coward should be free to request the joyless life of a coward." He snorted a couple of times, then added, "Understand that my patience is at an end. This last delay lasts only as long as it will take you to receive your definitive answer. Once you receive it, Varrick will have two more days for consideration, and no further delays. After that, he will either take the coward's option or he will die."

Cort nodded. "I have no problem with that."

\* \* \*

"You did it," Kearn said.

They had returned to the skimmer but had not yet taken off, because Cort had not yet given the pilot their destination. Until then, she greeted the relative warmth and more easily breathable atmosphere of the skimmer like a drowning woman who had just, after long and heroic effort, broken surface to swallow her first breath. She spoke with reluctance. "This settles nothing."

"But if it does turn out that the treatment works on human beings . . ."

"First," Cort said, rubbing fingers that had not been kept sufficiently warm by the presence of thick gloves, "we still don't know that. Second, even if it does, Varrick doesn't get to decide whether he's free to choose the option. I do."

"It's his life."

"True, it is . . . as little value as he placed on that life, committing his crimes on a world where they would render him subject to execution. But my primary interest is not him. He is only a by-product. My primary interest lies in determining, first, whether this much-vaunted treatment works as advertised . . . and second, whether we can afford the ramifications of establishing such a precedent."

Kearn's eyebrows knit. "But wouldn't saving his life . . ."

The impatience Cort often felt for slower or less perceptive minds manifested as harshness, which infected her tone now. "I have no love for capital punishment, bondsman. I'm not against it on principle, but I'm not fond of it either. You may know that I've escaped it a couple of times myself. But there are considerations that outweigh the value of even the noblest human life—a distinction that I don't need to point out is as far from Griff Varrick as it's possible to get. The problem we're faced with now is that by bringing this treatment of theirs to the forefront, that moronic little felon has exposed us to variables that affect not just his own ability to keep drawing breath, but also—if the Caiths are willing to share this technology—the course of justice on uncounted human worlds. Do you understand, yet? I'm not certain I'm confident in the ramifications of opening every prison door in human space. I need to know what we're talking about."

Kearn was silent for a long time. Then she said: "You're right. This can be huge."

"Oh, it's huge either way. We just don't know whether it also needs to be contained. Excuse me." Cort went up front, to talk to the pilot.

Their next destination was the medical facility the *Xe* had named, not precisely a hospital in the same way that he was not precisely a judge: a small structure a short distance outside the city where they were to meet a redeemer, one of the learned individuals tasked with the medical rehabilitation of murderers. The *Xe* had explained that the treatment was sufficiently rare for the facility to open only fitfully, when its services were needed; but had also promised that under his order a redeemer would make it his business to rendezvous with them there, for their consultation. It would take longer for the redeemer to get there than it would for them to reach the same location, so Cort told the pilot to take his time.

As they performed a long slow circle over the city, which from the sky looked like a squalid wreck half-shrouded by the fresh snow piling up at street level, Cort returned to her previous seat and Kearn said, "If you don't mind me asking . . ."

Cort rolled her eyes. "Oh. Here we go."

"You know what I'm going to say?"

"In my personal experience," Cort said, with the weariness that all such discussions left her, "all halting questions that begin with *if you don't mind me asking* have to do with my legal status. You're not the first to bring it up. Your ambassador did, with intense rudeness, the very first time I met her. Varrick did, almost as unpleasantly, only yesterday. It's a common thing to bother me about. The only thing that ever changes is the intended level of politeness. You're polite enough, I find, so if we must have this conversation, let's get on with it."

"If you're a convicted murderer yourself . . ."

"I'm a known killer," Cort snapped. "Not a convicted murderer. There's a significant legal distinction between the two descriptions. I see no point in going into my own extenuating circumstances. But they exist. Proceed."

"But if it has left you less than fully free . . ."

"We're both indentured to the Corps. The only difference is, your contract leaves you indentured for, at most, what, twenty years? And mine leaves me indentured for as long as they can still squeeze some use out of me—potentially, until I drop. Professionally, it's useful, because it places me under an umbrella of diplomatic immunity, and prevents me from being extradited to a couple of worlds that would like to put me in the same noose worn by your Varrick. But right now, neither one of us is fully free. Right now, we're equally owned. What's your point?"

Kearn remained silent for a long time, clearly aware that she'd given more offense than Cort admitted to, but unable to drop the question still burning in her. After a long time she shuddered and

let it out: "I'm sorry if this was painful for you, Counselor. It just occurred to me that if the Corps does recognize the treatment as an alternative to criminal punishment . . . you might be able to apply the precedent to your own case and force them to free you."

Andrea Cort might have been startled by the sting of a venomous insect. She jerked, her eyes widening, her mouth falling open, her mingled terror and understanding cutting through her composed mask to reveal the true face of the damaged soul underneath. This lasted all of a second, and then the moment of vulnerability passed, and her harsh mask returned, as cold, and now as airless, as the stormy landscape visible beyond the skimmer's shields. "You're . . . more formidable than I gave you credit for, bondsman. I honestly hadn't thought of that. At all. Thank you."

"And I'm also thinking, if . . ."

Cort shuddered. "Forgive me. I think I'd prefer it if we didn't speak again for a while."

She turned away, losing herself in the storm, and did not speak again until after the skimmer pilot announced that they were landing.

\* \* \*

The *Xe* had been manic, half-crazed, a constant study in motion that resembled the behavior of an imprisoned animal. Andrea Cort, who had not had any extended conversations with any Caith until that morning, could not help wondering how much of his demeanor she could attribute to eccentricity enforced by the isolated life he was obliged to live, and how much was true to the psychological baseline of his species.

The redeemer provided the much-needed contrast. He possessed a controlled, almost beatific stillness that rendered him otherworldly in ways that went beyond his furry Caithic physiognomy, and was in his own alien way, almost pleasant. He had introduced himself with a name that to Cort sounded like a four-note melody, interrupted after the third lingering tone by a hard consonant that sounded less like a glottal stop than a harsh clap—like the sound of a palm angrily striking a tabletop; it was no sound Cort felt assured of her own ability to make, though Marys Kearn did manage a close approximation of the melody in thanking the creature for his time.

He replied, "Those in my order have nothing but time. We are not often called upon to give cowards their choice of punishment. I believe that I was last summoned to this place a little more than a year ago, and the previous occasion was four years before that."

Kearn said, "We still thank you for agreeing to meet us."

"It is no hardship," the redeemer said, with what the htex translator interpreted as significant warmth. "I've never actually met an off-worlder, of any species, before. I knew you existed, and were disgusting, but have never until this moment met any of you. This is a fascinating experience."

Cort couldn't resist the observation, "I've heard we smell bad."

"Who told you that? Your stench could clear rooms, but I would never characterize it as *bad*. To me you smell more like . . . a powerful spice we use in some of our cooking. Please don't take it as a threat to eat you when I report that being this close to you makes me impatient for my next meal."

"That," Kearn said, "is the single oddest compliment of my life. Thank you."

The three of them gathered in a recovery chamber adjacent to the facility where cowards received their treatment. It had been a while since Cort had received medical treatment anywhere other than an automated AIsorce facility, but the room's general contours remained familiar, complete with the raised stone platform that was the Caithiriin version of a bed (which, Kearn explained, the species rarely used except in cases of illness or disability, as they tended to sleep standing up, for only thirty or forty seconds at a time). Despite the primitiveness of the arrangements provided for patient comfort, the rest of the accoutrements were advanced. There was an overhead vital signs monitor now reading a robust zero, and shelves stocked with liquids of various colors and presumed uses.

Cort had added a second oxygen patch to her arm in the hopes that this would ameliorate the difficulty she had even with the first patch, inhaling the thin local soup, but all that had done was add to her discomfort a not-unpleasant buzz a little like the onset of inebriation. As a result, Kearn had found herself obliged to pick up the conversational slack.

"What do you do with the rest of your time," Kearn wondered, "if you're never here?"

The redeemer said, “My professional duties consist of maintaining readiness and hoping that I’m never called upon. I live nearby. I have a family. I breed *graiya n* for sport. I am honored for my commitment to justice. I have no complaints about my life.”

Kearn said, “You are blessed, then.”

“I like to think so.”

Still reeling under her excessive oxygen-buzz, Cort managed to pull herself together long enough to ask the redeemer what the treatment entailed.

He showed fangs. “There is a saying among our kind: cowards have no secrets. Do you know what this means, Counselor Andrea Cort?”

“I do have my suspicions.”

“In the case of this treatment,” he said, “it is literal truth. The coward who takes this path has no secrets at all. His entire mind is opened, examined, read like a book. Everything, down to his slightest secret, is catalogued and transcribed. Would you allow this indignity for yourself?”

Cort did not offer a direct answer. “How can that prevent someone from committing more crimes?”

“The transcription is stored in a tiny device, which we implant at the base of the cowardly murderer’s neck. We often add a mark that renders it visible to the naked eye, to maximize the disgrace, but this is not always done and I suppose it will be optional in the case of your murderer.

