

# A Stab of the Knife

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## Adam-Troy Castro

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*Draiken has previously appeared in Analog in “Blurred Lives” (January/February 2018), “The Soul Behind the Face” (October 2016), and “Sleeping Dogs” (July/August 2015). Andrea Cort has most recently appeared in “The Coward’s Option” (March 2016) and alongside Tasha Coombs in “Tasha’s Fail-safe” (March 2015). (More history on pg. 42.)*

The takedown defines the phrase *coming out of nowhere*.

Draiken, who was trained not to enter any space without first accessing it for potential angles of attack, doesn’t see it coming at all.

On this trip, he is supposed to be a businessman seeking government contracts, and so he is doing what business people do when traveling in support of their enterprises: staying at a hotel. His room is at the midpoint of a long straight corridor, lined by doors. It is a classical space, identical to any number of others that have existed on any number of worlds for thousands of years; a form that follows function, altered from the general model only when some local designer feels like showing off. It would have been comprehended perfectly by guests at a similar establishment, from a hundred years back, or a thousand.

He has seen no other guests since his walk from the elevator. He’s registered no doors opening, nobody entering the hall from either side, nobody approaching rapidly in order to close with him in the time it takes for him to reach his door and speak the admittance code.

One moment his assailant is nonexistent, the next he is looming in Draiken’s peripheral vision, his powerful right hand reaching for Draiken’s neck.

Draiken spins, recognizes the man as one of the persons of interest he’s been trailing, realizes from this that his operation has gone wrong, and out of a variety of possible counterassaults instantly selects a crippling jab to the throat.

The man parries the blow with no difficulty at all.

Draiken has spun to face him, though, and so he is unprepared when with supernaturally perfect timing, the door to his room retracts into the wall, and a smaller and more delicate arm

emerges to affix a buzzpatch to the base of his neck.

It's a fast-acting paralytic, one that spreads numbness from the point of contact.

By the time Draiken feels the first effects, they have spread past his shoulders and are crawling down the muscles of his back. He aims a weak, uncoordinated blow at the woman in the doorway, who also parries it with no difficulty.

She wears the firm but sympathetic expression of the caretaker of animals who does not take it personally when the creature in her care resists the application of medicine; she knows that it is terrifying to the animal, but also that this cannot deter her from getting the hard part out of the way as quickly as possible. She actually mouths the word, *Sorry*.

He is not used to getting apologies from his enemies, but okay.

He is useless within two seconds, unable to stand in less than five.

They catch him as he falls.

As darkness comes, he registers that both man and woman are, as per their observed habits, dressed as if they find it a virtue to get as close as they can to nudity without quite arriving there. Thin strips of metallic silver, light enough to reveal the shape of what lies beneath, cover their midsections. The man's chest is bare; the woman uses the same silver material to cup her left breast, but not her right. Both have covered their neck and their shoulders with the same material, which looks less like fabric than form-fitting paint. Both man and woman have what are, despite the intervening millennia since the abandonment of the homeworld, still called Asian features, in both cases to beautiful effect, though the silvery bristles they both have as hair are as odd an aesthetic choice as streetwear that resemble bathing suits. Even on New London, a diplomatic hub where most visitors affect whatever's fashionable on the worlds they come from, exhibitionism on that scale is pretty much showing off.

His last thought is that he might be about to die. It's a reasonable thing to worry about. He's dealt with kill teams before, sometimes surviving only after spilling blood, sometimes getting away with the spilled blood his own. A couple of times, put out the way he's been put out today, he went under aware that it was quite possible that he might not be waking up, at all. Always, he felt a vague disappointment in a life that had come to this. Always, when consciousness returned, it might have been under terrible circumstances, but it still arrived as a pleasant surprise, confirmation that at the very least he had something to work with.

When he wakes, he finds himself in his own hotel room, or at the worst one identical to it, which seems unlikely. His captors would have had little reason to move him, let alone bring along his one simple traveling bag, if all they were going to do is transfer him to an identical room with the bag occupying the same corner of an identical dresser. The lights have been turned down low, and the atmosphere is gloomy but for a wedge of light escaping the corner bathroom. He can hear someone moving around in there, running water.

Draiken himself is now what a colleague used to sardonically call a "floating head," in short, a temporary quadriplegic thanks to a spinal block at the base of his neck. (Of course, it might be permanent for all he knows, a lingering misnomer left over from the days when actual spinal damage was a life sentence, not only as long as it takes him to get somebody to drag him to an AIsorce Medical kiosk.) There's plenty of reason to believe his condition temporary and artificial, because he retains enough physical sensation and balance below shoulder levels to keep from sliding out of a chair, which has no armrests or other impediment to a body otherwise totally at the mercy of gravity. He's been in this state before, and it's annoying but familiar, again welcome at the very least because it establishes his captors as not the type to kill him right away.

The water stops running. The beautiful woman with the spiky silver hair emerges, unsurprised to see him awake. She offers him a light smile. She is no longer dressed in the lopsided bikini but in a new outfit, considerably more conservative: a tight gray jumpsuit that covers her from her neck to her ankles, but for her right arm, which it leaves bare. The skin there is sleek and tan over the developed musculature of an athlete, leaving open the question of whether her physical gifts are naturally acquired or enhanced by surgery.

She says, "I'm happy to see that you're feeling better."

"Why?"

“Why not? I take no particular pleasure in the use of force. I’m just skilled at it.”

“I’m sorry it was such an inconvenience for you.”

“See? I hope that once we get past this we can move forward as friends.”

He gets the clear impression that she’s serious. “Do you think that’s likely?”

“No. But it is still something I can hope for.”

Damn. She is serious. “How long have I been out?”

“Three hours.”

“It feels like more.”

“I would have no reason to lie to you about so small a thing, not in these circumstances. If it’s any consolation, the dose was expected to put you down for about five, but failed to compensate for what appears to be an iron constitution. My compliments to you, Mr. Draiken.”

“Thank you. Why did you need me down for so long?”

“We didn’t. But we respected your capabilities and were willing to accept the inconvenience of having to babysit you for so long as long as you were neutralized with a minimum of violence.”

“That was accommodating of you.”

Another brief smile. “I think you’ll find that we have no intention of making this ordeal more unpleasant than it has to be. I for one hope that we can get what we want out of you in record time and send you back on your way.”

“You *for one*. I presume that there’s some interpersonal disagreement on this?”

“Unfortunately, the woman I represent has been through a lot in her life and is not as attached as I am to ending this amicably. I can advise, but I still defer to her judgment.”

“Ah. That might get in the way of us becoming friends.”

“Again: I hope not.”

This is all familiar, the disconnect that goes along with being captured, the friendly veneer, the understated but very real threat of harm that goes along with it. In the past, with other enemies, such cordiality has always been there to provide the carrot that goes along with the stick, the illusion that his captors are perfectly willing to be reasoned with, as long as he obliges them by being reasonable.

What remains unresolved is whether this particular set of antagonists falls into such well-worn patterns because it fits the interrogation rulebook, even if they intend to kill him, or whether they’re just protecting their own interests and really do intend on treating him with something like fairness.

He still gets the distinctly odd impression that this one really is trying to be friendly.

He says, “Where is she, then? And your other half?”

“Down at dinner. We were all getting hungry and thought there’d be enough time to grab some, before you awoke. They know you’re awake, though, and are settling the bill early so they can join us as soon as possible.”

He doesn’t ask how she’s relayed the message. He *knows* how they know, understands that all communication between the bristle-haired woman and the bristle-haired man is instantaneous, or rather that there is no communication, because *communication* as the word is usually understood would be redundant. Instead he says, “I can use a sandwich or something, if you’re amenable to that. Being attacked, drugged, and paralyzed is hungry work, and even if I die tonight, I’d appreciate the comfort of a last meal.”

“I’ll arrange it.”

If she does, whatever action she takes is not visible. She settles in at the edge of the made bed and says nothing else while they wait for the other interrogators to arrive.

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This is actually Draiken’s second trip to New London in the past couple months.

His first visit was to reconnoiter and lasted four weeks Hom Sap Mercantile. He spent the first two familiarizing himself with the territory. It’s a highly civilized and well-funded cylinder world that has mostly escaped the terrible things that can happen to such places when the local economies falter and the environment is allowed to degrade. The habitat is comfortable, the

curved cityscape well-maintained, the streets as free of crime and corruption as it's possible for any space inhabited by those contentious, argumentative, and contrary creatures known as human beings. It's a showcase for how good life can be in the Confederacy, a model world designed to impress the other sentient species who maintain permanent embassies and enterprises there, and as a result he learned everything a tourist would need to know about its current layout in a little more than a week.

For the next stage of his overview, he moved to a less expensive hotel and spent another week exploring the places that the tourists never go—the industrial spaces where the machinery of civilization has been tucked away and the access tunnels that the humans among the maintenance crew use to keep their errands out of sight. Then he spent a week in the cheapest quarters available, a cubbyhole of the sort used by itinerants who have exhausted all their available funds, and familiarized himself with the station's more disreputable places, which included the smuggling routes dealers in forbidden things use to get from Point A to Point B, without detection.

At no time during this crash course in station geography did he breach the grounds of New London's single biggest holder of land, the headquarters of the Diplomatic Corps. He was aware that he might have to, eventually, but such penetration is the act of a man who's mastered his environment, and these were still the early stages—the time when it's best to take baby steps.

Only when he felt that he'd become minimally familiar with New London's nooks and crannies did he take the first transport out, travel a fair distance away, rendezvous with a contractor he'd left hiding in the system's Oort cloud, and through him transfer to another ship heading back in, this time wearing a new face and cover identity.

Now he was who he still pretends to be, a well-heeled traveler with no particular agenda taking in the same sights he did a month ago and showing only the polite interest of a tourist.

This time, he focused on his target. He discovered that she enjoyed breakfast on a certain café on a balcony overlooking the three hundred terraces of the Dumas Plaza, so he affected a liking for another café overlooking that one and made a habit of dining there, watching her. She always sat with the same pair of companions, the same ones who have just captured him. He noted how they always wore as little as they could get away with, while she preferred severe black suits. Tracking them from a distance, he mapped the usual route they took to their apparent offices in the Dip Corps campus, and how much time they usually spent there before emerging at about station sunset. He confirmed that they always ate at one of a small number of local restaurants, none fancy, before returning to the quarters they shared in one of New London's less tony residential sections.

The three were always inseparable in public, corroborating intelligence to the effect that the spiky-haired man and woman functioned as full-time bodyguards of the woman who prefers to dress in forbidding black suits. He gathered from the way they moved that they were formidable and began to formulate strategies for taking them out with minimal fuss, clearing the path to her.

After the three locked themselves in for the night, he returned to his hotel and collated his growing store of information. This is what he found out.

She was a high-ranking prosecutor for the Dip Corps, one her colleagues describe as brilliant, difficult, asocial, ruthless, and dangerously resourceful. She was officially a war criminal, thanks to participation in a bizarre massacre that took place when she was eight. At least two sovereign alien worlds she's been to are now under permanent military blockade, for reasons that remain classified but are heavily implied to have been her recommendation. In the past year or so, she has risen to a rank that his researches indicate never existed before, Counselor-At-Large, a position that allows her to travel freely and set her own agenda without Corps approval; it practically makes her an independent arm of the government, and this makes so little sense in the scheme of things that it drove him to seek three separate forms of confirmation before he was willing to accept that, yes, it appeared to be true. It was also suspicious as hell.

The most suspicious item in her background was a recent visit to Xana, the home world of the Bettelhine Munitions Corporation, whose ruling faction publicly treated her not just as

envoy but as honored guest, a strange way for them to treat a Dip Corps prosecutor, since the Confederacy and the Bettelhines have never gotten along.

This was not the first time the Bettelhine name had come up, in respect to Draiken's own agenda. His target's recent coziness with the family implies a connection worth investigation.

The bodyguards are Oscin and Skye Porrinyard, a man and woman who have had their personalities cybernetically fused, forming a new shared intelligence who exists in both their bodies simultaneously. This is fairly new technology that Draiken has never encountered before, as its proprietary sellers, the software intelligences known as the *Alsource*, only started introducing it into human space during his long years in exile on a world where nobody would have ever even considered partaking. As a man who's spent much of his life fiercely guarding his individuality, perhaps to a fault, he barely understands the motivation. But upon reading up on the procedure, he confirmed what it meant tactically—that the pair functioned as one person and that there will be no point in trying to turn one against the other, let alone in pursuing any strategies that rely on divide-and-conquer. They would be difficult opponents in any head-on confrontation.

He was still planning his approach, taking more time than was typical for him, when they beat him to it.

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Thirteen minutes after his conversation with Skye Porrinyard, the door retreats back into the wall, and the others enter. Like Skye, Oscin has changed clothing since taking Draiken down; he now wears a jumpsuit identical to that worn by his other half, except that in his case the arm it leaves bare is his left. The polite smile he flashes Draiken is identical to the one Skye displayed earlier. He says, "Hello."

"Hello," Draiken replies.

There is no particular malice in the other man's demeanor, only measured affability. He carries a quartet of food cartons, which would presumably include what's left of a pair of dinners cut short, another brought up for Skye, and even Draiken's sandwich. The implied presence of the sandwich doesn't impact Draiken's personal assessment of his chances of surviving this night, except as evidence that these people intend on employing the carrot as well as the stick.

The woman who enters behind Oscin is beautiful, in a harsh way; fierce, stern-eyed, and scowling. All the official images Draiken has of her depict short black hair with one lock long and dangling over one side of her face, but of late she's changed her look, for some reason, and now wears lush auburn locks that dangle to her shoulders. The style, emphasizing soft femininity, doesn't suit her.

All the overt hostility in the room comes from her.

She sits on the edge of the bed regarding Draiken with a measuring scowl.

He speaks mildly. "This is excessive, Counselor. I have not yet declared myself an enemy."

She says, "It makes no difference to me whether an enemy has declared himself. I've survived assassination attempts by strangers and by people who came pretending friendship. It's made me inclined to expect betrayal, unless I have pressing reason to believe otherwise."

"It seems like a sad way to live."

"It's the water in which I swim, sir. And I'd wager the same true of you. Your effectiveness against my companions might have been pathetic, but they were still able to assess your response time and judge in it the training of a man accustomed to fighting for his life."

He nods. "I commend them for being able to infer so much from such a minimal sample."

"You'll find that I make the most of observable data, as well." She announces this without sadness or self-pity, her demeanor that of a woman reporting a fact beyond contention. "For your benefit, sir: have you ever dealt with a cylinked pair before?"

"I've done some research of late, preparing from some version of this conversation, but I confess that they're still a relatively new phenomenon to me."

"Then let me demonstrate their nature, for your reference. Oscin? Skye? Say something to him."

Skye Porrinyard has already conversed with him as an individual, but now both Oscin and

Skye speak in perfect unison, uncanny in its precision. “Hello again, sir. I repeat what Skye said alone, when you woke in your current predicament. We have no intention of making this any more unpleasant than it has to be. We hope that you’ll assist us in this by cooperating.”

Draiken’s impressed, despite himself. He has seen people attempt simultaneous speech before: actors and singers, attendees at houses of worship. Sometimes they’re practiced to the point where they seem driven by the same will. But in those cases there’s just enough difference in their rates of delivery, even if constantly corrected, that their voices can be discerned as the product of different mouths. The Porrinyards do something else. Not precisely matching words but sharing tones and phonemes, they produce a voice utterly different from the ones they employ individually, one that appears to spring out of the empty air between them. “That does take some getting used to.”

“I know,” the counselor acknowledges. “The act still gets on my nerves from time to time.”

“Which is what makes it so fun,” the Porrinyards counter, with what looks like merriment.

“In any event,” the counselor says, “I establish what they are in order to point out for your benefit that their shared nature doesn’t just make them superb bodyguards; it also provides them great talent at triangulating the behavior of human beings and, in particular, at detecting lies. This is also a skill at which I excel, though my significant gifts are based in observation and logic, not their analysis of eye movements and other facial tics. I assure you that even if you do what most people cannot, successfully lie to one of us, you would have to be a truly gifted indeed to lie to the other. Between us, we are very difficult to fool.”

“Consider me forewarned, then.”

“Very well. Getting to it: you clearly know who I am.”

“I know who you’re reputed to be.”

“Say it so I know we’re talking about the same thing.”

“You’re Counselor Andrea Cort.”

“We have that point of consensus, anyway. Who *else* do you think I am?”

“I know you were born Andrea Cort. I believe that you might have aspects you haven’t shared with everybody who knows you.”

“That happens to be true of most people, sir. We are all multifaceted.”

“Speak for yourself,” the Porrinyards say. “I’m multifaceted only in the sense of having more than one face. As a personality, I’m *remarkably* without depths, if I do say so myself.”

Draiken admits, “I don’t even know what that’s supposed to mean.”

“I’m straightforward,” they reply. “Again, I hope you have the opportunity to find this out.”

If Cort is annoyed by this seemingly whimsical interruption, she doesn’t show it. Her gaze remains fixed on Draiken. “I repeat, sir: who else do you think I am?”

“I’m afraid I need some assistance with the question.”

“I am, to various people, a war criminal, a symbol of the Confederacy’s endless capacity for corruption, a murderer, an enemy of the state, an inconvenience, a Dip Corps asset, and a bounty.”

“Also,” the Porrinyards say, “a pain in the ass.”

Cort ignores this interruption as well. “Which of these brought you here looking for me?”

He says, “As of now, none of the above.”

“Who are you?”

“To echo you, Counselor, you know who I’m reputed to be.”

“You’re traveling under the name Liam Vireinja, and you claim to be a habitat engineer, visiting New London in pursuit of Dip Corps contracts. Who you really are remains an open issue, since you’ve conducted no real business while here, and have in fact done nothing during your two-stage visit to New London except prepare for this confrontation with me. I repeat: who are you?”

Draiken is impressed that she’s detected not only his current activities, when he’s been focused on tracking her, but also the earlier, more general information-gathering of his first, preparatory visit. “My birth name would mean nothing to you, I’m afraid. I think of myself as Draiken.”

"That is neither enlightening nor helpful. Who are you?"

"*Draiken* is about as far as that goes, unfortunately. My identity is fluid depending on my circumstances."

"I must have omitted the part of the conversation where I told you my lack of patience for games."

Were he capable of moving his arms, he would spread his palms, indicating nothing to hide. "I'm not playing games, Counselor. I'm speaking the absolute truth, admitting that I don't possess the easy answers most people provide when asked for biographical detail. For more years than I care to count, I've never been anyone in particular, except for who I pretended to be. You could say that being anyone is my skill set."

"A spy, then. Or assassin."

"At different times, yes."

She offers a barely perceptible nod. "Working for who?"

"That's just as unclear, even to me. Part of the reason I'm here. But I'm not necessarily your enemy, in any event. My mission here is my own, and it involves research, not assassination."

"That still doesn't make me feel any safer. Research into what?"

"For one: just why your name would come up, when I was questioning a very bad man."

Cort raises an eyebrow. "My name?"

"Yes, Counselor. I got it from a man named Silver, on a cylinder world named Liberty."

"I've never heard of the place, or of him. Why didn't you simply ask him why he would mention me?"

"I can't. He's dead now."

Her scowl narrows again. "Do people always die when you question them?"

"Not always. This one died of untreated natural causes, by his own choice. Old age, as it used to be called."

The Porrinyards twinkle. "Just how long was this interrogation, sir?"

"Our entire association was pretty much entirely a deathbed confession. I asked him some questions about this matter that interests me. He gave me your name, and recommended that I approach you with care. He appears to have been right about how formidable you are. I'm not a man accustomed to being detected."

The linked pair appears to take some pity on him. The character of their melded voice changes slightly, taking on more of Skye's softer tones. "I assure you, sir, you committed no obvious errors. You were quite professional, indeed suspiciously professional, at every moment. But one of the advantages of seeing the world from more than one set of eyes, as I do, is more efficient processing of detail. I first spotted you a week ago, and remembered you when I spotted you again one day later. When you appeared a third time, you became a person of interest. With the Counselor's approval, I took the prudent course and arranged some countesurveillance."

He says, "Official or unofficial?"

Andrea Cort resumes control of the conversation. "Suffice it to say that if I chose not to bring your activities to the attention of my nominal employers in the Dip Corps, it's because they subscribe to laws that limit what can be done to stalkers of their personnel."

"And you do not?"

"As I've told you, sir, I've suffered many attempts on my life. Too many. Three separate organized efforts, on just my last errand off-world. They came with a price in the lives of innocents. I've become too practical a person to always handle such matters according to Corps guidelines. Sometimes I'm obliged to take shortcuts. Just to let you know, I'm not mollified. I'm still considering extreme action, in your case."

He can't help it. He grins. "I believe I like you."

"That is also neither enlightening nor helpful."

He shakes his head. "Look at us, Counselor. I am clearly not currently equipped for an assassination. Your friends are clearly equipped to protect you. If I'm a threat, it's one you appear capable of handling."

"I believe you. I also believe that you could have contacted me without subterfuge, via the

New London directory. The worst I would have done to you, in that event, was tell you to go away. Now, I'm faced with the very real possibility that you're a threat to me, or to the Corps I serve. Giving you the benefit of the doubt might be suicidal."

"It might be," he says, calmly enough. "But if you cut off the end of this conversation prematurely, you'll never know what I came for, and I suspect that you're the kind of person who would not be able to live with that."

The Porrinyards surprise him by laughing out loud: a sound enchanting when it comes from both of them, her tinkling laugh a fine counterpoint to his deeper bellow. Unlike their speech, it sounds like the laughter of two people, even if it's too people so much in synch that they know one another to the marrow. "He has your number, Andrea."

"Oh, shut up," she says. But she is no longer wholly listening to them, or to him. She's processing. The way she tilts her head, right now, looks uncannily like she's listening to someone, a voice in her head as audible to her as the voices of Oscin and Skye must always be to each other. It is intense concentration, over in seconds, and when it is done, she seems to relax, though it would remain a profound mistake to mistake this for her being at peace. He suspects that, much like himself, this woman is always in a state of war, even in the absence of an identifiable enemy.

No obvious signal passes between herself and the Porrinyards, but Skye rises from the bed, passes him, and removes a small disk-shaped object from the base of his neck. An unpleasant tingling sensation, neural sediment, returns to his limbs, and he flexes his arms, relieved to enjoy mobility once again. By the time he is fully himself, Skye is a safe distance behind him.

They have not lowered their guard, not one of them. And this is only smart. Though he is not at all confident of being able to take down all three, starting from this position, he is reasonably certain that he could if he wished do mortal damage to at least one, before the others would be able to react.

Were this a suicide mission, he could even be reasonably assured of taking out the Counselor herself, with perhaps a 10 percent chance of escaping to fight another day.

This is something to keep in mind, because he has not yet decided what to do with her. With *them*, since the Porrinyards are apparently an inextricable part of the package. His initial ambitions are as harmless as promised, but then he has not gotten all the information he needs, and this can very easily change.

He stands, just to get some blood flow in his legs. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," the Porrinyards say, from opposite ends of the room—and even this far apart, the sound appears to be come from the midpoint of the space separating their physical bodies, indeed, from right next to him. It is an uncanny ability that unnerves even Draiken, a man unused to being unnerved.

Then Andrea Cort says, "I'm listening."

\* \* \*

The biggest problem, which he admits, is of course that while he was indeed directed to Cort as his next contact, the man who provided him with this information perversely failed to explain just what he could expect to gain from her.

He is left with no alternative other than telling his story, if not from the beginning, then nearer to the beginning than the present.

He explains that in the past he spent some time as a prisoner, being interrogated under torture at what is most easily called a reeducation camp. He explains that what he underwent was an attempt at what was once called brainwashing and that he barely escaped with his sanity intact; that after many years in hiding he came across the intelligence that the same parties responsible for his suffering were still at large somewhere in Confederate Space.

He specifies that one of the things he's found out is that they are still refining the science of mind control, and that they are disturbingly not alone, as there are now multiple powers who have made frightening advances in the field.

Cort stirs. "Is this what you're after, Mr. Draiken? The acquisition of such technology for your own ends? Would you fancy that capability, for your own use in whatever it is you do?"

“Far from it. I’ve been the victim. More than once. It’s left me with scars that will never heal. I think it’s obscene, and I want it destroyed wherever it exists.”

A shadow briefly passes over her stern features, giving him a fleeting glimpse of the forces that sculpted her into what she is. “I’ve been a victim too, Mr. Draiken. More than once. It’s left me with scars that will never heal. I also think it’s obscene, and I also want it destroyed wherever it exists.”