“Either way,” he continued, “it takes full control over all his actions. It becomes in effect a second mind, a dominant mind, identical to the first except in that it has been programmed with certain behavioral modifications. His soul is not affected. Underneath, he gets to keep his inclinations, his instincts, his memories, his impulses, everything that makes him the objectionable creature he is; but from that moment on it is the transcription, echoing his actual moment-to-moment circumstances, that makes all of his decisions for him. As both versions of his mind are for the most part identical, and both respond to identical stimuli according to the contours of his recorded personality, the difference between what he wants to do and what the transcription permits him to do, will most often be minimal. If he wishes to walk across a room, the transcription—reacting with an identical personality to the identical set of options—will also want to walk across the room, and so he will walk across the room. If he is hungry and wishes to eat a meal, the transcription will also want to eat a meal, and so he will eat the meal. If he has a thought he wishes to express in speech, the transcription will also wish to express that same thought in speech. The only time there will be a noticeable divergence between his thoughts and his actions is when his impulses guide him toward proscribed actions, or when an accepted authority orders him to take actions counter to his preference . . . at which point the transcription will not permit that behavior and will steer him toward more responsible courses of action, until his impulses and his options are once again congruent.”

Kearn said, “Won’t he be aware he’s being controlled?”

“It will be most obvious to him on those occasions when his actions differ from his impulses. Say, when he wishes to break an innocent’s skull with a sacred figurine, and the transcription says that he should put the figurine down and surrender. The rest of the time, Counselor Andrea Cort: can you even testify, right now, that your actions are your own? That you are not being controlled by artificial means and forced into behaviors that you only believe to be the products of your own free will? Can you say this of Marys Kearn or any other human being you know?”

Many years later, Andrea Cort would have reason to look back on this conversation and reflect on ironies still hidden to her today. But right now she had no immediate answer. She bit her thumbnail. “Your society still looks down on any convicted killer who chooses this treatment over an extended and painful execution . . . to the point where most go ahead with the execution anyway. Why?”

The Caith species did not seem to possess a gesture equivalent to the human shrug, but the slight tilt of the redeemer’s head communicated the noncommittal hesitation of a creature who now had leave to speculate on matters he previously might have considered too elementary to contemplate. “Perhaps it is because we all still know what they are like inside. Perhaps we despise interacting with those who behave themselves and obey the rules and in all other ways act according to the laws they once broke, who may treat us with absolute courtesy but who, by

the weight of the evidence available to us, might be even at the same moment straining with all their co-opted will to curse our names and wrap their hands around the others. Perhaps it is impossible to look at such a person and not know that, however sane and blameless their current actions might be, they might just as well be raging maniacs, with minds driven but nothing but their old bloodlust. Perhaps murderers resist the option because they are aware that they will no longer be able to defend themselves, regardless of the provocation; or for that matter resort to suicide, the option we all abhor but secretly treasure as an escape route, valuable if only because the value of our lives can be defined by our daily decision to eschew it. Perhaps it is only the knowledge that if we do not possess full control over our own actions, we also cannot know ourselves, and cowardly murderers are faced with the prospect of becoming increasingly strangers inside their own heads. For some, it might well be unbearable." The cock of his head reversed itself and now canted at the opposite angle. "Overall, we feel that it is simpler to endure the execution. Either way, on our world, only cowards or those who will not put down whatever responsibilities they feel they have to their families are willing to endure this option. Most prefer execution."

In the silence that followed, it fell to Marys Kearn to ask, "And can this be done to a human being?"

Another head-tilt. "There would be some critical differences, but I cannot imagine the problem being insurmountable. In form, the technology is really very simple. If your murderer chooses to be cowardly, I presume we can be ready for the procedure within a matter of minutes, and be done within a few minutes after that."

"Thank you," Cort said. "I have one last important question. Can the procedure be rendered reversible?"

The redeemer tilted his head. "Why would you even ask this question, Counselor Andrea Cort? Is it your clever plan to immediately transport your murderer to some other location outside our control, and then defy our justice by removing the device?"

Cort smiled. "I can't blame you asking. No; I fully expect you to make sure that whatever you do to him affects him permanently. It's only because this is the first time it would have been done to a human that I ask if it can be made temporary until after the effects are observed. In case of complications."

"I see. That is a reasonable concern. Very well. Be assured that the implantation is minimally invasive and that the effects, while immediate, only become permanent over time, as the brain of the prisoner forges new neural pathways. This is enough time for us to confirm that the device is functional and that there are no medical complications that demand its emergency removal. However, healing is swift. By the time the adjustment period is over, which in the case of our people involves no more than about sixteen of our days, the brain of the affected individual has become absolutely dependent on the device and is no longer capable of controlling the body without its input. At that point, removing the device results in permanent dysfunction, sufficiently severe that the patient can no longer see, hear, move or speak. You understand, however, that there are only a very few circumstances even during the adjustment period where reversing the procedure will even be considered . . . and that I am duty-bound to tell the Xe that you have asked the question. He will no doubt not permit this Varrick to leave our world until we are certain that what we have done to him will govern his actions for the rest of his natural life."

"Thank you," said Andrea Cort. "If we go ahead, I'll make sure we abide by that."

Later, in the skimmer, as they flew between a sky the color of slate and a city rendered no more beautiful by its growing blanket of now, Andrea Cort shuddered as if touched by a cold skeletal hand and turned to Marys Kearn, who she had been ignoring since their take-off.

"What's wrong?" Kearn asked.

Cort's voice was very weak and terrified. "Do me a favor, will you, bondsman?"

"Anything."

"If you ever think I'm in danger of using that tech to clear my record . . . I want you to punch me very hard."

\* \* \*

By the time they made it back to the embassy, night had fallen. Cort went looking for Pendrake in her office, found it locked, then checked the rec room next and found it occupied by a couple of young indentureds cheating each other at cards. When she finally found Pendrake, the ambassador was in the dining hall eating and in too foul a mood to tolerate disturbance, regardless of urgency. Cort arranged an appointment for two hours later and returned to her quarters, where she spent too much time under a shower heated perilously close to the threshold of pain.

At the appointed time, she dressed in a fresh black suit and went to see Pendrake.

Perhaps in compensation for her vulnerability during their last meeting, when she had been dressed down for her boxing match with a phantom, Pendrake took this one in her office. It was a shabby little place by the standards of most ambassadorial sanctums, which tended to focus on homeworld banners, displays of awards received, images of reflected glory dominated by moments spent in the company of more famous dignitaries. By contrast the walls here were plain white stone, bereft of decoration, stark in the way that the architecture of the surrounding world was stark . . . and they would have rendered the space cold as well if not for the heat Pendrake kept up to maximum, turning the air in the chamber to a level just short of sweltering.

As if in compensation for her spartan chambers, Pendrake appeared in full formal dress of the sort that must have been only rarely called for on this protocol-averse world. She'd pinned her hair up and affixed a holo generator cycling through her career honors and medals; a display that Cort was not about to say she'd found pathetic, because it started repeating after too short a time. She found herself wishing that she hadn't gone out of her way to antagonize this already antagonistic woman on their last meeting, when what she needed most, right now, was an ally.

Pendrake must have sensed some advantage in Cort's hesitation. "Don't waste my time."

Cort was unused to entering such negotiations in the position of a supplicant, where her own native formidability would not serve as advantage. "I . . . find myself in the position of needing to trust you."

"Poor you. Why?"

"We have a problem."

Warily: "Oh? How bad is it?"

"So bad that if it was just up to me, I'd use every connection I have to advocate cutting off all diplomatic relations with this world, and a permanent military blockade keeping them from ever opening trade with anyone else."

Pendrake's forehead wrinkled in disbelief. "Really."

"Yes. Really. But I've done that before, and it's not the kind of thing anybody could ever get away with doing more than once in so short a time. I'm hoping you'll take the lead on this one."

"You *are* crazy."

"I understand why you'd say that," Cort said. "I do."

"And I understand why you'd be used to it," Pendrake snapped. "It is what everybody thinks, after all. Even the people who believe in you say you're some kind of wind-up savage. But *this*. How could you possibly think I'd go along with . . ."

Cort cut her off. "I know. It's the kind of position that can destroy an ambassador's career, even if she manages to sell the idea to her superiors. That kind of escalation gets looked upon as a shameful failure, even if it's justified. The ambassador I dealt with on the other occasion was permanently ruined. But this planet is such a clear and present danger to human civilization that once we're done with all obligations regarding Varrick, we need to do whatever we can to discourage any more contact with these people."

Pendrake tapped her fingers against her desk, the drumbeat turning martial despite herself. "And assuming you can even support this insanity, why should I cooperate with someone who's already threatened my career?"

"If you go with me on this, I will drop that earlier matter. I will, in fact, spin things so that it looks like you always knew exactly what you were doing in repressing this technology; tell our superiors that far from being incompetent, you were *visionary*. Your career won't advance, I'm afraid, but then you'll have to admit, it hasn't exactly been stellar. You'll be able to retire early . . . and I'll see to you that you get the kind of benefits the Corps only accords its most accomplished leaders."