“It appears that we have some things in common.”

“Superficially, yes. But I am not quite ready to declare you a long-lost spiritual sibling yet. Please continue.”

He moves on past his recent ordeal on the world known as Liberty, wrapping up with the specific citation of her name by the dying man he knew as Silver.

The full narrative, itself as brief a summary as he can manage, takes almost two hours. Throughout it Andrea Cort listens in near silence, her dark eyes focused on him, her absorption of every detail total. He has seen concentration like hers before, but not often, and always at the command of skilled interrogators adept at probing all assertions for flaws. Her few questions only serve to refine his already formidable estimate of her intelligence. He knows he would rather have this woman as ally than as enemy.

When he indicates that he is done, he expects further interrogation, but instead she does what he least expects; she stands up and says, “Good night, then.”

He is stunned. “What?”

“I’m compelled to believe you, sir; it does not mean that I’m quite prepared, at this hour, to help you. This has been a long and stressful day, and I’m tired. If you refrain from harassing me, I’ll be in touch sometime tomorrow, when I have the energy. In the meantime, please let me set the pace.”

Skye returns to her side, serving as visible counterpoint to the larger but still twin-like Oscin, both Porrinyards smiling back at him with eyes that persist in measuring him from complementary angles. They even blink in unison, it seems.

They stay behind for a second, after their mistress leaves, their empathy palpable.

Oscin speaks alone. “You’re lucky. She likes you.”

Then Skye enters their vocal chorus, and they speak the next few words together. “So do I.” And then they leave.

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Draiken doesn’t trust Cort as far as he can throw her. He doesn’t need the fruits of his crash course in her history to know her type. She’s known extreme and intimate betrayal, not just once or twice, but often. She’s never known safety, and she locks most people out not just because she fears them doing the same, but because she’s aware that circumstances might require her to betray them first. He has no doubt that she possesses a grand talent for that black art, and that she does not allow moral considerations to place any governors on the ruthlessness with which she wields it.

All of this reminds him of his now absent old ally, Thorne; a dangerous comparison.

On the other side he has just one ameliorating factor:

Despite himself, he trusts the Porrinyards.

He doesn’t know why. They’re clearly loyal to her, but they have enough latitude in her presence to constantly prick her pretensions. They have considerable influence over her decisions and appear to be a moderating force. And yes, despite having been overpowered and imprisoned by them, he finds himself reciprocating their claim of liking him. This doesn’t mean that he’s safe from them or, for his part, that they’re safe from him, but it is a factor that will color things, moving forward.

The room is compromised, but given how carefully Cort must be keeping tabs on him, there’s no point in finding another one. Nor is it a bad thing, for the moment, that she knows where to find him. What he faces now is a choice between remaining here and meekly waiting for her, or leaving if for no other reason to document that he still can.

He finds he wants the illusion of freedom.

So he changes clothes to something a little more casual and goes downstairs.

The hotel is part of an entertainment complex with twenty bars and restaurants, many of them geared to habitats other than New London's generic human-neutral. He is not in the mood for anything neutral. Alternatively, he could go to the Bursteeni place, where he will be greeted with warmth and not left alone until he concedes eternal friendship. Or, if he wishes an evening of snotty condescension, he can submit to being likely the sole human willing to endure the attitude he'll receive at a smaller club run for the Tchi. Out of the several other options, he decides on a place influenced by the desert climes preferred by that ubiquitous alien race known as the Riirgaans.

He feels the hot, dry air, not quite set to sauna intensity but close, as soon as he enters the space, a room geared to the monotonous brown palate preferred by the dominant subculture of the species. Many Riirgaans sit at tables, absorbing their most popular light intoxicant, a scented vapor rising from a bowl of something that Draiken's never bothered to find out about. Few humans aside from the academically interested would, since the substance doesn't affect *homo sapiens*, for good or ill. But the combined scent is not unpleasant, and the music is relaxing, and there are so few humans, enjoying the establishment's other offerings, that chances are he will not be bothered. He takes a seat in one of the handful of booths with seats designed to accommodate the human rump, punches in his order for water laced with a mild stimulant capable of comforting him without affecting his judgment, and spends a few minutes listening to Riirgaan melodies.

He takes about three times longer to finish the first drink as most human customers would before ordering his second and is just beginning work on that when a stranger emerges from the murk, his tan-brimmed hat doffed and held respectfully in his hands. "Excuse me? Mr. Vireinja?"

Draiken immediately returns to his traveling persona, gruff and businesslike. "Yes? Do I know you?"

"I believe not. But I suspect that we have business in common. May I sit?"

Company is the last thing Draiken wants, but he gestures toward the seat opposite his own. "Please."

The stranger drops his hat on the table, and takes his seat. He is a compact individual with shiny black hair, a pale complexion, and eyes that would resemble saucers were they not determined to rest at a semi-lidded position. He is courtly, in a manner that strikes Draiken as antiquated, but there's also a jumpiness to him, the nervous energy of a man who is afraid that enemies are watching him but not quite practiced enough to hide it. "Excuse me."

"For what?" Draiken asks.

"I am aware that I give a poor first impression, and a worse second impression. Forgive me; I was the object of a minor legal dispute on a world I won't name, and suffered their traditional punishment, the installation of a tiny psionic transmitter that makes me an easy person for strangers to instinctively despise on sight. I assure you that without its influence this is not the impression you would have naturally."

"I tend not to form impressions at once," Draiken says, "even if I must warn you that I form them quickly. Out of sheer curiosity, I must ask: if you're no longer on that world, why not stop in at some clinic and have the offending device surgically removed?"

The stranger's grin is sickly, the look of a man trying to keep up a brave face during a public embarrassment. "Were I an individual with no responsibilities to anybody, I would of course do just that. However, I regularly do business with enterprises whose relations with that world would be irreparably harmed, were one of their associates to cheat that world out of what it considers justice." He flashes a nervous smile that fades immediately. "It is not a life sentence, fortunately. In a little more than months, the term of my punishment will be up, and the device will turn itself off. At that point I assure you I will become much more likeable, among members of the fairer sex in particular. They are quite fond of me, under normal circumstances."

He actually blushes a little, at this boast.

Draiken nods. This tends to eliminate one working theory of the stranger's reason for approaching him. And now that he's been in range for a while, he's apparently telling the truth about the device. There's a low-level buzz around him, one that renders him if not completely hateful then at least vaguely repellent, like a nagging odor neither pleasant nor unpleasant that would tip to the latter if identified. "I will try to keep in mind, Mister . . ."

"Lawray. Mr. Derausch Lawray. There is yet a third name, but most people here on New London cannot pronounce it. I prefer most friendly associates to call me Lawray, no honorific."

Draiken refrains from pointing out that he has not yet declared himself a friendly associate. "As I insist on the honorific for myself, I'll take the liberty of doing the same for you, Mr. Lawray."

"That will be acceptable, sir."

"Our relationship will still be a brief one unless you can clarify the nature of our mutual business."

Lawray smiles broadly. "Why, the Counselor, of course."

"Andrea Cort?"

"Please don't pretend that you don't know her. I am aware that for some time you have been following her and that she has rather forcibly visited you."

Draiken cannot resist a wry, self-deprecating grin at the operation that keeps acquiring complication; at this rate, it will be the most public job ever originally undertaken in stealth, of his entire career. "I'm genuinely gratified to find my travels such a universal source of fascination."

"Your origins are unknown to me, sir. My primary interest is in the Counselor, and that means I possess a secondary interest in those who associate with the Counselor."

"Why is that your business, Mr. Lawray? Can't a man have a quiet gathering of friends?"

"One can," Lawray says, "if one is the kind of individual who has friends. We both know that the Counselor is not. She is a notorious misanthrope, who would brook no social interaction at all were not some required for her work."

Draiken maintains a bored expression. "She seemed fond of the two she travels with."

"They are, as you should know if you met them, not quite human."

"They are unusual, I admit, but I found them fully human. Perhaps more human than I am."

Lawray's lips curl. "This is slicing the onion further than is useful. Your meeting with her was not a gathering of friends. What I observed of the prelude was two equally predatory parties, circling one another before contact is made. Am I wrong? Because if I am wrong and genuine warmth resulted, I will happily withdraw."

There is something clownish about this man, a vague absurdity that clings to him like another layer of clothing, but if he's managed to observe the covert dance between Draiken and his subject, without either party detecting him, he's more dangerous than he appears . . . and quite possibly not working alone. "What do you want with her?"

"I believe that I have found a source of potential profit, sir."

"For you?"

"Potentially, for both of us."

"Financial profit?"

Lawray titters. "Among other kinds."

A server approaches, forcing an interruption in the conversation. Draiken orders another glass of the stimulant-laced water. Lawray orders a more conventional alcohol-laced concoction. Within two minutes the drinks have arrived, and the pair imbibe, regarding each other with care.

After a while, Draiken says, "Who do you represent?"

"At this point, myself. I occasionally take on clients, but my approach to the current matter is, as in most things, speculative. I find that my profits benefit that way."

Draiken says, "This would tend to indicate a choice of clients. A highest-bidder situation."

Lawray titters. "You *are* clever, sir."

"Narrowing it down still further: you don't seek the Counselor's death—at least, not from your own hand. If you did somehow manage to pull off that trick before negotiating a price from

some interested party, then nobody among her collection would have any motivation to pay you.”

“This is elementary, Mr. Vireinja. I don’t run a charity.”

“You want something else from her. Blackmail strikes me as unlikely; she’s not the type to sit still for it. Information? Granted, she must have access to at least some classified intelligence, but also doesn’t strike me as the kind of compromised individual any intelligent information broker would bother trying to turn. Process of elimination suggests that you want to take possession of her, in some manner, only contacting potential buyers once she is safely in your hands.”

“Would something like this be a proposition that interests you?”

“I don’t have that desperate a need for money.”

Lawray titters softly, the laugh like a whisper shared only with himself, which crosses the table only because of a break in the alien music. “I have always found that such declarations grow progressively weaker as the potential profit grows more grandiose.”

“That is true,” Draiken admits.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of the good Counselor’s recent visit to Xana, the homeworld of the Bethehine Munitions Corporation. You do know that they are a sovereign power, correct? Not signatories to the Confederacy she serves; a commercial enterprise, long ago grown sufficiently powerful in and of itself that it functions as a monarchy. For all practical purposes, a bank, with coffers we might as well estimate as infinite.”

“And?”

Another little titter. “I believe you know the first rule of commerce, sir.”

Lawray retrieves his hat and begins to slide out of the booth. There is no immediate point in stopping him, because he is the type of man who will always have one more thing to say, and so he does, as he stands with that hat of his still politely gripped in his hands. “The enterprise does not wholly require your participation, sir, but I have been watching your skill at tradecraft and would nevertheless find your cooperation an asset. I will be in touch in a later time to determine your level of interest.”

Draiken says, “What if I want to locate you?”

“I will locate you, sir. I have already shown it within my capabilities.”

Lawray dons his hat and heads for the exit. Draiken is after him at once. He cannot tackle the smaller man in public, not without involving civilians and whatever this establishment might have in the way of security, but he can move quickly enough to gain ground, and does, to the point where he’s just a few steps behind when Lawray takes a hard right turn upon entering the public spaces beyond. It is a crowded evening in this complex filled with night spots, the path teeming with pedestrians human and other-than-human, the smiling faces of people looking forward to or coming from a good time, the unsmiling faces of races whose features are not meant for smiling. Between the loud music, the flashing lights, the hubbub of the crowd, and a curving sky that is also a busy cityscape glittering like a night filled with stars, the sensory overload is more than sufficient for any man evading a tail to get lost in; but Draiken is good at what he does, and so he spots Lawray’s familiar shape, topped with that familiar hat, entering a crowd that swiftly closes behind him.

Draiken judges the man’s trajectory and charts his pursuing course. He has tracked targets through raging street riots. He will not fail at tracking Lawray. He is aware of a dozen different efficient ways for the man to lose him. But he also knows his own capabilities and is prepared for all of these, including the one that actually occurs, a sudden assault from behind.

It is the second time in a matter of hours that somebody has attacked from Draiken’s blind spot. There is a difference, though. What the Porrinyards did, back at the hotel, was more or less magic. This new attacker is merely trained and formidable and wholly flawless in technique, and therefore fails at achieving surprise.