More finger-drumming. “And if I don’t want to retire?”

“There’s only so much I can do, Ambassador. I’m playing straight with you here. But this is bigger than you and bigger than me. If we allow Varrick to take this treatment, and then don’t repress that information, the damage we do to humanity may be catastrophic. You can count on that.”

Pendrake seemed to realize what her fingers were doing and pulled them away from the percussive instrument her desktop had become. “You better tell me what the hell you’re talking about.”

Cort found herself in the position of a drowning woman, struggling to reach a floating object against current that carried her farther away with every stroke. “I saw something wrong the first time it was even mentioned to me: the over-the-top sadism of the execution, offered alongside what is superficially at least a more humane alternative. I walked out of that meeting wondering: what society would even evolve such an essential contradiction?”

Pendrake shrugged. “Most human societies are built on contradictions. Like capital punishment and life imprisonment, as possible punishments for the same crimes. That’s a contradiction right there.”

“A limited one,” Cort said. “Life imprisonment is still taking away the rest of a prisoner’s life, separating him from the pleasures of comfort and family and most matters involving personal choice. It’s execution of a different kind, a slow death rather than a swift one.”

“I could debate that.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. But this is a contradiction of an entirely different magnitude: die in horrible agony, over what must feel like an eternity of suffering . . . or get a box put in your brain and go back to doing what you would do anyway. The very fact that few prisoners offered the choice take life has to give you pause. It *has* to. I submit that it’s because Caith, raised on a world where this is a known choice, understand that such all-encompassing control *has to be* torture of a more insidious kind. I’m not sure what form that torture takes. But I’m morally certain it exists. It has to. Otherwise, the existence of the option, from a justice system that doesn’t seem to care all that much about mercy, doesn’t make any sense.”

Pendrake’s expression remained blank. “I’m not sold. But go on.”

“The Caith can afford to have this in their society,” Cort said. “They number only thirty million or so, under only one government; they have a stable system, even if it’s also a brutal one.

“But humans have many tens of thousands of worlds, administered under hundreds of different forms of government, under Juje alone knows how many local forms of corruption. What happens when news of this technology starts to spread? You think humanity’s going to limit it to treating murderers?”

“I’ve experienced some of this personally, Ambassador. *I know*. We’re the species that has tortured and murdered its own for reasons far more trivial than that: slight physical differences from the local norm. Ancestral conflicts going back centuries. Disagreements over small matters of philosophy. Sexual orientation. Gender itself. Even perversity: the sheer hunger for someone to oppress.

“You let this evil technology get out, and I’m telling you it won’t be long before we start using it to control people convicted of crimes a lot more picayune than murder. Rape will be next. Why not? Nobody sane approves of rape. Might as well control any bastard prone to it. Other forms of assault? Theft? Nobody approves of that, either. Let’s make sure nobody gets to do it twice! How about standing up for your rights when the government starts making intolerable demands of you? Hey, that just makes you a troublemaker! From now on, we can shut you up in a *second!*”

“And then, the human animal being what it is, it’s only a matter of time before some governments start using the technology preemptively. On some worlds, children will have their implants installed as soon as it becomes a medical possibility. Entire populations will be kept in slavery, unable to do anything but what their implants, and the few privileged in charge, tell them to do. Nobody will be able to protest. They’ll *want* to . . . but their implants will keep them grinning and complacent and cooperative in any way that their owners define as cooperation, even if they’re almost insane with fury. There won’t even be any possibility of rebellion. People with the implants will become commodities, sitting with folding hands while they’re traded from one powerful owner to another.

“That’s what this is all about, Ambassador. And everything between us aside, *that’s what you need to help me stop.*”

Pendrake had gone pale and stricken, in the manner of a woman suffering a terrible wound who had not yet figured what kind of weapon had struck her and how mortal the injury had been. Several seconds passed before she even seemed to realize that her mouth had fallen open. When she did, her teeth clicked. “This . . .” she started, then swallowed. “Juje.”

She got up, crossed the room to a functional cabinet that fit the rest of her décor as well as a tumor fits the biology of the organism around it, and came back with a crystal bottle bearing a bright orange liquid. The vessel narrowed so sharp that the aperture was almost microscopic, a function she demonstrated by wetting two glasses from her desk drawer with no more than three drops, apiece.

She handed one to Cort. “Drink.”

Cort preferred to imbibe her intoxicants in solitude, but an illegal conspiracy was being forged here, and certain rituals were only to be expected. So she took the glass, lifted it to her lips, waited just long enough to confirm that Pendrake was also going to drink, and threw it back. The three drops burned like fire as they hit the back of her throat, but in the heartbeat that followed she felt an overwhelming euphoria, as every pleasure receptor in her body fired at once.

The effect was intense and lasted only thirty seconds, before being trailed by a precipitous emotional plunge back to the cold squalor of Pendrake’s office.

Cort found herself missing the brief interval of bliss as if its loss amounted to a promise that she would never know happiness again. “What the hell was that?”

“You’re better off not knowing its name,” said Pendrake, as she returned the bottle to her cabinet. “On the world I come from, there’s a serious social problem with people becoming addicted to it. Those who use it too frequently burn out the brain’s pleasure centers and can’t ever know a moment of joy, ever again. I commit a genuine personal risk just allowing myself access to it—which I do only because I’ve found no other intoxicant that matches it. I only partake on special occasions. As a sacrament, you might say. For things like the forging of important conspiracies.”

“So . . . we’re agreed?”

“I come from the world that has forsaken unimaginable wealth by not producing that stuff in quantities that could addict the rest of human civilization.” Pendrake flashed gray teeth. “So I think you can say I’m familiar with the premise of taking responsibility for the common good.”

\* \* \*

They broke for the night without resolving all the problems their little conspiracy would cause. They still had to work out a means of breaking off diplomatic relations, while hiding the reason why. They had to work out another of avoiding the humanitarian consequences of abandoning the Caiths to the uncertainties of their own fragile agriculture. They finally had to figure out what they were going to do about Varrick, who was still entitled to decide on his own fate.

None of this would be easy. Cort would have to work with Pendrake, a woman she’d alienated and considered a second-rate hack, for months.

It wasn’t the most onerous task she’d ever stumbled into. But it just might have had the highest stakes.

Exhausted, aware that a terrible door had been opened and that it might now take all of her efforts to close it, she returned to her guest quarters and took care of her first order of business—a dispatch to her immediate supervisor at New London. His name was Artis Bringen, he was more enemy than confidante, and though she despised him for more reasons than she could even list, she had managed to break him in; forcing him to the epiphany that he could expect better results if he just let her have her own way. That would make prevarication here only a little easier than impossible, because Bringen was no fool.

She didn’t provide details because she and Pendrake hadn’t come up with any. She just wrote, SERIOUS COMPLICATIONS. DETAILS TO FOLLOW.—CORT.

Even with a tamed supervisor like Bringen, there was no way that would ever be enough. The indenture’s duty to account for every hour of every assignment meant that she couldn’t just continue

to stay at the site of an away assignment forever unless she could produce some defensible reason. That, like everything else, would have to wait until she had some sleep.

For a long time she sat on the edge of her cot, her thoughts fuzzy, her stomach churning as the implications of the Caithiriin treatment stretched out before her. For a while she lost herself in one of the unhelpful spasms of self-pity that had always been part of her personal pathology. Why, she wondered, was it always so hard? Why did it have to be her, instead of any one of the Dip Corps's other fully competent prosecutors, whose routine assignments got sidetracked to such awful destinations? Then the lateness of the hour and the long day her system had spent being punished by the tension of breathing even with assistance in Caithiriin spaces began to get to her, and she found that even depression took more energy than she had.

She fell asleep without having resolved a thing, the very last thought in her head being that Pendrake had been far easier to sway than she ever would have guessed.

The metabolic aftereffects of the orange narcotic hit her less than an hour after she closed her eyes, turning an already deep sleep into a drugged one without any noticeable transition.

Had she been awake and aware that she was in danger, she might have noticed the grogginess and fought it off; even taken one of a number of counteragents she carried, to force her back to sobriety and return her capacity for self-defense. Asleep, she welcomed the dreamlessness; asleep, she accomplished a state she rarely felt, peace.

She was therefore incapable of reaction when the door to her quarters slid open.

\* \* \*

The first stages of Varrick's execution were by far the most watchable part of an ordeal that would only get more horrific as time went on; right now it was only a naked and terrified Varrick, strapped to a cold stone floor as the basin atop the slab that pinned him received its first few trickles of water. He would not stop screaming that this should not be happening, and was still capable of achieving volume because his breath was not even close to being constricted yet; later, Cort had been told, he would be reduced to whispers, released with what little air he could manage. Other, more awful manifestations had been described to her: the various ways the body would empty under pressure, the various sounds it would make as bones splintered and fractured; the more graphic things that would happen when the skin stretched past the breaking point finally split and began to spill its cargo of blood. That was not anything any human witness, short of a monster, would have wanted to stick around for. Cort had to look away, thinking that sometimes the sheer volume of pain in the Universe was more than the human heart could contain, and that her failures here were not just to this terrible man, but to herself.

That night Cort sat in her quarters compiling her nightly report on the progress of Varrick's execution, which was still expected to take a couple of days yet, and found that sometime during the day she'd received a dispatch from Bringen, demanding to know just what kind of complications she could possibly be talking about, with the execution already happening.

This was no surprise. Bringen was always going to be a problem. He had always treasured his position as the man holding her leash, and indeed professed a kind of affection for her, even if that affection had more than once taken the form of outright opposition. He still knew her better than any other human being; a fact she considered appalling, because she did not want to be known by anybody.

She cast about for a fiction that might stand a chance of satisfying him, and finally wrote:

YOU GOT ME. I CONFESS. THERE ARE NO "COMPLICATIONS."

YOU WANT TO KNOW THE REAL ANSWER, ARTIS, I'M TIRED; MORE TIRED THAN I'VE EVER BEEN; EVEN MORE TIRED THAN I WAS AFTER BOCAL.

THE FUTILITY OF THIS ONE GOT TO ME. THE MAN WAS DOOMED BEFORE I EVEN GOT HERE, DOOMED IN LARGE PART BY HIS ESSENTIAL NATURE, DOOMED BEYOND ANY HUMAN MEANS OF REACHING HIM. IF HE HADN'T COMMITTED HIS IDIOT CRIMES HERE, HE WOULD HAVE COMMITTED THEM SOMEWHERE ELSE, AND DAMNED HIMSELF IN SOME OTHER MANNER—PERHAPS EVEN WHILE UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF SOME OTHER GOVERNMENT CRUELER THAN THIS ONE.

THE SADDEST THING IS HOW AVOIDABLE IT WAS. WE KNEW ABOUT HIS CRIMINAL PROCLIVITIES FROM THE VARIOUS OFFENSES HE COMMITTED AT HIS EARLIER ASSIGNMENTS, BUT BECAUSE OF THE TIME-DEBT HE OWED TO THE CORPUS, WE

SATISFIED OURSELVES WITH SLAPS ON THE WRIST AND CONTINUED TO PLACE HIM IN POSITIONS OF GREATER AND GREATER RISK. WE TESTED HIM TO DESTRUCTION, UNTIL HE WAS DESTROYED.

I MAY HAVE FELT THIS MORE THAN I FEEL MOST OF THE CASES I WORK ON, BECAUSE I HAVE SO MUCH IN COMMON WITH HIM. BUT IT'S GOING TO TAKE ME A WHILE TO ABSORB THIS. IN THE MEANTIME, THE EMBASSY HERE NEEDS A LITTLE LEGAL WORK, INVOLVING CERTAIN MINOR DISPUTES BETWEEN US AND THE LOCALS—AND THOUGH I'M OVERQUALIFIED TO HANDLE THEM, I FEEL I CAN BEST OCCUPY MY TIME HANDLING THOSE TWO-FINGER EXERCISES, WHILE FIGURING OUT WHAT ALL OF THIS MEANS FOR MY FUTURE. YOU'LL HAVE THE REQUEST FROM AMBASSADOR PENDRAKE UNDER SEPARATE COVER. SHE'S A GOOD WOMAN, AND SHE'S BECOMING A GOOD FRIEND.

I HOPE YOU'LL FORGIVE ME FOR THIS, AND I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I REGRET ANY DISAPPOINTMENT YOU MIGHT FEEL IN ME.

YOURS IN FRIENDSHIP, ANDREA

She read the document three times before confirming that she had done the best she possibly could with it, then shuddered and forwarded the text to the Ambassador.

It wasn't long before she got the return message that Pendrake wanted to see her, shuddered again, and smoothed out her black suit before traversing the three short hallways to Pendrake's office.

Pendrake was not dressed formally this time, but was instead wearing the sweaty workout gear indicating a recent session with the simulated boxer. The text of the missive to Bringen hung transparent above her desk, glowing green everywhere she'd highlighted a phrase for special consideration. Emerald highlights shone in the sweat on her cheeks.

She said, "What the hell is this?"

Cort said, "It's my letter to New London."

"I can see that, Andrea. I just read the damn thing. I'm just wondering if you think I'm stupid."

Cort wanted to tell the woman that the answer was yes, that in her estimation she was stupid, that it might have been a form of stupidity that went along with cunning but it was still a bone-dense, opaque blindness that limited her concerns to her own personal ambition and relegated everything else to mere annoyance. She also wanted to leap over the desk and teach this creature, so addicted to unfairness that she limited even her simulated fights with constructs prevented from fighting back, what it meant to anger someone who, unlike her, had more than once needed to actually fight for her life. But she did neither. Instead she said nothing.

"You must think I'm stupid," Pendrake said, "because you treat me like I'm stupid."

Cort wanted to say that of course she treated Pendrake like she was stupid, because in any sane and ordered universe it was the way Pendrake would always be treated. She wanted to say that if it was up to her Pendrake would have been strapped down and forced to endure having the word *Stupid* carved into her forehead with a dull knife. She wanted to say that if it were up to her she would have held the blade herself. But she did not do that. Instead she said nothing.

"I've experienced your way of speaking to people first-hand," said Pendrake. "Why would you think me capable of believing that this *warm* and *polite* note accurately reflects the kind of communication somebody like you would *ever* have with anybody responsible for giving you orders?"

Cort wanted to say that not everybody she dealt with was garbage in human form, and that she respected Artis Bringen quite well, thank you, but that would have been a lie and the words that came out of her mouth were, "It's the way I talk to people now, Ambassador."

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it? It doesn't sound anything like you."

*Die screaming.* "No."

"Thank you for your honesty," the ambassador said. She went to her cabinet and removed the familiar, now-hated, bottle of orange liquid, squeezing four drops into a glass. "Drink."

*No, damn you. I won't*

She drank. Again she felt that burning rush, and again the subsequent warmth flooded her, banishing all the despair of the last few days and filling her heart and lungs with a pleasure she had already begun to crave to a degree that horrified her. For seconds that seemed to last hours, everything was all right in the world. Under the influence, even the state of terror she'd lived in for days now was comforting: for what is more promising, really, than freedom from having to make decisions?

Then the pleasure ebbed, and she was once again returned, with a thud of despair, to the cruel reality of imprisonment.

Pendrake's smile was kind. "It's really that simple. Life is punishment *and* reward. Sometimes *both* punishment *and* reward, at the same time. It's reward, now, because it's all you have. It's punishment because you know that if you taste it too often, you will lose even more of yourself than you've already lost. Too much reward and punishment is no longer a threat; too much punishment and no amount of reward is ever solace. But when reward *is* a punishment: that's about as eloquent a subsidiary behavior-modification a system as anyone could want. You're afraid of being given more, aren't you?"

*I'll kill you blind you burn you to ashes.* "Yes."

"Well, then, you know what to do. Tonight you'll rewrite that letter, editing out the warmth so it sounds a little more like you. And then tomorrow morning you'll come back to me and we'll have another strategy session. Okay?"

*If I could kill you now I'd—*"Okay."

"Good girl. And while I'm at it, make yourself more evident at mealtimes. The recluse thing isn't quite working for me. It makes you too mysterious, encourages the asking of questions. Be more sociable. That's an order."

Cort nodded and even found her lips curving into an unwanted pleasant smile before she turned her back and began the long walk back to her quarters, somehow a greater distance even though it was not far enough, would not be far enough even if it encompassed the gulf between here and the very edge of Confederate Space.

Every step was a futile exercise in hammering away at her personal walls. She could not stop focusing all the hatred she had, which was considerable, at the priorities that drove her meek return to the little room where all her energies would be kept focused on following orders. Rebellion was built into her. It was who she was. It also wasn't what currently drove the body she inhabited, the body that she was imprisoned in. That was another mind, one she couldn't access.

There was, she'd found, no moment of the day she wasn't aware of it. Even when the neutered copy that drove her chose to do what she would have done anyway, the steps she took, the gestures she made, the words she spoke, were not *hers*. They were actions that paralleled hers, rendered maddening by the subtle yet tangible disconnect between her will and the acts that will directed but could not affect. That was not her rolling over in bed; that was not her taking an early-morning trip to the bathroom; that was not her swallowing after her mouthful of food had been chewed the preferred number of times. That was a being who lived parallel to her, a being who happened to want to do many of the same things but was not a reflection of her own volition, a being who was Andrea Cort without any of the things that made Andrea Cort.

Cort had come to realize that even her few pathetic attempts at rebellion, like the uncharacteristic tone of her missive to Artis Bringen, were not her. They were that other controlling version of her, having the same idea she had but not finding any particular reason to differ with it.

Pendrake had picked up on this at once and had wasted no time turning to the reward/punishment of the orange narcotic to discourage the controlling mind from taking steps even as miniscule as that. It was, like Andrea herself, a fast learner. It wasn't stupid. It would give up before long.