Draiken perceives the sudden motion coming from behind him and to the right. He sidesteps suddenly, the way people usually don’t if they’re making a beeline on a busy thoroughfare. The space he just vacated fills with a massive arm, hurtling by in the wake of a fist. Draiken seizes that arm by wrist and elbow and adds his own momentum, hurling its owner to the ground.

Even as he manages the trick, he feels the added strain it involves and knows that he's likely in big trouble.

A quick dodge-and-spin, measuring the shocked faces of the surrounding crowd, establishes that there aren't more attackers approaching from other directions. That's good, because the one he just tossed has incorporated a tumble into her fall, and is already rising to face him.

She rises.

And rises.

Were Draiken the kind of man who reacted to a formidable-looking enemy by saying *Holy Shit*, he would now react to the sight of this woman by saying *Holy Shit*.

Not long ago, he met a woman named Edifice, whose size had established a record he had imagined, and hoped, would remain unchallenged for a while. This one would challenge Edifice. Towering over him by a head and a half, she has massive shoulders and weight-lifter arms that strain at the cords of tight scarlet sleeves, as well as a jaw that, though set between rounded feminine cheeks, still looks like it would not break even if he piloted a skimmer into it. She's had a cosmetic skin job, too, apparently to accentuate the impression she already gives of a person one should not, under any circumstances, mess with. It has given her blockish features a bright and metallic gold tint, reflecting the ambient light, and emphasizing the way her cheeks crinkle as she faces him. Her shoulder-length hair is the same golden color as her skin, but not metallic. It might possibly even be her natural shade, some genetic throwback to what her lips and nose appear to mark as a more pan-racial background. It doesn't lessen the impression that she could rip the head from his own shoulders without breaking a sweat.

She speaks in a soft whisper, less a seductive voice than a ravaged one. "Go order yourself another drink. I'll even buy you one, if you want."

Damned if she doesn't manage to make it an attractive invitation.

Draiken says, "I'm not that easy."

What follows is a communal gasp among onlookers as he charges. Given the difference in their respective sizes, the act must look suicidal. There is, however, an instinctive human reaction to an oncoming attacker, one that is, if anything, more common among those whose greatest weapon is their bulk, and that is to brace for impact. Even Goldenface here does that, while preparing to do what someone her size would just naturally do, grab him.

He doesn't hit her mid-body, as she must have expected. As she reaches for him he drops and rolls under her lunge. In the instant she's off-balance, he plants his palms against the ground and with both legs delivers a powerful double kick to her rump. What he might not have been able to do if she'd been prepared for an impact of that power, knock her over, is relatively easy when she's still leaning into the frontal attack she'd expected.

He is up and running before she hits the floor. She's not finished, obviously, and assuming she can run as fast as he can she's still very much a danger. But she's now the problem behind him, and that returns Lawray to being the problem in front of him.

If, that is, she hasn't already delayed him long enough for Lawray to get away.

Draiken can only head in the direction he last saw Lawray headed, and it is frustrating, because the longer the interval between the last sighting and now, the more his actual trail becomes buried by multiplying alternatives. He can only try to cover the distance and trust in being able to tell about when he gets as far as Lawray could have. The street is crowded with groups of friends traveling together, some forming barriers by walking three and four abreast, and as he weaves in and out of the spaces that exist, blessing those pedestrians of any species who are fast enough to get out of his way and dodging the little sale kiosks where merchants sell comfort food and useless crap from a thousand worlds, he is acutely aware of how much every even momentary sidestep narrows the possibility of finding Lawray again. He knows for a fact that in another hundred meters or so, a nexus of avenues that intersect in a square with escape routes in every direction, the chances will descend, irrevocably, to almost zero.

To the right, up ahead, is a sidewalk café, cut off from the main flow of foot traffic by a colorfully-painted waist-high wall, encircling the diners like a protectively cupped hand. The wall is some form of simulated stone and wide enough to support as he neatly hops on top, taking

advantage of his new height to scan the hundreds of people milling about up ahead. In that sea of heads he thinks he catches a glimpse of Lawray's hat, receding in the distance. He leaps off the wall at its other end and aims himself for the spot he saw, emboldened now that catching up with him once again seems a possibility.

But by then, he feels a steady, machine-like drumbeat from behind, another set of footfalls to match his own. Years of experience grant him a fleeting guesstimate of his pursuer's size and bulk, and he knows it must be the woman he's provisionally dubbed Goldenface, who is faster than him after all, coming up faster than seems possible.

Later, analyzing why he hadn't detected her sooner, he will conclude that she hadn't ever been running all out to catch him; she'd been pacing herself, trailing at a distance because there'd been no real need for her to close the gap as long as she could keep him in sight. Only at the first clear opportunity had she gone full-sprint.

He tries to dodge again, but two hands that feel the size of bread-loaves close on his shoulders. Their grip is bone-crushing and painful. He struggles in the last moment it's possible, tearing skin, and she winds up with two fistfuls of cloth. His shirt comes halfway off his body and he tries to sink out of it, but she uses what grip she has and flings him to one side, sending him over a sidewalk kiosk selling what look like throbbing gray blobs of protoplasm. He hits a support pylon shoulder-first and feels it dislocate. Not quite blacking out despite the additional pain that comes when he hits the ground, he still manages to stand and face her, from opposite sides of the kiosk.

She is not looking at him, but at the throbbing gray blobs, which seem to have no purpose other than repeatedly inflating and deflating. She may be the only person in sight looking at them; all around her, keeping their distance, are beings of various species intensely interested by her.

Not even winded, Goldenface glances down at the vendor, a frightened little man who is crouched beside his kiosk, shielding his bald head with his arms. In the same gentle whisper she used before, she asks: "What *are* they? Pets or toys?"

"P-plants," the vendor stammers. "Sort of."

"Are they hard to take care of?"

"No." He's still stammering, but growing more in control of himself as the circumstances become more familiar. "Two spoonfuls of water, a little crust of bread, once a day. They're as big as they're going to get."

"Amazing," Goldenface says. She produces an object, places it on the counter, and claims two of the pulsating blobs for herself. Only then does she turn her attention back to Draiken, who's swaying on his feet. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vireinja. But you really should have allowed me to buy you that drink."

"I'm beginning to get that impression," Draiken manages.

She nods at the vendor and seems to notice the small mob of onlookers for the first time. "It's all right," she says, sincerely. "There's nothing to see here." Then she turns her back on Draiken and departs. The crowd obligingly parts for her, its two halves becoming a corridor meant only to facilitate her exit. Even though it seals up behind her, she remains visible, a towering head and shoulders, long after most people would have vanished.

Any ambition Draiken had of tracking Lawray is of course shattered.

He considers trying to stagger to an Alsource Medical kiosk, or even to make it back to his hotel room. These are both things he could do, if the need presented itself. Certainly he's managed to function, for longer periods, with worse injuries. But as he sees two figures wearing the uniform of New London's security forces, each resting a hand on a teeming pistol at their side, push their way past the crowd, he also calculates how little he is likely to gain in the attempt. Sometimes there's a reason to exercise one's powers of resilience, and sometimes there's not. Sometimes it's most profitable to just fade to black.

\* \* \*

On the other hand, one of the advantages of getting the crap kicked out of you in a civilized place like New London is that even if the local constabulary hauls you in afterward, you wake to

## ANALOG

find that whatever your legal circumstances may be, you have still been compassionately healed in your sleep.

He is in a cell that but for that bedding and a toilet in one corner, would otherwise be a featureless cube. There is no obvious exit, no obvious aperture that his captors might be using to keep him in observation, and the light source is universal, all surfaces lit with the same, inoffensive glow. It is disturbingly close to a number of environments where he's been held prisoner before, but some of those flashed upsetting images intended to ruin his peace from any angle.

He scoots over to a wall and sits there, patiently waiting with his knees brought up against his chest. It occurs to him to wonder if they intend to keep him forever, as have other jailers maintaining rooms like this, but it's not a question he's empowered to answer.

Twice in the next twelve hours, a door opens and guards deliver meals, in both cases thick liquid concoctions in bottles. He knows that such offerings can be drugged, and also knows that if they keep him here has no choice but to accept what's offered. He drinks, and detects no effects other than diminished levels of thirst and hunger.

More: it's tasty. He has been to prisons where the food provided the inmates was deliberately tasteless or revolting, part of the process of dehumanization; but he is genuinely pleased by this sweet flavor. So far, it seems that New London treats its prisoners remarkably well.

He sleeps a little, at points dreaming of his past periods of incarceration, but mostly he waits.

Then guards come for him. He is mildly surprised that they restrain him in no way. He shows them the same respect by not giving them any trouble as they lead him through a spotless corridor lined with doors that likely contain rooms just like the one he just left.

Two left turns and one right turn later, he is ushered into another small room where four people sit at a table, waiting for him.

Andrea Cort wears either the same forbidding black suit as when last he saw her, or another just like it. The Porrinyards, who bracket her, wear shiny silver outfits not as revealing as their prior exhibitionist bikinis: these cover everything from neck to thigh, but leave their limbs bare. The fourth is new to him: a woman with penetrating brown eyes, skin the same tint, and a fussy hairstyle comprising a matrix of highlighted ringlets dangling to her shoulders. The neutral but measuring look she casts on Draiken can be interpreted as either that of a woman who has yet to make up her mind, or one who has but wishes to keep it to herself. Draiken is not pleased that Cort has admitted another player but supposes that he is right now in no position to criticize.

The guards indicate the chair opposite Cort's. He takes it, and they leave.

It surprises him a little that he hasn't been restrained, but the Porrinyards are present, and they have already proven capable of taking him down with or without the help of the two counselors, whose martial abilities if any are unknown quantities. This may just be a show of strength on their part. Or it may be that their intent is not hostile at all.

Then Cort says, "I must say, Mr. Draiken, that if this the way you once conducted covert activities, I hope that you didn't stick with that career for long. You don't appear to be very good at it."

He offers a wry nod. "I could debate you, Counselor, but this does not appear to be the best possible context for it."

"It is not. You were made to look quite foolish."

"I agree."

"You'll be pleased to find out that there will be no immediate legal repercussions from your pointless foot chase and physical altercation. The incident has been investigated by local law enforcement and while you were clearly pursuing this Derausch Lawray, your intentions in doing so are unclear. Meanwhile, you were fortunately also being pursued by someone who turned the incident into a fight by assaulting you, and that produces enough ambiguity all around to assure you the benefit of the doubt. But it does raise the question of why you didn't stay close to home and await my return, instead of heading out to a bar and looking for more trouble."

He refrains from protesting that he hadn't gone looking for trouble, that the trouble had gone looking for him. She knows that. Deliberately unfair remarks like that are an old trick

among interrogators, who can count on their subjects saying too much in their own defense. Instead, he notes: "I see you've identified Mr. Lawray."

"Indeed, we have. He's well-known in the diplomatic community, an independent player of shaky morals but little of provable criminality. We've also identified this other player, the woman with the gaudy skin tone. Her name's Delia Stang, she's a professional bodyguard, and she's not facing charges either, because she's bonded in her profession and has numerous witnesses willing to testify that she did nothing but prevent you from harassing Lawray. She won't even confirm that she was working for him."

The Porrinyards say, "We hear that she offered you a drink."

"So?"

They twinkle. "Do women always react so violently when you refuse?"

The dark-skinned woman with the highlighted ringlets hides her startled laughter by coughing into her fist. The Porrinyards share the deadpan look of people who have just said something clever but won't diminish the joke by acknowledging it. Only Andrea Cort betrays no amusement at all. "Have you ever met Lawray before last night?"

"No. Not that I expect you to take my word for it."

"Believe it or not," Cort says, "I'm inclined to. Your actions of last night suggest that he took you by surprise, and Lawray's history reflects a habit of extremely temporary alliances. Can you tell me what he wanted?"

"I'm interested in knowing why you haven't asked him."

"I am right now asking you, Mr. Draiken."

Fair enough. He'll cooperate as long as it suits him. "It might be best for us all if we can be sure that no one's monitoring this conversation."

"Doubtful, for multiple reasons. But if it makes you more comfortable, certainly." Andrea Cort produces a small cylindrical device, makes some adjustments to unseen controls, and upon activating it places it at the center of the table between them. Draiken hears only a soft hum but recognizes the device as a hiss screen, which permits conversation within a certain radius but causes all sound traveling beyond that distance to impenetrable white noise. They're popular personal equipment here at the home base of the Dip Corps, where he's seen entire restaurants where multiple tables were occupied by gesticulating diplomats whose words were shrouded behind curtains of static.

Draiken can tell from the way the ambient sound changes character that Cort's screen is particularly powerful: more so than he normally would have expected a Dip Corps Prosecutor to have. His opinion of her rises, if that's possible.

Upon her gesture to begin, he asks, "Have you ever heard of something called the first rule of commerce?"

"I presume that among those who unlike me care about such things, there are many axioms that can be called the first rule of commerce, depending on what self-important point the speaker imagines himself trying to make. Why?"

"Lawray alluded to it. Given the context I was pretty confident that he was talking about first identifying potential customers who have the most money to spend, and then coming up with the goods that they would be willing to pay exorbitantly for."

She nodded. "That does seem like a reasonable, if elementary, premise. And so?"

"He was talking about you."

She blinked. "Do tell."

"And for potential client, he specified the Bettelhine Munitions Corporation."

Andrea Cort's expression remains impassive. But the Porrinyards tense, both sets of eyes flicking toward her. She drums her fingertips on the table. "Why would he believe you open to assisting in my kidnapping?"

"He'd detected my surveillance of you, could not account for me in plans already under way, and thought to investigate whether my interests could be aligned with his."

She drums her fingertips again. "Foolish. For all he knew, he could have been tipping off an ally of mine."

“Unlikely. If he picked up on my activities the way you did, he had to know that I was trying to avoid detection by you. From his perspective I likely looked like what I looked like from yours, someone who meant you harm. Under such circumstances it would only make sense for him to determine how my plans would complicate his.”

“I concur. I presume you declined, since he left and you were driven to give chase.”

“I wasn’t being selfless. I came here seeking specific answers. Anything that happens to you would endanger that.”

The shared glance the Porrinyards direct at Cort could be read as servile, the behavior of underlings carefully watching their superior for cues . . . but Draiken has the uncanny impression that they don’t really require her guidance, that their concern for her reaction is just one element of a far more nuanced set of calculations.

He continues, “If you don’t mind telling me, why would the Bettelhine Munitions Corporation give enough of a damn about you to attract the interest of speculators in kidnapping for ransom?”

After a few heartbeats of careful consideration, she says, “I do mind telling you. It’s frankly none of your business. But I can tell you this much. When I visited their home world Xana not long ago, I did so as a private citizen. I conducted no official Dip Corps business while I was there, and I betrayed no official Confederate interests while I was there. My superiors in the Dip Corps know exactly why I went and are, I guarantee you, fully satisfied that my mission there was entirely private.”

“Friends or family, then.”

“Something like that.”

“The connection must still be pretty important if it left this Lawray person confident that the Bettelhine family would be willing to ransom you.”

She looked very tired. “The motivations of the Bettelhine inner family are also private, Mr. Draiken. They have less to do with their family business than with personal relations that have formed, relations that this Lawray vulture should have had no means of knowing about.”

Draiken suspects that it’s not quite as simple as that, but his instincts perversely advise him to trust her; there’s something in the way she talks about them, something rattled, that belies the cold dispassion of her usual demeanor. “I’ll take your word for that, Counselor. But this dovetails with the reasons I’m here, specifically my interest in those researching mind control. Silver told me that the Bettelhines were pretty far along. Can you tell me anything about that?”

Cort shudders. “I did encounter some nasty manifestations of the science during my visit to Xana. And yes, it was terrifying. I’m happy to report that the bitch who first brought them the tech is now rather violently dead.”

“And yet you and these users of evil mind-control technology still possess an ongoing relationship. How does that work, Counselor?”

“As I’ve said, it’s personal. And complicated. It remains an ethical dispute between us. And that really is all I’m going to say on the subject at this time.”

Very well. He knows a stone wall when he encounters one. It makes more sense to turn his attention to the woman with the cascading ringlets, who has been silent throughout all of this. “Who is she, and how does she enter the picture?”

Does Cort actually show a measure of relief, now? “She actually enters a somewhat related picture, Mr. Draiken. This is an old colleague of mine, Counselor Coombs. She was once in what I can loosely call your line of work, but has since left field operations to claim a more rarefied position, one too delicate to name, in the collation and analysis of incoming intelligence.”

“I like having my evenings free,” Coombs says. “In the old days I had no social life at all.”

A familiar irritated scowl flashes on Cort’s face. “As I for the most part don’t occupy myself with classified materials, and had not yet decided whether to trust you, I took the liberty of inviting her to our consultation. I first asked her to determine your identity. On such matters she has resources, and discretion, greater than any I could bring to bear.”

“Not to mention veto powers,” says Tasha Coombs. “Hello, Mr. Draiken. You can call me Tasha.”

He nods. "Hello, Tasha." But he's not quite finished with Andrea Cort yet. "I confess a little surprise that you were willing to bring friends into this."

"She still hasn't," says Tasha. "I've offered my friendship more than once, but Andrea's made it clear that she's not interested." This statement comes complete with an undertone of regret, some ancient hurt that that long ago healed as much as it was ever going to. "You, though, Mr. Draiken. You're an interesting person. Would it surprise you to know that it took me less than a day to confirm your story of your time with the late Silver? Not to mention track down your birth name and many of your past associations?"

"Really? My birth name?"

She utters five syllables that between them once defined a life, but which have in subsequent decades been buried by entire successive archeological strata of lies. His origins have not so much as flitted across his memories in more years than he cares to count, but the reminder of the child he once was stabs him. All the formative elements that sculpted his soul from early on, the face of his mother, the distant figure of his father, the sky of the world where he was raised, the friends whose names he's forgotten, a beloved pet, the early passion for making a difference that had led to him joining a cause that even then some wiser heads had beseeched him to forsake, for its capacity to destroy him: it all flashes by in an instant, before being buried by the other names he'd worn, the other people he'd become.

After a moment with closed eyes, he says, "I'm impressed. More talents like yours in the Universe, and fewer prisoners would be tortured for what they know."

"I'm talented," Tasha said, "but I don't deserve any credit for your fingernails remaining in. May I tell you some hard truths, Mr. Draiken?"

"Please."

"It's been a long time, decades in fact, since you were a working asset. Your file was marked *Retired* before I was born. During the many years you spent fishing for actual fish instead of information, the specific group you once worked for has fallen under, and drifted away from, the Confederacy's influence any number of times. So have many of the constituencies you then considered enemies. Whenever they fell back under our control, my predecessors in the office I represent pretty much inherited everything both powers were so dedicated to hiding, all that time. At this particular moment in history, our sphere of influence is still far from total, and is in fact more precarious with regard to the great alien powers, than it's ever been. But, like an amoeba, it has encircled and now incorporates pretty much the entirety of what you knew as two sides, and so we have all the intel your squabbling groups spent years collecting on one another, or documented on their own materials, freely available for perusal by anyone with the clearance. We've also made a science of maintaining the mechanisms that keep them up to date, and as a result likely know more about you than you do. The real problem's become that there's far too much information coming in, and not enough trained people like me who can be trusted to separate that which can be safely ignored from that which should be given priority."

So far everything she's told him matches what he learned the day he declared himself out of retirement. "And what category does your professional expertise lead you to place me in?"

"Let me put it this way, sir. I have no intention of placing you under arrest for your past activities, heinous as some of them were when viewed in the context of today. Nor will I intern you preemptively for any actions you might get up to in the future, disruptive as I suspect they could be if you ever found momentary advantage in wreaking chaos. I am not here in my official capacity, but only as an unrecorded off-duty favor to a woman not quite my friend who I've long owed my life. To a limited extent I'm even still willing to answer your questions, if I approve of what I think you'll do with the information. I'm that sympathetic. But my patience, and your license, is not unlimited. If this enters the realm of the official, I won't be inclined to protect you."

He considers her words, which are all far less reasonable, when seen through the prism of his own experience, than they seem. "You will allow me to continue my activities as long as you approve. I assume that you will not approve anything that counters your interests. How is this different than becoming your agent, and taking your orders?"

“Simple,” Tasha says. “I have no intention of ever recruiting you to do anything. What you get instead is what you get with any other ally—assistance, as long as I don’t actively object to what you’re doing. And the knowledge that if I ever see you as an active threat to the interests I protect, I can declare you an active enemy. Between those two points, you will have autonomy.”

“And in return, you will have deniability.”

“I understand your paranoia, Mr. Draiken, but this is no different than any other relationship between human beings. We can have one as long as I don’t consider you too objectionable to be around. If you can’t bring yourself to have anything to do with me, then that’s fine, but the only other options are either seeking help elsewhere and being aware from this point on that I’m watching, or giving up this pointless quest and being satisfied with a pleasant, consequence-free retirement. In that case, I’ll even buy you a drink in celebration.”

The Porrinyards twinkle again. “And so it becomes a recurring theme.”

What’s up with them, anyway?

He turns back to Andrea Cort. “Your associate here reminds me of you.”

Cort nods. “It may be why the two of us will never be friends.”

“I confess that I’ll need to think on my options, for a little bit. She’s given me a lot to think about. I may well forego accepting intel from either of you. But in the meantime, it strikes me that you still have a problem. What do you intend to do about this Mr. Lawray, and is there any way I can help?”

He knows the bottom line they’ve kept from him even as the question is met by uncomfortable silence.

It falls to the Porrinyards to tell him. “Actually, that particular part of the problem appears to have taken care of itself.”

\* \* \*

Deraus Lawray lies in the local morgue, his condition an eloquent argument against the popular misconception that life and death are the only two possible positions in a strictly binary set of options, in which human beings are always either one or the other. There are, his corpse argues, still other locations on the graph, some of them farther to the right than others. He is not just dead, but extremely dead.

He lies naked in a stasis chamber, the natural decomposition of the human form even in anti-septic environments kept at bay by the artificial near-cessation of all molecular activity within. No part of him touches the surrounding clear shields. His naked form reveals a man who might have been a fairly accomplished amateur athlete, but no prodigy, and certainly no successful fugitive from the ravages of time. If he’s ever gotten any rejuv treatments, it’s been a while since the last once. In any number of little places, mostly where fat accumulates, he clearly shows the first effects of entropy.

The most significant feature is the same thing that appears to have killed him, the removal of everything above his carefully-sculpted eyebrows. What remains of his skull is now an open bowl with a rim right above his eyebrows. His eyes are open and a discolored scarlet. What remains of his brain is an undifferentiated reddish sponge, cut off at that altitude, with no more raggedness to the wound, internally, than there is externally. It’s a clean cut, down to his carefully maintained hair, reduced by the destruction of its habitat to a horseshoe fringe.

Draiken’s seen bodies more violated than this. He’s even created a few in battle. But rarely has he looked upon any of death’s product this level of personal offense, at the sheer offhand neatness of the offense. Whoever did this was showing off.

He and the counselors have privacy here. On New London, diplomatic hub for the thousands of worlds in the Confederacy, the local police operate as an entity subordinate to Confederate security forces and know to back off wherever diplomatic matters are concerned. Lawray’s status as perpetual person of interest has given Tasha Coombs the leeway she needs to declare the investigation under her purview, and so the officers who first responded to the discovery of the body and the forensic tech who performed the first scans, while still resources, were given a chance to relay what information they’d gathered so far, before being ordered from the room so the grownups could talk. The Porrinyards went with them and are still

stationed outside, guarding the door. Draiken does not envy anybody trying to get past them.

The information the police have provided amounts to very little, mostly that Lawray survived his successful flight from Draiken by only a matter of minutes. At about the same time Delia Stang concluded the foot chase in her favor, Lawray was ducking into an unmarked entrance to a structure designed to look like an employee's entrance to the clothing store that stands next to it. It is, as it happens, nothing of the kind—just a false front of the sort that exists in many modern urban centers, actually the entrance to one of New London's maintenance corridors. Lawray went down a flight of stairs and a hundred meters spinward before being dropped in his tracks, his corpse left for subsequent discovery by a maintenance drone.

Draiken says, "Interesting. What did this? An energy-beam of some kind?"

"That was the first question I asked," Tasha Coombs replies. "I'm told that it would have left substantial heat-traces, if not along the cross section of skull, then certainly in the more liquid medium of the brain itself. This thing cut without any visible friction. Our working theory is a crystal monofilament, the same kind they use to construct the cables for space elevators. They're only a few molecules thick and can cut through almost anything. One could certainly slice through a human body, bone and all, without much deforming the surrounding tissue. Somebody must have strung a length of it between two endpoints and used it as a kind of guillotine, probably one being flown about by drones or bots."