She returned to her quarters, closed the door behind her, and lay on the bed fully clothed, her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Returning to her room wasn't rebellion. She'd been ordered to.

Lying on her back wasn't rebellion. Pendrake had said *tonight*, and this was still local afternoon. As long as it got done by tomorrow, the controlling mind had no problem with her following her moods.

Furious concentration wasn't rebellion. It didn't affect her actions. It was also the only weapon she had, even if it also turned out to be the reason why the Caith treatment was indeed what she'd suspected, not a humane alternative but an even more vicious punishment, the vicious internal torment that now threatened to damn her to hell throughout the rest of her days.

All she could do was think. And so she thought, hating that the only place her concentration took her was the same path she'd already traveled half a dozen times since waking up in the Caith facility with her will stolen from her.

Pendrake, she'd realized, might not have had the idea right away.

Upon being confronted with the truth, Pendrake might have seen the very same problems Cort herself did. She might have indeed agreed with her that it had to be kept out of human hands, even at the cost of her career.

Even when she brought out that orange intoxicant, she may have meant it as nothing more than she represented it as being, a sacrament to lubricate the agreement between two conspirators.

But then Cort had left her office, agreeing that the problems here were too complex to resolve all at once, putting their next meeting off to the next morning.

And that most self-involved, angry mediocrity known as Ambassador Virila Pendrake had done something that Cort would have imagined most uncharacteristic of her.

She had continued thinking.

She had thought:

*Wait.*

*Why do I have to let that bitch destroy my career?*

*There's no reason for that.*

*If I get her on my side, I might be able to salvage this.*

And then she had thought:

*Hell, I might be able to do more than salvage this. I might be able to profit from this.*

And then she had thought:

*Humanity's had any number of other awful methods of controlling people, and survived. If I leave here with their treatment in my possession, I could find somebody willing to buy it. I could sell it for more than anybody could spend in a thousand lifetimes. I could live like a queen. I could be a tycoon, a Bettelhine.*

*The worst of the repercussions won't even be worth worrying about until I'm long gone.*

There would have been some idle, pleasant daydreaming about castles and servants and all the luxuries she could possibly imagine for herself, swelling to suit even more grandiose visions as she lay back in her chair, and teased herself with the possibilities.

But then, of course, her thoughts had circled back to Cort.

*If only there was some way to stop her.*

Followed by the inevitable thunderbolt:

*Juje. There is.*

*She's a war criminal.*

*She's a killer.*

*She's been written up for insubordination, a ny number of times.*

*She's practically living under a deferred sentence, even now.*

*What would it cost to just incapacitate her in some way and take her to the Caith, with the facts all laid out to support what they would consider a very reasonable request?*

*I can take care of her, and Varrick, at the same time.*

*In fact, it'll be downright easy.*

*I can imagine it right now.*

*I contact the Caith authorities.*

*I say, "You can have Varrick. He's decided to take the sentence of death. He'll likely panic and change his mind once it starts, but you know how it is. All decisions are final."*

*That takes care of that loose end.*

*Then I go on to say, "And while you're at it, you should also take this one. She's a prime candidate for your treatment. Here's full documentation. As you can see, she has quite the record. Murder and everything. Made trouble for herself, and for others, wherever she was posted. A genuine danger to the social order. We've been wondering what to do about her for years."*

*"No, we don't want to kill her, not exactly, because she is a talented little thing, and those talents are quite useful to us, as long as they're properly channeled. All we want you to do is make*

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*sure that she's no longer a threat to anybody, ever again. Take her violent tendencies out of the equation. Also make sure she can't rebel, or disobey direct orders.*

*"On whose authority? My authority. You know me. I'm the ranking Dip Corps authority on this planet. You can make me responsible for her. Come on. You've seen her records. She deserves this. The only reason we've never executed her is that she's been of use. This way, she can continue to be of use."*

*It wouldn't fool a human. Not most humans. Not most smart humans.*

*But it might fool somebody who doesn't quite know how human beings think, who doesn't quite know how human society works. The Caith barely tolerate us. They pay as little attention to us as they can get away with.*

*They can be manipulated into doing what I want.*

*Andrea's heart hammered hard as she thought about what had to be Pendrake's next thought.*

*As far as the human reaction: who would even notice? Cort's a notorious misanthrope. She's crazy. She has no friends. Nobody's ever going to say that anything's out of character for her . . . especially not if I make sure she transfers to permanent duty, under me.*

*She would be the perfect advisor. Brilliant, in her way. Logical.*

*Loyal.*

*I could be certain that she'd never rob me, or hurt me, or betray me.*

*This isn't a daydream any more. This is a plan.*

*Juje. I could do this.*

*I should do this.*

*It would take care of everything. Varrick. Cort. Keeping a lid on their tech until I work out a way to obtain it for myself and a means of selling it elsewhere, things that Cort will be able to help me with. Not to mention revenge against the insufferable bitch for threatening me: a not inconsiderable reward in and of itself, since if I do this I can make sure she regrets drawing breath every single day for the rest of her life.*

*This is perfect.*

*This is what I'm going to do.*

And so Pendrake, having talked herself into forsaking whatever moral qualms she might have had, had waited until she could be reasonably certain that Andrea Cort was asleep, made sure she remained out by administering another of what Cort now suspected to be a quite extensive personal collection of recreational narcotics . . . and taken her. It had been late at night, all the indentures asleep or otherwise retired to their rooms, and so she'd suffered absolutely no difficulty getting Cort down to the skimmer bay unnoticed; no problem leaving with her, unnoticed; no problem leaving her in the skimmer unconscious; no problem, given the minimal Caith sleep schedule, of getting in to see the Xe; no problem having the conversation she had already rehearsed with herself, promising the delivery of Varrick and obtaining the Xe's order for Cort's treatment; no problem rendezvousing with the redeemer, who had no particular reason to question the dictates of the Xe and the world's ranking human; no problem standing by as Cort's personal volition was stolen from her; no problem after that returning to the embassy, a much-changed Andrea Cort in tow, without anybody ever realizing that she and Cort had been gone.

It was in the returned skimmer that Pendrake administered the counteractive drug that had roused the horrified Cort to a different world and said:

*You thought you were so smart, you bitch.*

*But you made a mistake.*

*You assumed you were smarter than me.*

*You assumed that just because I'm stuck at a dead-end post, that I live without ambition.*

*Neither of those things is true.*

*Starting tomorrow, we're going to start working on that.*

*From this day forward, you work for me.*

\* \* \*

Lying in bed for those afternoon hours, thinking of all the foolish mistakes she had made and all the lost and helpless years that she was about to live because of them, Cort made only four discoveries of note.

The first was that none of this obsessive circling about events still raw in her memory did her a damned bit of good. It was just self-flagellation, the endless poking at a wound to punish herself with the pain she deserved. It took up time she couldn't afford and left her, longer than she could bear to think later, in the same trap she'd stumbled into before.

The second was that, as long as she was alone and nobody could see her, hysterics remained within the options the device making her decisions was willing to duplicate for her. The tears didn't just fall, they flowed. They burned her cheeks on their way down, endless numbers of them, more than she had managed to release in years; but though she shuddered and sobbed and whispered to herself that she didn't want to live like this, none of it was at all cathartic. Only the tears, an involuntary function, managed to be genuine. Everything else was the transcription, acting for her, doing what it correctly calculated to reflect the real Andrea's feelings and desires . . . without ever quite being her; without ever quite accomplishing emotional release. It only added to the torture.

The third discovery was a corollary to the second. This, she realized, would only get worse. It was built into the treatment. The transcription of her mind had only reflected her state of mind at the moment the copy was made. It was capable of learning, and incorporating new information, but it would never grow. It would never alter its behavior to reflect changes in her mindset over all the years to come. Even if she was screaming inside, even if she longed for death, even if she went insane, the transcription would remain the same thing it was. The differences between what she wanted to do and what the transcription wanted her to do would only get worse, until she became an alien to her own body, a prisoner forced to live out a stranger's life.

It would be different, she supposed, had the treatment actually qualified as *mind control*, had it altered or changed or in some way modified her thinking process. She lived inside her own head and could think of any number of ways where, if that were even possible, she would have not only approved but actively sought out such adjustments. A happiness pill, for instance, would have been nice. But here, the mind she had always lived with still existed, and was just as self-cannibalizing as it always had been. It had just been rendered impotent, an irrelevant ghost shouting at the confines of her skull, with nothing to do but rage as her body's strings were pulled.

It was as cruel a punishment as any she had ever encountered, and it was designed to get worse. *Someday, she thought, maybe in a year; maybe in ten, I'll look back on this day and think I was foolish for imagining this had gotten as bad as it was going to get. Someday I'll regard this as paradise . . . even if I'm still capable of thinking, by then. If I'm not a mindless, gibbering madwoman inside.*

The fourth discovery she made was that she didn't even have the option she had often exercised in life, of being too upset to be hungry.

At a certain point, after hours of coming no closer to a means of escape than she had been when she first placed her head on her pillow, the transcription reacted to the hour and decided that she had better get up and start getting ready for dinner.

She didn't want to eat. She certainly didn't want to face other human beings. But she had been ordered to mix, and so, with every ounce of will in her body screaming *no*, she sat up and went to the room's shower and washed away the worst of the damage the afternoon's weeping had had on her face. Then she went to her bag and removed the cosmetics she carried out of habit but rarely used to reduce the puffiness around her eyes, restoring them to their usual penetrating look.

To her own examination, the figure in the mirror did not look like her. The eyes did: they looked forlorn and lost. But they also looked like they were peering through the holes in an edifice shaped like her, that moved and acted like her, that was otherwise a jail cell with spikes on all the interior walls. She recognized nothing but those eyes.

She would have lingered at the mirror, and likely begun weeping again, but then, against her will, her body began to dress.

The embassy's communal dining room was a functional space where the night's offerings were served on buffet tables and claimed by indentured who gathered at various four-sided

tables. Apparently there was no set eating time, because there were only a few indentures present, all at tables where every seat was taken. As a small mercy, Pendrake was nowhere to be seen; she either didn't mix with these lowly representatives of her will, or she preferred to eat at some time other than the schedule followed by these particular people. This didn't mean that Cort wouldn't have to eat opposite her, behaving herself, any number of times in the days and years to come: a prospect she found nauseating.

Driven to nod at the few embassy personnel she'd met, who no doubt saw her as a prime mover in the still-ongoing execution of their colleague and had no particular desire to pursue conversation, Cort made her way to the spare buffet and selected a few items that looked edible enough. She didn't care about the flavor, and in fact doubted that she'd taste any of it. The command was to eat. When she had a sufficient assortment of foods her legs carried her back to an unoccupied table, where, once she sat, her hands began the mechanical task of feeding her body with nutrition.

She was about a third of the way into the meal when other hands lowered a tray before the seat opposite hers. "Hello, Counselor. Do you mind?"

Cort's preference for dining alone, already violated, did not manifest itself in the transcription's controlled response. "No, of course not. Sit down."

Kearn sat, flashing her a quick smile that turned somber almost at once, as she remembered the reason Cort had come to this planet in the first place. She looked different wearing clothes appropriate for the temperatures inside the embassy than she had traveling around Caithiriin's frigid natural air; looser, friendlier. She'd released her curly hair from its binding and freed it to dangle to her shoulders on both sides of her fresh, heart-shaped face.

She said, "I still can't believe he chose the way he did."

Cort wanted to say (and surprised herself by actually saying), "I'd prefer not to talk about it."

"I understand. No shop talk at dinner." Kearn stabbed at her meal with a fork. "I heard you'd be staying on for a while. I'm glad."

Cort wanted to say (and surprised herself by actually saying), "You are?"

"Sure. Why not? A place like this, we can all use somebody new, once in a while. I guess you're the newbie, now. And that's not bad. You're not one tenth as awful as you encourage people to think."

Cort wanted to scream, *Are you blind? This isn't me! This isn't even close to being me! This is a meat puppet with me trapped inside it! Look past my face, you stupid cow, and see what's actually there behind it!* Instead, not raising her voice at all, she flashed a warm grin and said, "Don't tell anybody."

"I won't. What did make you decide to stay, anyway?"

There had to be something she could say. It couldn't be anything overt, because the transcription mind would reject anything overt in favor of a response much less revealing . . . but she had already noticed that it didn't balk at small rebellions. There had to be an idea she could come up with, that the transcription would also come up with and find innocent enough to pass on.

She said, "I suppose I'm tired of traveling."

"I can understand that," Kearn said. "But why stop here, of all places? New London's civilized. Somebody like you could have gotten an administrative job there and spent her off hours enjoying herself."

*Something. Anything. It doesn't have to be anything big. It can be small.*

"You're crying."

Tears had indeed spilled, but Cort found herself flashing a reassuring grin, utterly at odds with the screams taking place inside. "It's nothing. Just tension. The result of a bad day."

"The worst," Kearn agreed, buying the explanation, not following it to where Andrea Cort would have sacrificed one of her arms to lead her. "It's got to be hard, to lose a life and wish there was something you could have done to save it. One reason I could never imagine doing what you do."

*No! I don't want you to sympathize with me! I'm only three feet from you! Make the leap! See what's in my head!*

Kearn selected a vegetable strip from her plate, dipped it in the white sauce that went with it, and bit into it, swallowing before she went on. "But, again: why leave New London?"

New London was Cort's home. She was not comfortable there because she was not comfortable anywhere; but the city was the place she knew best, the place she'd come to consider home base in spirit as well as profession. She found herself saying, "I don't like it there."

Kearn frowned. "You like it here more?"

No! "Not really."

"But you transferred here. To a post where you'll have next to nothing to do."

*Not willingly! Dammit, see!*

Cort's shoulders shrugged, without her consent; her hands made a fluttery *so-what* gesture, without her consent; her mouth released a noncommittal grunt, without her consent. Her vision blurred again, as more tears spilled. "Maybe I'll find more to do here than you think."

The bridge of Marys Kearn's nose wrinkled, as her brows knit in an expression of extreme dubiousness. "These are very . . . short answers coming from you, Counselor . . . and you're crying again. Is there something I'm not authorized to know?"

Yes! "Yes."

"Does it have to do with the treatment?"

Yes, *dammit! See it! See what's going on with me!* "I can't say."

Cort stabbed at her meal with a fork, acquired a bite-sized morsel, and brought it to her mouth, her jaw moving up and down as if without any sense that nutrition was being absorbed. It was not bad food. Whoever handled the job of preparing it had known what to do, to bring out the flavor, to maximize the pleasure that a talented hand could wring from even the simplest ingredients. But the satisfaction of a meal felt a million light years away.

Cort could focus on nothing but the three little wrinkles that now stabbed upward from the bridge of Marys Kearn's nose, as the knitting of her brows became persistent.

"Is there anything you can tell me?" Kearn said, at last.

Something. Something small. A tiny idea the transcription could have too, that its filters would not see fit to censor.

And then Cort had it: a word so tiny and yet so blatant a clue that she despaired of hearing it come from her own lips.

It stunned her by arriving. "Well, let's just say that I can't."

*See it! See what I'm telling you!*

Kearn's forehead-wrinkles smoothed, as she retreated. ". . . okay."

The two women spent the next minute dining in companionable silence, Cort screaming inside, and Kearn concentrating on her meal, no doubt casting about for something else to say. Cort feared that that she'd blown whatever last chance she'd been given, aware that even as she sat here compelled to pretend that nothing was wrong, her brain matter continued to rewire itself, bringing her closer and closer to the time when there would be no means of escape.

Then Kearn's gaze flickered toward her again. "You know," she said, "you may be tired of it, but I've always wanted to see New London, just once. Talking to you might be as close as I'll ever get. What's it like?"

*Say it!* she begged the transcription. *Have the same idea and say it!*

"Well," Cort said, dragging out the word, "it's a cylinder world, you know. Central sun along the hub, a planned garden of a colony around the outer rim. The horizons curve upward, everywhere. But there's green, everywhere you look . . . and it's always warm, except for a couple of planned winter days, a few days per calendar year."

Kearn ate another veggie stick. "You must like that."

"Well," Cort said, wishing she could give the word more emphasis, and despairing at the degree to which the mind running her body flattened it, "what's not to like? I love that it's the middle of everything, the center of the whole human race, or at least as much as one as we allow ourselves to have. I've never liked crowds much, but I love just walking from my little apartment to the Corps headquarters, on surface streets; seeing all the different kinds of faces around me, knowing how different people are, wondering how many different cultures they come from. It's . . . *well*, it's enough to make me overlook all the terrible things we sometimes do to one another."

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The three little lines at the bridge of Kearn's nose had reappeared. "But you just said you *didn't* like it there."

*Come on! Do I have to say "well" another two dozen times before you get it?*

"I'm not fond of the company," Cort said.

Then either the imperative to conceal her condition or the order to get her work done tonight kicked in. It was impossible to tell which. The transcription had its own reasons, reasons it had no particular reason to share with her. She found herself flashing the most disarming grin possible *no* and standing up *no* and picking up her tray and saying, "Anyway, this has been great, but I just remembered I have an assignment to finish before I go to bed tonight," the nonsense just spilling from her without her input, "I hope we can make more time for this later," *stop it stop it stop it*, a few more inconsequential pleasantries spilled before her legs carried her across the room and her arms dumped the remains of her half-eaten, barely-remembered meal into the disposal bin, both without any input from her, *no*, an abyss of absolute madness opening up before her, her sanity starting to crack at the edges, until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and was turned against her will to find a stricken Marys Kearn saying, "If I'm wrong about this, I apologize, but I'm afraid I have to punch you in the face."