"That's dangerous tech to have flying around an urban space station."

Cort emits a soft, bitter laugh. "You were retired an awfully long time, Mr. Draiken. There are any number of mechanized little assassins roaming inhabited places these days. I myself survived an assault from a somewhat similar weapon while I was visiting the Bettelhines."

Draiken is beginning to see why this Andrea Cort has such an extreme reaction to being followed by strangers. "Was it Bettelhine technology?"

She says, "The Bettelhines have never been above repurposing weapons developed elsewhere. The flying strangle-cord was an updated version of an ancient Ghyei weapon the species that originally developed it called a fire snake. Significant alterations were necessary to render it practical against human beings."

"And they used it against you? What kind of friends are they?"

"I can only repeat that the situation is complicated. I was on Xana to visit a small, specific group of people in their inner family. The Corporation comprises many other tens of millions, including castes classed as outer family and employees. In any system that large, there are always internecine conflicts, jockeying for position between factions. What I ran into during my visit was a deadly difference of opinion between one faction that had defensible reason for inviting me there, and another that didn't like the idea. Notwithstanding my particular situation, it is the kind of thing that can happen to any civilian who visits some exotic locale and finds herself in the crosshairs because of political considerations that have nothing to do with her."

"I somehow suspect that these political considerations were all about your presence."

Cort's default scowl grows suddenly even more irritated. "What do you want me to say, Mr. Draiken? That my arrival did not exacerbate instabilities already in place? I cannot offer you that assurance. It did. But I repeat: the situation has nothing to do with you, or anything you've come here to learn. Your input is desired only on the subject of this particular investigation, and in particular your interaction with Mr. Lawray. We know you didn't kill him because you were elsewhere, being dealt with by that bodyguard, Delia Stang. All we need to know from you is this. During your brief conversation, did Mr. Lawray give you any reason to believe that somebody might want to kill him?"

He shakes his head. "No. He was downright jolly. I've given you everything he gave me."

"Are you sure of that, sir?"

"It has no obvious connection to the reasons I'm here. I have no reason to hide any of it."

Both Counselors chuckle, not unkindly. It is the kind of laughter that comes from respect, but the kind that comes from adults in the presence of a clever child.

Tasha Coombs says, "We're not quite ready to take your word for it, Mr. Draiken. A man is dead."

“I understand.”

“Everybody involved will be under heavy investigation until this is settled. We’re investigating what financial records we have for you, and for Stang, and for Lawray. Andrea has also already sent a private communication to her associates among the Bettelhines, to determine whether they can offer any useful intelligence; if we’re lucky, they’ll just come out and say, ‘Yes, we knew *La wray* was *planning something, and yes, we took the liberty of taking care of him for you.*’”

Draiken nods. “A little preventative maintenance as a favor, between friends.”

“If you must. But until the matter is settled, we are left with what we should do with you, while you’re still hanging around New London. I may have reasons for keeping you out of this, and I’d rather not put you in protective custody, but I also don’t think we can permit you to continue wandering around unsupervised, not under these conditions.”

He almost objects but thinks better of it. What’s the point, after all? He hasn’t come to New London to provide security for an irritable prosecutor, let alone one like Cort who has the entire weight of the Dip Corps power structure to draw from. It’s a distraction from his own agenda, and now that she’s been warned, he can afford to wait while she deals with security concerns that are none of his business. “Very well. What do you suggest?”

\* \* \*

Two days go by, two days of boredom and very little else.

He has left his hotel and accepted new quarters in a facility the Dip Corps reserves for visitors who present special security challenges. There is little difference between the false sunniness of its upholstered rooms and a couple of his more comfortable places of confinement, except that in those he hadn’t been allowed to receive any media feed from the outside world, and here he is able to summon anything he wants from ample reportage on local politics to as much information as he could ever want about his possible next port of call. While he waits, he listens to music, he meditates, he practices his combat drills, and he enjoys the catering.

He also appreciates that any illusion of privacy it provides him is a lie; certainly, a place like this must have systems monitoring his every move, and measuring his every twitch for signs of active rebellion. So he provides no telltales as he also plots an escape, keeping all his planning internal. By the end of the first day, he has formulated the first stage of an escape plan, one that will get him as far as the station sections populated by civilians, at which point he will have to pick up one of several alternate identities he’s prepared and start improvising.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, one of his guardians, a tall and broad-shouldered infant who has all the physicality but projects none of the qualities he would have picked up in the field, arrives at his front door to advise Draiken that he should don nice clothes, because in a couple of hours he will be taken to dinner in a public place.

Two hours and thirty-two minutes later, he answers the door again scrubbed and shaved and clad in one of the finely tailored suits appropriate to his businessman alter-ego. He expects to find the counselors. Instead, he finds Skye Porrinyard, dressed in a loose-fitting, diaphanous purple thing that covers far more skin than she usually bothers with, while pointedly hiding none of it. He does not see Oscin Porrinyard behind her, wearing whatever their unified persona would see as the male equivalent. She’s by herself.

“Hello, Mr. Draiken.”

“This is a surprise. I thought you came as a matched set.”

“I do. Whether I’m together or separated, I’m still only one person. But tonight, the counselors thought including both of me in their current activities would be redundant. They only needed one, and as you’re not a prisoner, I thought it would be polite to treat you to an evening’s freedom.”

His once-infamous dogmatic streak almost summons forth the reply that freedom is not a treat, nor something to be offered in kindness, but he decides to take the gesture in the apparent spirit with which it’s been offered. “I thank you. And you were chosen instead of Oscin because . . .”

He now gets to see what that smile of hers looks like when it’s saucy. “Please, Mr. Draiken.”

“What? Did I just make a social faux-pas?”

“You cannot possibly be as slow on the uptake as you gallantly pretend. One of the reasons I dress the two of me the way I do is to provide a contrast that makes the measurement of human micro-responses easier. I have nothing but praise for the way you maintain eye contact despite all nearby provocation, but it still doesn’t take the perceptions of a cylinked pair to tell that you’re by nature somewhat more predisposed to enjoy yourself with a pretty woman than with a handsome man. Not necessarily closed to all possibilities—I can see that much, honestly—but preferences are preferences. Under the circumstances, selecting this body as companion for your night out simply makes more sense.”

“And yet I suppose Oscin’s still here as chaperone, looking over your shoulders?”

“Through my eyes, actually. I thought you understood this, especially since I’ve made no attempt to hide it. I use separate names only for convenience in labeling. Other than that, the pair of me are best considered as no more separate individuals than two fingers controlled by the same hand. This is true even if you and this body end up in bed together, which is, if you’re not too unpleasant about it, I promise not a complete impossibility. Please don’t tell me that a man who’s traveled as extensively as yourself would find this a problem.”

He doesn’t even need to think about it before offering her his arm. “Forgive an old man. I’ve suffered through many far less charming dinner companions. Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

\* \* \*

Skye escorts him past multiple security checkpoints before they emerge from Dip Corps territory to the more public streets of New London. There they transfer to a private pod that whisks them through a tunnel into an elevated tube high over New London’s mercantile district, an area now swathed in darkness after the nightly shutdown of the station’s artificial suns. The cylindrical landscape does what human civilization always does in response to darkness, and defies it, becoming a constellation of multicolored lights, some clustered, some more scattered against black background. Even when the pod hurtles over a body of water, or the habitat’s many parks, the signs of life don’t give way to absolute darkness. The sea glitters, the forested areas become line-drawings, defined by the lights that girdle the walking-paths. At one point, Skye points out a concert taking place in one of those parks, a lit stage bleeding beams of multicolored joy over a jellied mass too distant to readily identify as an appreciative crowd of thousands. She adds a wistful complaint that the musicians in question were personal favorites and that until this current affair began, her shared self had been hoping to attend.

“With Counselor Cort?”

“I’m afraid not. She has little patience for music and almost no tolerance for large crowds. But that’s one of the advantages of being what I am. If security permits, I can both stay close to her and send one of me to the show.”

The pod slows as it approaches a tall, thin support tower rising up another body of water, banks as the tube circles it, then rises on a straight vertical toward a disk-shaped platform at the summit. The tube comes to a rest at a station one level down, a gilded place where sleek, fashionable men, women, and neuters sit at tables only large enough to support drinks, reacting to this latest pod’s arrival with only fleeting interest. It is clearly an establishment that caters to people with money, or those willing to incur debt in exchange for making a good impression. The lights of the curving landscape curve up on both sides like jewels.

A short ride on a separate elevator and they emerge at the center a spacious patio restaurant, mostly inhabited by human beings, though Draiken spots a pair of Bursteeni at one table and one lone glowering Tchi at another. Though the space has no visible barriers at the periphery, even those he would normally expect necessary save drunken or fumble-footed diners from what would certainly be a fatal plunge, the air is still and pleasantly cool. The sky is like a glittering starscape, though of course that sky is not a vision of the Universe, but of whatever urban streets sprawl kilometers away, on the opposite of New London’s vast spinning cylinder.

Once an obsequious waiter leads them from the central elevator to their table midway across the patio, they sit across from one another, Draiken contemplating why he’s here, Skye

regarding him with chin resting on the back of two nested hands.

He remarks, "This must be a popular location for lovers not afflicted with vertigo."

"I'm not. The two of me used to specialize in high-altitude professions. Mountain climbing, orbital construction, even a short time spent at a diplomatic outpost that required people who could deal with extreme heights. I find open spaces tremendously freeing. Don't you?"

He suffers a brief memory-flash of long sunny days on the open water, during his many years on Greeve, and not for the first time regrets that any agenda could have ever drawn him to abandon what he now recognizes as likely his last real opportunity for happiness. "I suppose that you've eaten here before?"

With a trace of wistfulness: "Not until now. Counselor Cort's not fond of heights."

This is information he did not have, and a confidence he is frankly astonished to hear her share. "My research never established that."

"She's also not fond of allowing her weaker points to become public knowledge. Don't make too much of it, sir. Her aversion is considerably sub-phobic, these days, but places like this will never be among her favorite environments in her limited discretionary time."

"You could go without her," he suggests. "As with your concerts."

"Isn't that what I'm doing right now?"

"It's still a recurring theme, Skye. Your association with the woman appears to cost you a great number of the things you enjoy."

She chuckles. "I know why you would think that, sir, and I take no particular offense, because it can be difficult for those outside our relationship to see. But I wish you would get this much clear: what the two of me derive from my relationship with the counselor far outweighs the sum total of her dysfunctions. She's well worth the work I put in."

"How?"

Her answer is a simple, "Have you failed to figure it out, Mr. Draiken?"

"What?"

"She's the one great love of my life."

This is another surprising gap in his knowledge. Thinking back over his limited acquaintance with Cort and her constant companions, he cannot recall ever seeing her show them a single moment of genuine warmth. But Skye's declaration is so clearly genuine that he's forced to accept it as true. Taken off balance, he says something that he will later consider unforgivably stupid: "Both of you?"

"I keep telling you, Mr. Draiken. There is only one of me. Andrea accepts this, and I assure you, reciprocates, both physically and emotionally. She's just unlikely to show it in the presence of an ongoing problem such as, if you forgive me, yourself."

He says, "But earlier . . ."

"My suggestion that you and this body might well end up in bed together, if the evening goes that way? Wholly true, as far as that goes, and if you care, I'm still leaning that way. I guarantee you, Mr. Draiken, that Andrea would not consider it unfaithful, nor would I offer it as a possibility if she did. We agree, both of us, that human beings are not emotional property."

"It's complicated," he says, in a fairly accurate impression of Cort's speech patterns.

She chuckles again, the sound much like the tinkling of bells. "That is good. Just don't do it in her presence. You don't know her well enough."