Cort watched as if from a million miles away as Kearn drew her arm back, telegraphing her blow in the way an inexperienced fighter does, and inside she could think of about a dozen ways she could evade or block the attack with ease. Anger flared in her, the way it always did whenever violence was directed her way.

Instead she watched and did nothing as the fist came right at her, a missile that she should have had no difficulty dodging.

Instead, it impacted without meeting opposition. Cort hit the floor hard, aware as she rose with blood on her lips that half the indentures in the room had risen to their feet, aghast at the sudden injection of violence into their quiet meal. Marys Kearn stood above her, massaging her closed fist in the manner of a woman unaccustomed to violence who had just discovered, for the first time, how much solid punches can hurt those who hurl them.

Andrea Cort turned to the others in the room and said what, in this particular circumstance, she might have said anyway. "Don't worry about it. This is a private matter. It's not going any further than this."

Then she stood, dusted herself off, and faced Kearn, thinking one more thing, *say one more thing, give her one more thing to let her know she's right. Just one more thing.*

Something that obeyed the transcription's imperative, of defusing violence without further engagement.

"You're right," Cort said. "I deserved that. I apologize."

Then she smiled.

*Well, I'd better head back to my quarters now. I have work to do.*

\* \* \*

The next few hours were the longest in a life that had known any number of agonizing waits. Rewriting her dispatch to Artis Bringen took only a few minutes of it. The rest was spent agonizing over what she otherwise had no means of knowing, what must be happening elsewhere over these long and excruciatingly isolated hours. Had Kearn jumped to the wrong conclusion? Did she think that Cort had done this to herself? Would she be stupid enough to bring her suspicions to Pendrake? Would somebody bring Pendrake the news of the incident in the dining room, giving her the warning she needed to protect her crime from the only person in a position to figure it out? If so, was Pendrake already working out some kind of charge she could bring against Kearn, to justify having her fixed in the same way Cort had been fixed?

Torture. Hours spent screaming inside, while the second mind making Cort's decisions for her saw to it that she behaved herself and spent a quiet evening, finishing her letter, organizing her thoughts on the matter of the agenda Pendrake wanted her to pursue, listening to some music, and then finally, without any fuss at all, lying down to sleep.

She did not, of course, actually sleep.

She just lay in bed, obeying the pattern of behavior she would if she were asleep, her eyes closed against her will, the terror inside her building until she craved the release of death.

\* \* \*

The next morning, she rose on schedule, showered, then dressed and went to the dining room for breakfast. Nobody sat with her, though Marys Kearn walked in once, met her gaze, then shuddered and walked away, foregoing the meal. Cort took her time over breakfast and bussed her table in time for her early-morning meeting with the ambassador, actually arriving a few minutes early, which obliged her to stand at the door, patiently waiting.

As it turned out, Pendrake was a few minutes late getting to her own office that morning and arrived carrying a coffee cup and a malignant smile of approval. "Glad to see you're so prompt. I approve of that quality."

Cort's answer was polite and respectful. "Thank you, Ambassador."

They went inside, where Cort stood with folded hands while Pendrake made herself comfortable at her desk and called up the text of the letter Cort had edited on her instructions the previous evening.

It took Pendrake all of thirty seconds to make her way through it. "Well, this is much better. I see a couple of points that might benefit from tinkering, but nothing really worth complaining about. Together with my letter, this should take care of any further questions your Mr. Bringen might have."

"I'm afraid we're not finished, though."

Pendrake frowned. "What's the problem?"

"I was not satisfied with this draft and produced another one early this morning."

The ambassador rolled her eyes. "You should have shown me that one first, then. I don't have time to waste reviewing every piddling little step you take between the initiation of a project and its successful completion."

"I'm sorry, Ambassador."

"That doesn't give me back my wasted time. Where is it?"

Cort tapped her hyltex link. "Here it comes."

The holographic text above Pendrake's desktop flickered as the old version was replaced with the new one. Even before it hung there long enough for a single word to be read, it was visible as a different draft, because it consisted of four paragraphs longer and denser than the ones Cort had completed before going to sleep.

Pendrake had time to sight-read several words in the first sentence before she looked up, a terrible comprehension dawning in her eyes. She leaped up with enough force to send her chair toppling backward to the floor. The fight-or-flight impulse settled on *fight*, and she circled her desk in a frenzy, launching herself at Cort in an attack that she must have thought her superior bulk guaranteed victory.

What followed was downright embarrassing.

In her life, Cort had defended herself against murderers of flesh and blood. She had absorbed blows and retaliated with more punishing ones. She'd entered this room expecting no challenge, and now experienced no challenge, taking down a woman whose familiarity with combat was limited to a holographic simulator at a beginner's setting. She sidestepped the wild lunge with ease, robbed Pendrake of breath with a blow to the throat, robbed her of balance with a heel to the ankle and of fight by seizing the hair in the back of her head and driving her face forward into the desktop.

She might have done a lot more than that, given the opportunity, but that's when Marys Kearn and the two male colleagues she'd enlisted to the cause came running in, their own fists raised, prepared to intervene if by some chance it had been Pendrake who won the advantage.

The three of them stared at the scene they found: a dazed Pendrake on her hands and knees, bleeding from a fresh gash in her forehead, a furious and red-faced Andrea Cort towering over her, trembling with hunger for some excuse to hurt her some more.

"Well," Kearn said, without thinking. Then she heard what she had just said and winced. "That was pretty definitive."

"The physical confrontation was moot," Cort said. "It was never going to be a problem."

"I can see that," Kearn said. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

One of the men behind Kearn said, "Still need us?"

"Not here," she said without looking at him. "Wait in the hallway. Keep anybody else from coming in. You don't want to get any more involved in this than you already are."

Despite everything Kearn's two friends had been told, and despite what they'd witnessed with their own ears the previous night, she was correct. This was still a mutiny . . . and it was far safer being at the edge of a mutiny than at the center of it. They left with relief, closing the office door behind them.

Cort circled the desk and read the floating text. "ATT: ARTIS BRINGEN. BELOW YOU WILL FIND DOCUMENTATION OF A NUMBER OF SERIOUS CHARGES I WANT FILED AGAINST AMBASSADOR VIRINA PENDRAKE OF THE CONFEDERATE MISSION TO, blah, blah, blah, RELIEVED OF DUTY, blah, blah, GROSS MISCONDUCT, blah blah blah, and so on." She tapped the hyltex connection at her throat, flicking the letters off, before coming back around the desk to face the kneeling woman with folded arms. "In case you haven't figured it out, that means you're under arrest, you intolerable bitch."

Pendrake moaned, rubbed her injured forehead, and glanced up at her two scowling captors, seeking room for negotiation and finding none. "When . . . did you . . . ?"

"Last night," Cort said. "Long after everybody else was asleep. Same time you picked, the night you fixed me. Marys enlisted help and together with her two friends outside overpowered me, drugged me, and got me to the Xe. He turned out to be very upset when he found out that Confederate law didn't sanction your personal version of justice. He had no problem ordering the immediate emergency removal of my device."

"I was afraid he wouldn't," Kearn said. "I thought he'd take too much satisfaction in ordering the treatment for a human, any human. It turns out that he also has a sense of honor . . . or self-preservation, if you prefer. The last thing he wanted was to be the center of his own diplomatic incident, when your over-reach was reported. He was *eager* to help. He even apologized."

Cort's could barely contain her fury. "And they got it out of me barely in time, too. I only *just* survived the procedure. You know what the redeemer told me, afterward? That it turns out human beings grow their new neural connections a lot faster than Caith do. I was supposed to have another week left. The redeemer said I would have been beyond help in another forty-eight hours."

Pendrake's terrified gaze was now flickering from Cort, to Kearn, and back again, as if driven to debate over which of the two constituted the bigger threat. "B-but . . . how did you even manage to tell her . . ."

Cort saw no reason to go into all the things that had gone right with the conversation in the dining hall. "Information's like water, Ambassador. It cuts its own channels, no matter how carefully you try to contain it. Given the impression she'd formed of me on our one day together, and our briefing on the Caith treatment still fresh in her mind, Kearn here was able to discern what was wrong with me in one brief conversation. I'm just fortunate that she could also figure out that you were not the one to ask for help."

Kearn's righteous fury was a less evolved version of Cort's own. "That much was easy, Ambassador. You were the only person who stood to benefit from the Counselor staying on. Plus, if you don't mind me saying, I had a bad feeling about you from the first moment I met you."

Cort flashed one of her rare uncomplicated smiles. "Yes. It appears that Marys here is wasted in her current career path, not when she could be a lot more useful in the prosecutor's office. She has a frightening knack for discerning patterns and turning tangled evidence into straight lines. I intend to talk her into requesting a transfer and sponsoring her training in my department. I think she'll find the work, not to mention the environment of New London, a lot more enjoyable than her position here."

Pendrake moaned again, rubbed her head some more, and said, "Varrick—"

"Oh, him? I'm actually glad you mentioned him. He's the single detail that leaves you most screwed. The Xe informed us during our visit. It turns out that your resident murdering thief was on the extreme lower end of the survival spectrum, and lasted only about a fourth as long as expected. It wasn't so much the growing weight, which may not have even been uncomfortable yet, so much

as the unrelenting terror. A few hours of staring oblivion in the face and the poor sick son of a bitch pretty much jettisoned his will to live. The Xe said it happens sometimes.”

As if in hunger for some form of justification she could find in all this, Pendrake blurted, “He was going to die eventually anyway.”

Kearn made a disgusted noise and looked away.

Cort said, “True. But your understanding of the Caith rivals your understanding of ethics for sheer idiocy. They’re not without their own capacity for moral outrage. True, the man was already sentenced to death—and yes, granted full understanding of what the Caith treatment entailed, he might well have chosen that death as his preferred alternative—but by handing him over to the Caith under false pretenses, you turned an execution planned by the state into your own personal killing of convenience. The Xe was most upset to find out that you’d taken such terrible advantage of him. He didn’t appreciate being reduced to a weapon in your hands. He was so upset, in case, that he intends to charge you with murder.”

Terror flared in Pendrake’s eyes. “That’s a stretch. I’ll fight it.”

“Sure,” Cort said. “You can do that. That’s your right. You might even win. But then what happens? You take one step out of their jurisdiction and find yourself facing Confederate law next.

“And there, Ambassador, your situation becomes far worse.

“The instant you’re in my power, I see to it that you get charged not just with murder, but also with assault, kidnapping, false imprisonment, and slavery. Maybe half a dozen other serious charges; I haven’t compiled a full accounting yet. In order to make them all stick, I’ll be forced to tell my superiors everything that happened here, and that’ll get you declared such a security risk that any sentence you receive will be spent in the kind of place where we only send people too dangerous to ever be permitted any further contact with other human beings. You’ll spend the rest of your life locked in a windowless cell, with no way of telling the difference between night and day, nobody to talk to, nothing to do but feel your mind fragment. I promise you. For you, Caith justice is better. You might as well surrender to it.”

Pendrake heard this, and absorbed it, and clung to one last hope: “You don’t dare. If you tell your superiors, word gets out. If I go on trial here, I’ll make sure word gets out. Either way, people will find out about the treatment. Everything you were afraid of will come true.”

“Also correct,” said Cort. “Either way, billions suffer. But if those are the only options, then at least we’re comforted by the knowledge that the human race now encompasses trillions. For everybody who suffers because this technology gets loose, there’ll be others who still manage to escape it; others still whose worlds will refrain from using it. As a species, we’ve swallowed fouler medicine and survived. As a species, we’ll survive this.

“And on top of that I have to consider: right now, *you’re* the most pressing threat. If you’re not removed with all possible haste, the word gets out anyway. Everything will be just as bad, with the extra added intolerable consideration of you getting away with what you tried to do.

“And besides,” she said, her voice taking on the chatty tone of a shared confidence, “I really do think you underestimate just how much my hatred for you factors into my decisions, now. I don’t retain much of a rational sense of perspective at the moment. After what you’ve done to me, I find seeing you get what you deserve more pressing than what *might* happen to billions. I’m willing to take the risk. Trust me. I’m almost eager for it.”

Pendrake lowered her head and sat shaking for several seconds until the time for bargaining began. She appealed to Kearn, who had stood apart during the entire recitation, wearing a face just as stony as the counselor’s. “Can’t you help?”

Kearn’s voice was a symphony of eloquent loathing. “Why would I even want to?”

“You can’t take this as personally as she does. You have to see what she’s risking . . .”

Kearn shook her head. “I think I’m the best judge of what I’m willing to take personally, Ambassador. I like her. And I don’t like you.”

The ambassador buried her head in her hands, shuddered, and, groping for a handhold on the edge of her desk, pulled herself back to her feet. The other two women stood apart as she found her way back to the cabinet, removed the bottle Cort had come to hate, and set it down on the desk. They watched as she set her chair upright again and collapsed into it, with a finality suggesting that

all of her ability to support her own weight had fled, and would never again return to her. They let her squeeze four drops of the powerful euphoric into a glass, drink it, and enjoy a brief moment of exquisite pleasure before, too soon, it faded and left her in the same trap she'd inhabited before. They were prepared to stop her if she drank more, but she thought better of it, putting the bottle away before placing her hands palms down on the desktop. "All those things you said, Counselor . . . those are all things you *can* do. But they're not what you'd *prefer* to do. Are they?"

"No."

"I could tell. That letter was a draft. You haven't sent it, have you?"

Cort shook her head. "No."

"Then there has to be something you want. We can negotiate."

Cort stared down the ambassador, hating everything she stood for in this world, hating especially that she continued to draw breath. "What I *want*," she spat, "is the pleasure of ripping your throat out with my bare hands. But the legal repercussions would destroy me. I'll satisfy myself with what I can *have*."

"I can appreciate that," Pendrake said. "And that is?"

Cort said, "I can offer you two alternatives to prosecution.

"The less preferred of the two: Kearn and I leave this room for ten minutes. You kill yourself. You don't leave a note. You just find some way to die. You're an imaginative woman; you can come up with something . . . perhaps an overdose of that awful orange stuff, if an overdose is possible. You become one of those mysterious cases of sudden self-destruction that occur every once in a while, and are never explained to anybody's satisfaction. Kearn will see to it that her friends outside support the story. I won't raise any objections.

"This would, I admit, give no small degree of pleasure. The only difficulty I have with this option is that it still leaves us with the problem we started with—keeping this treatment out of human hands.

"The preferred option: survival. You decide you want to live, at any cost. You come with us and pay a discreet visit to the *Xe*, pleading guilty to charges that he will keep from the official records in exchange for your promise to submit to immediate treatment. You allow us to take you to the redeemer and you take the treatment. You come back here. You retain your position. You stay quiet. We watch you for a week or so, until we're certain the effects have become permanent. You go back to doing the same things you were doing anyway, living your life, pursuing what's left of your mediocre career without your dangerous capacity for acting on malice or ambition.

"But from now on, you operate with only one priority, under my explicit orders: finding some acceptable and discreet means of bringing our relationship with these people to an end. You send me regular reports on your progress. You take what satisfaction you can from the knowledge that you're doing some good for the human race. In a few years, with this place in your past, you retire wherever you would have chosen to go anyway, and live in peace. All that time, you live your life as a spectator, but at least you still get to live it. And you never hear from me again."

Cort's voice cracked as the anger and hurt overwhelmed her. "These options will only remain available for the next ten minutes. Otherwise, I start the legal machinery and let what happens, happen. Is that *goddamn* clear?"

Pendrake used a knuckle to wipe at the corner of her eye. "Yes. Thank you. It's understood."

"We'll let you get to it, then. Goodbye. Maybe we'll see you alive again. Maybe we won't."

Cort and Kearn left the room, shutting the door behind them, nodding at the two men standing guard but moving past them to the end of the corridor, where Andrea Cort released the breath she'd been hoarding and fell against the wall, chin trembling.

Marys Kearn hovered over her protectively, clearly half-expecting a further surrender to gravity, not relaxing it even after it became clear that Cort was steadier on her feet than she looked. Noting this, but not commenting on it, Cort had the distant, analytical thought: *this must be what having a friend is like*. She could not help rejecting the label itself as inappropriate, in her case—she had no room in her life for friendship—but was able to find some enlightenment in the principle: a datum she might be able to use, someday, in her work.

After a minute or two, in what appeared to be more an attempt to fill the silence than anything else, Kearn asked: "Were you actually serious about recommending me for transfer?"

Cort managed a breathless, "Yes."

"I'm honored. But I'm not certain I want it. Not if I have to think the way you do, all the time."

"If you do come to New London," Cort said, "I think you'll find that the majority of the counselors you'll meet are significantly more human than I am. I'm my own piece of work. But the decision's yours. I just want you to know that the offer's there."

"All right," said Kearn.

But there was something else, and as the minutes passed, Kearn made a number of false approaches, each time retreating from the issue just before trusting it to words. Cort didn't prompt her; she just let the process take its time, following the thought process with every sideways glance, every suppressed interjection, every moment when the decision was made, and then rejected. It was beautiful, she thought. That's what life for any sentient being should be: the constant consideration and selection of options.

Then, still circling the issue, Kearn said, "I think she's going to decide to live."

"Oh, I don't doubt that at all. A creature like that can't conceive of the world without her in it. She also can't conceive of a world where she isn't really in control, even if she's not supposed to be. She'll choose the Caith treatment believing that she's really putting one over on us, and imagine she's scratched out a victory, up until the moment she has to live with it and finds out how little power she truly has."

Another hesitation, and Kearn finally arrived at the terrible place she'd been avoiding. "I noticed: as angry as you got in there, you never once told her what it was like for you, what it was going to be like for her. You never even referred to it."

At the other end of the corridor, Pendrake's office door slid open.

"No," said Andrea Cort, as she went to receive the ambassador's decision. "I sure didn't."