Conversation drifts, while remaining pleasant. He finds her witty, charming, radiant, and something else, something that does not bother him: elevated, a being finer than himself, smarter and faster and kinder, even when viewed from only this one aspect. He prevails upon her to call him *John* and not the formal *sir* or the unwieldy, cumbersome *Mr. Draiken*. She asks him about his travels, and he shares some of his more pleasant memories from the worlds he's visited, from Greeve's sun to the daylong chorales on Vilathum. They order their meals, in his case a delicately spiced filet of something or other imported from a world he hasn't even heard of, in her case a sort of algae-dominated pudding that churns as if still alive between bites. They hit it off. A few times, her speech becomes briefly deeper, and he has no trouble imagining the male Oscin's face superimposed over her own, perhaps a symptom of whatever his own mind

must be doing to get used to the idea, perhaps an actual manifestation of Oscin's half of their shared consciousness, momentarily grown more ascendant in Skye's female physicality. Either way, it's oddly delightful, enough to make him envy the woman Silver had described to him as dangerous to approach.

They are done with their entrées and enjoying the pleasure of lingering over their empty plates when a cloud passes over her features. "Delia Stang's here."

"Where?"

"Not in sight. On the lower level. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but I've never been your only security tonight."

He says, "You never had to tell me. I counted four people downstairs and another six up here, including two of the waitstaff. The elderly couple at table seven. The fellow at table fifteen, the one with the impressive nose who acts like he's had just a little too much to drink but while we've been sitting here hasn't had enough to keep a child tipsy. A few others."

"I'll take it as a personal compliment to my level of personal charm that you've actually missed a few. Unless you're holding back?"

"A gentleman never tells. How are you getting your updates from downstairs? I presume Oscin's here? Physically, I mean?"

"Yes. The counselors too."

He nods, completing an epiphany that was planted at the very moment Skye first showed up at his door, and that has been flitting about the edges of his consciousness ever since. "Counselor Cort was never really Lawray's target, was she? He only mentioned her in the first place as misdirection, because he had no way of knowing whether he could trust me. Naming her as the target was his way of ensuring that if I went straight to her with what he told me, I'd only bring her the wrong information. In truth, he wasn't feeling out whether I'd be willing to kidnap *her*, but whether I would be up to joining him in the kidnapping of someone close to her."

Outwardly, Skye is the same effervescent presence that she's been for as long as he's known her. Outwardly, she keeps up the pleasant demeanor and relaxed body language of a woman having a lovely romantic night out, and even manages to beam at Draiken as her soft words acknowledge a situation turned deadly serious. "Yes, John. That's been the general thinking, last few hours."

"You must have heard back from Andrea's friends among the Bettelhines."

"Yes." Her soft hand comes to rest on his wrist. "It *is* an internal dispute, among them. We've been briefed on the specifics, but it involves more politics, both familial and corporate, than I have time to cover. All you need to know is that there's been a substantial power struggle among members of the Bettelhine inner family for some time now, and that the faction Counselor Cort has a personal relationship with is currently being challenged by another that seeks to hurt them through her."

He thinks he gets it, now. "She's supporting the side friendlier to Confederate interests."

"Not at all. It's certain that some among those whose forces we're facing tonight see it that way. But Andrea's own political preferences among the opposing parties are, I assure you, coincidental and don't fall into the category of interference with a foreign power. Whether you can believe it or not, her actual relationship with those helping us remains only personal, and not nearly as close as their rivals must imagine. It's only solid enough to ensure that they would currently take any direct attack on her as an attack on them. Do you understand?"

Draiken is distantly reminded of having once been called upon to thwart the revenge killing of a man whose sole connection to a certain very politically powerful woman was that, years earlier, he'd slept with her a grand total of twice. The man, an innocent, had barely remembered her; she'd lived a busy life and remembered him not at all. But he did not receive the constant protection that was hers by right, and so he became the most convenient, perversely most hurtful, secondary target. "Yes. And I presume that the reasons the hostiles can't target her directly has to do with her being officially under the personal protection of her friendlies."

"Correct. They wouldn't be able to get away with the trespass. It would be suicide, literally suicide, for everybody connected to it."

“That leaves only one other possible target. Albeit one in two bodies.”

“Also correct.”

No civilian watching the restaurant floor would observe any sign of increasing tension among the undercover security forces he’s detected. Superficially, everybody’s behaving precisely as they should, but to a man who’s been around for as long as he has, it’s easy to see a dozen separate indicators of imminent danger, from the sudden relative steadiness on the part of the man who’s been acting a little drunk, to the sudden increased vitality among the couple who have been pretending to be old marrieds contentedly sliding into an unrejuvenated, uninterfered-with old age. All over the dining floor, people who have pretending to be without a care in this world or any other are now scanning the open air that surrounds them, for an attack that can come from any direction, from subjective up or down, or any direction visible from the platform’s open sides.

Not for the first time since taking his seat, Draiken reflects that he can think of no other public place, anywhere on New London, better designed to draw out an attack, as long as one is expected. Keeping up his pose, he grins exactly like a man who is only delighted by something clever just said by the woman he loves, and he finds that it’s not an expression he has to fake, because he finds that he still has a very real affection for the strange creature who’s been his companion this evening. “You never had to keep this from me, Skye. I already offered my help. I would have been pleased to back you up, had you only asked.”

“I couldn’t afford to,” she says. “All my instincts said to trust you, but you hadn’t been fully cleared, not by Tasha’s people, and not by the Bettelhines. The stakes were still too high. You weren’t declared off the game board until about an hour ago, when the arrests began: both on Xana, and here.”

He decides to consider that fair. “And Stang?”

“We’re still not sure who she’s working for, not really. We should, but the current indicators are ambiguous. But there are other parties of interest, among Lawray’s collaborators, still at large . . . and if anything’s going to happen, it’s going to happen very, very soon.”

He absorbs that, and then takes a little sip of his wine. “I’ll give you this much, Skye. You do know how to show a man a good time.”

They are still waiting for something to happen when, a minute or so later, the central elevator pod rises out of the floor and a single occupant emerges. It is Delia Stang, as physically intimidating a creature as she was the other day, and one strange to see dressed, and made up, as a beautiful woman. She has changed her hair to something that seems to bubble with liquid fire, and her style of clothing to something sparkly that doesn’t just capture the ambient light but amplify it, casting delicate little rainbows that seem to follow her around like her own personal weather system. The skin of her face still shines like metallic gold, and it too captures the light as she stands on the restaurant floor, scanning not the sea of diners but the surrounding sky. She seems unaware of, or at least accustomed to, the attention her odd appearance brings from all directions, and not just from the security agents Draiken’s managed to identify, who must be under orders to watch for her.

This is a human being who from the moment she attained her size must have forever sacrificed the ability to ever enter a room unnoticed, knows it, and has come to peace with that fate.

Eventually, satisfied with whatever she’s attained from her scan of the surrounding sky, she lowers her gaze to the dining floor, and after a few seconds finds Draiken and Skye. Her smile, framed by glossy red lipstick, is very wide and very white.

She heads for them, in no particular hurry.

“Easy,” Skye murmurs.

Draiken nods but keeps his eyes focused on the approaching figure of the woman who’s already made short work of him once. The smile has not left her face. It’s an amiable smile, a friendly one, and while he would like to believe it genuine, he is already thinking of ways he can put blood on those lips, gaps in those teeth, and soulless windows where there are now vivacious eyes, if the next few seconds go the wrong way.

When is within a few steps, he stands and says, “Delia.”

“I see somebody’s given you the formal introduction we unfortunately didn’t have time for. How are you feeling, Mr. Draiken? I trust you’ve been treated for your injuries?”

“I’m good, thank you. How are your pulsating gray blobs?”

Skye says, “What?”

Evidently, none of the reports she received of his prior encounter with the powerful Delia Stang bothered to cover the woman’s instant infatuation with the vendor’s little menagerie of pulsating gray blobs.

“They’re adorable,” Stang says. “Thank you. I . . .”

She lunges at Skye in mid-sentence.

The big woman acts, as she acted before, with a speed dizzying in one of her stature. She doesn’t betray her actions by tensing first. She just acts, her massive hands darting for Skye with the seeming velocity of little missiles.

Draiken moves to intercept, but Skye acts first. By the time Stang’s fingers close on what should be Skye’s shoulders, the smaller woman has already moved inside her reach and is driving a powerful jab into the soft tissue on the underside of the jaw.

Stang gags, staggering her just long enough for Skye to drop back out of sight.

Draiken closes. The angle is not great because the curve of the table interferes, but Skye’s instant response has given him a quick blind spot to exploit. He aims his own strike at the bridge of Stang’s nose, which he sees almost in profile. The cartilage collapses, and blood spurts. The cartilage gives way at first contact. She hurls a massive roundhouse in his direction, but he backtracks and ducks, and between those two evasive actions gets to pass under it, a close call, as if he just managed to avoid being creamed by a hurtling steel beam.

The security agents he’s identified, and a few he hasn’t, have already risen from their respective tables and are converging on the altercation, at least ten of them racing toward the table from all directions.

If Delia Stang’s the only problem, her size might still permit her to last for a minute or so, but the crisis is pretty much over.

But it can’t possibly be that simple, and it isn’t.

Draiken hears it as the high-pitched drone of something coming directly at him. His mind considers all known variables and comes up with the same device that killed Lawray.

The monofilament weapon.

“Skye!” he yells, rolling over the table in his haste to escape it. Glasses shatter, the candle centerpiece topples and rolls. A triangular section of table suddenly slices free at the corner, the cross-section so smooth that it might have been amputated by guillotine. Draiken feels something fly low above his face, trailing an angry mosquito whine.

A man in a formal suit, one of several Draiken’s identified as Dip Corps security, runs into Draiken’s field of vision, heading for Stang, only to have the monofilament slice across the top of his head. He doesn’t lose quite the same cross section of skull that Lawray did, because the monofilament device strikes him higher, effectively scalping him. He loses a flap of skin, a sliver of bone, and between those two things an awful lot of blood.

As he tumbles to his knees, Delia Stang steps in front of him, gripping a small metallic rod in one hand. She does something to it and it telescopes, becoming a staff, with which she immediately intercepts the rampaging invisible *something*. The point of collision a grinding white-hot line of friction that the flying monofilament, as sharp as it must be, nevertheless fails to pass.

The monofilament seems to realize that it cannot cut through Stang’s staff and rebounds, but with the supreme idiocy of many simple machines immediately attacks her again, this time forming that white-hot, helpless attempted slice not far removed from her double-handed grip. She gives the staff a twirl, forming a loop in the monofilament, and now there are two white-hot lines on the staff that refuses to be cut, parallel to one another. The endpoints are two dark blurs, that rattle wherever they hit the metal, which they do frequently, now that Stang continues to twist and adjust her staff in ways that counter their movements and keep the monofilament trapped. The strain shows on her face, but she sees him watching and shouts, “Draiken! I have this! Help Skye!”

He scans the crowd for Skye. She's racing in the opposite direction of the security forces converging on Stang. She is already almost at the platform edge, and as he watches she uses the seat of an abandoned chair as she would the first in a flight of steps, the abandoned table behind it as the second, propelling herself upward as well as outward before sailing out into open space.

As she falls out of sight he follows her, pausing only to jab the neck of a security man who has not yet ascertained that for some reason Delia Stang is protecting them all, and has leveled a particle weapon at her. The man falls, choking. Draiken gets past him, and the next one, and the one after that, only then finding the path clear to following Skye in her same seemingly suicidal leap. He has already figured out that Skye must have made her blind leap guided at least in part by Oscin's eyes. He cannot afford such a jump himself because his own personal line of sight remains the only guide he has. But he hesitates only a second at the edge, before he sees where he needs to go.

Oscin, Skye, and two men in form-fitting black masks are struggling about two body-heights below the restaurant's lower level, seemingly unsupported, but from the way they're bobbing up and down they are clearly in the grip of a net so fine that it doesn't so much as blur the landscape far below. Skye's arrival has been within the last few seconds, and she's still bouncing from her initial impact. Even so, she's cut off one of the two strangers from the one struggling with Oscin. They're all illuminated by a strobe effect from the restaurant's lower level, one too intense to be party lighting. It's more like many little explosions going off in rapid succession, and even as Draiken leaps he senses light-bursts of the same intensity beginning to go off behind him, terribly certain that he knows what they are.

They're teemers, devices designed to put down riots by overloading the human mind with fractal images that crowd out the capacity for thought. Although they need direct eye contact to work, they can put their victims down for up to a week at a time. The bright lights are characteristic of their use, but the dozens of quick flashes at once, coming from behind Draiken on both the upper level and—as he falls, the lower one—testify to many having been prepared beforehand, as a means of incapacitating everybody on both levels.

Draiken has no way of knowing which side, those who want to snatch the Porrinyards or the Confederate security trying to stop them, has prepared this measure.

He lands on the net, bounces, lands, endures the several additional bounces that prevent him from joining the fight right away. Along the way, he is able to form a mental picture of this new arena in which he finds himself. The net is essentially a shallow bowl, extending invisibly in all directions from what must be an anchor point just below the restaurant's lower level, probably the pylon on which the two platforms sit. It is a flat bowl at the bottom, but curves gently upward on all sides, its upper and outer borders unknown, but certainly distant enough to ensure a safe landing for anybody making a determined leap from the restaurant's upper level—and all of it transparent enough to avoid any spoilage of the festive view.

By the time Draiken's careening slows, and he is able to get his bearings, the number of masked assailants on the net now number eight, and the number of allies who have managed to join the battle number five. Tasha Coombs is about ten meters to his right, her expression betraying a level of terror Draiken attributes less to fear of the disk-shaped weapon in the hand of the woman she's tackled than of the teem-flashes she won't open her eyes long enough to risk seeing; every fresh burst of light from behind her makes her recoil with the instinctive fear of someone who's been burnt once and now fears being burnt again. In the other direction, Andrea Cort, though pale enough to communicate another level of mortal fear, likely a manifestation of her height-aversion, rains repeated blows on the face of another masked assailant who is no longer fighting but has been reduced to attempting to curl into a tight ball.

Nobody but Skye shows much talent for maneuvering on the spongy surface, but she's making up for all of them, bouncing about the net with expert understanding of where each careening rebound will take her, taking out a fresh assailant each time. She is magnificent, and her flawless response-time, her easy mastery of the situation, both confirms what she said earlier about having experience in high-altitude environments and documents that Andrea Cort could not have possibly chosen a better companion.

She must already know something else that Draiken can see from his position: that Oscin, who should be doing just as well, is in trouble. His struggles with his own hooded man are already slowing down, becoming sludgy, and as he throws another ineffectual punch at the figure now straddling him, Draiken sees why: the bad guy has managed to apply a buzzpatch. It can't be doing much to Oscin's state of alertness, given how much of that is shared by Skye's head, but it is crippling his coordination, rendering him helpless from limbs that are turning boneless and limp.

Draiken scrambles to help, flattening at one point so a couple of battling forms sliding down the curve of the netting can roll over his back and to whatever the net's lowest point is. Halfway to Oscin's side he sees that it's going to be close; the man straddling Oscin is already applying the glowing tip of some cylindrical instrument to the net, drawing a wide red semicircle from Oscin's right shoulder, to his left.

The semicircle becomes a loose flap and the flap becomes an exit.

Flat on his back, Oscin begins to slide backward out the opening, his assailant ducking down low so he can fit through the opening as well.

Draiken covers the distance as fast as he can and doesn't quite make it in time to prevent Oscin from being taken. He does, however, manage to grab the male Porrinyard by the ankle.

There is no possibility of arresting Oscin's fall. All Draiken can accomplish is for himself to be pulled along, and this is exactly what happens, an instant of sudden acceleration that ends with Draiken, Oscin and the anonymous assailant plummeting toward the largest of New London's several bodies of water.

At this altitude, there is no possibility of Draiken just letting go and converting his fall into a dive. There would be no practical difference to any human body between hitting the water and slamming into a solid wall. But the man in the mask, who still doesn't appear to have noticed that Draiken's tagging along for the ride, appears to have accounted for this, because as soon as he does something to a control on his wrist, an open-cabin skimmer comes roaring in from spinward, and assumes a vertical bearing that matches their plummeting velocity.

There is a familiar moment of discontinuity as the skimmer draws close enough for its artificial local gravity to overwhelm and subsume the gravitational pull New London simulates by spinning. In that instant, the skimmer becomes the local definition of *below them*. All three men topple onto its padded seats with various grunts.

Oscin lands bonelessly, several audible cracks sounding from places inside him.

The man in the black hood hits the interior bulkhead with what appears to be painful, but alas not fatal, force. Draiken feels something pop in his knee and manages to resist crying out, not that crying out would change anything, because the man who took Oscin can count and now knows that he has two people with him and not just one.

The skimmer levels out and goes for speed, flying a mere two meters above the surface of the water. On board, the man in the hood launches himself at Draiken. Draiken grasps him by the wrists, and for several seconds, they struggle in this position, Draiken's injured knee screaming for relief. Then the man makes the mistake of pulling free and attempting a jab from another angle. This time Draiken is better prepared. He grabs the man's wrist again and this time pulls instead of merely arresting, adding his momentum to his enemy's. Yanked off his feet, his assailant yells, a yell that is cut off quickly when Draiken slams the top of his head into nearest hard surface, a solid metallic wall separating the rear passenger seat from a cargo bed beyond.

The hooded man comes up with his forehead bleeding, but still capable of recovering, a chance Draiken refuses to give him.

The second time Draiken drives his head into the wall, the man comes up still weaker.

The third time, he doesn't come up at all.

Draiken stumbles to the controls and sees that the course is locked in. There are only a number of places the skimmer can go inside New London, but none of them can be any good, as whoever programmed this would have wanted it to meet up with whatever mechanism the snatchers would have set up to get themselves and the Porrinyards off-station. He does not want to be aboard when that happens. Fortunately, the speed controls remain open to

Draiken's tinkering, and so he slows the vehicle's flight down to the equivalent of a brisk run. He gets back to Oscin, rips the buzzpatch free while he's at it, and with a heroic effort that simply slaughters the hell out of his knee, manages to haul the Porrinyard up and over the side.

He then wastes no time diving in after him.

The water is fortunately not cold, but lukewarm and—in a happy reminder of Draiken's favorite environment—salty. He is grateful for whatever level of buoyancy this provides, once he paddles over to Oscin and finds him bobbing along the surface, unfortunately face down. Draiken gets Oscin's head out of the water and does what he can to keep them both afloat, an effort that is difficult at first but gets easier in a few minutes, as Oscin's drugged paralysis eases enough for his own legs to start treading. They seem too far from shore for Draiken to attempt to drag Oscin there, though the attempt might become necessary if nobody comes to pick them up, soon.

The pylon topped with the two-tiered restaurant is still the dominant feature of the landscape from this angle, and for a long time, too far from whatever's going on up there to either tell what's happening or alter its course, Draiken just watches the distant flashing lights as best he can, knowing as they gradually die down to nothing that the battle is petering out and that one side, or the other, has won.

After a few minutes, Oscin stirs. His voice is still sludgy, but growing clearer. "That was a fairly impressive effort, Mr. Draiken. I thank you."

"You're welcome. What's happening?"

"As it turns out, we won."

"I'm glad to hear it," Draiken says, shifting his position to better support Oscin.

Then Oscin says, "I'm sorry our evening out was ruined."

Draiken is by now only mildly startled to hear a version of Skye's tones coming out of Oscin's mouth. This strange shared being they are, this particular way they must be seen, takes a little getting used to, but he finds he's up to it, and as a bright light in the distance resolves into a vehicle that will be on them in less than a minute, he thinks *what the hell*. "Who says it was?"

He lowers his head to give Oscin a passionate kiss on the lips.

\* \* \*

Draiken remains in Dip Corps custody for several days, but during that time he works closely with both counselors, helping them unravel the intelligence as it comes in.

The numbers amounted to no fatalities, a few serious injuries, a number of agents and civilians in temporary comas induced by teem-flashes. There are a lot of people who will have to be cared for physically, until their minds recover, a fact that Tasha Coombs reports with a considerable shudder, as (she volunteers) she had a very bad experience with teemers, once. There are enough prisoners to drive an extended investigation for weeks. Delia Stang is, for the moment, among them.

Oscin turns out to have been a target of momentary convenience; the conspirators would have liked to take both members of the cylinked pair, but for obvious reasons would have been willing to get one or the other. The reflected threat this meant to Andrea Cort went without saying and rendered the chances of blackmailing her friends among the Bettelhines just as viable as any more direct physical threat. The true targets, as it turns out, were the brother and sister team that now run the Bettelhome Munitions Corporation. The fallout on that world is massive, including many arrests, and some actual eruptions of intrafamilial violence.

Two days in, Tasha's people confirm that Lawray's killing had been at the hands of his own people, who had forbidden him to seek Draiken as potential ally and regarded the defiant attempt as the act of an informant.

Three days in, the difficulty the ruling Bettelhines showed in accounting for the activities of Delia Stang turn out to make perfect sense, in retrospect. Stang hadn't been working for either the Bettelhines in charge, or the ones responsible for moving against the Porrinyards, but indeed for a tertiary group in the broad and sometimes labyrinthine family tree that had heard about the plot and taken it upon themselves to arrange their own secret action against it—a ploy to advance that had sown a dangerous level of confusion, but might well gain them some favor, given

Stang's helpfulness in countering the enemy's most dangerous weapon.

Upon hearing this, Draiken says, "It would have been helpful if the Bettelhines did a better job of communicating with their own."

"True," says Tasha Coombs. "But that's the nature of complicated systems like corporations and planetary governments, and even of those entities like the Bettelhine Corporation that function as both at the same time. The left hand never knows what the right hand is doing."

"Speak for yourself," the Porrinyards reply.

Cort rolls her eyes. "Governments, love. They don't possess your advantage, being able to claim one good mind between them."

The monofilament weapon was under the control of Lawray's team and was loosed in the restaurant to take out anybody who might have provided assistance to Skye Porrinyard. Given how many civilians and security forces were around for the incident, it likely would have slaughtered dozens of innocents, had Stang not prepared herself with a device intended to counter it.

Tasha Coombs says, "She's still in serious trouble for not sharing any of what she knew with us on day one. She ran operations on our soil, while fully aware of an existential threat, all because her bosses in that tertiary group wanted credit for saving the day. We haven't decided whether to declare her a hero or prosecute her to the furthest extent of the law—but both resolutions have advantages."

One week after the incident, the answers still coming in are all less about the central questions than about the minor ones. Draiken begins to find the unraveling of it all an unwelcome distraction from anything he truly cares about, as patently none of his business as Cort had assured him in the first place. He so aches to get back to the things that are his business that even a few extremely enjoyable nights in the company of Oscin and Skye Porrinyard (who at one point tell him that they've invited Counselor Cort to join in, but that she's responded with a polite no and forwarded best wishes) fail to distract him fully from that rising urgency.

He is just beginning to return to thoughts of breaking out when the Porrinyards—most enjoyable of all the prison guards he's ever had, but in the last few hours, increasingly distracted and distant—let him know that the two counselors will soon be coming to see him one last time.

He dresses formally, the same way he did the night of the battle, and is sitting on the couch when the counselors enter without knocking, Andrea Cort leading, Tasha Coombs following. Andrea is clad in her usual severe black suit, Tasha Coombs in a more casual, looser outfit suggesting that she's been interrupted on a day out. Tasha shows Draiken the courtesy of a smile, while Cort limits herself to a nod.

Cort takes the seat opposite his and pierces him with her cold, dark glare. The Porrinyards leave him and position themselves at her side—presenting a common front, which is absolutely not a good sign for him.

She says, "I believe we had better get to it, sir."

"All right."

"First, I establish that we've lived up to our agreement. We have quite a dossier for you."

"Among other things," Tasha Coombs says, "the current address of some people you likely owe a visit from the old days. They're currently running a facility very much like one where you were once imprisoned. Modeled after it, in fact; doing much of the same work; not *officially* under the auspices of this government, and indeed a perversion of what we like to say we stand for, but still something that someone in our power structure once supported, and therefore very difficult to shut down. We are prepared to offer you any assistance you need in arranging passage."

"Thank you," says Draiken, who remains aware that it cannot end this easily.

Tasha continues: "I place this information in your hands as a matter of personal discretion, which is strictly speaking an act of treason. After today, it does not exist, and any action you take is wholly your initiative. Maybe someday, if successful, and pending other considerations Andrea is about to get to, you can come to me for more. I don't actually want a *yes* or a *no* from you, John, no commitment that you can attribute to me, but maybe you can confirm that you

understand.”

He says, “I believe that the proper response is, *‘I’ll keep it under advisement.’*”

She nods. “I’m fairly confident that this is not a mistake. But it’s the least of the business we have to transact today. Andrea?”

Andrea Cort stirs and glares at him again. He gets the same impression that he always gets from the woman, that she is every bit as dangerous as the advance word promised, even if he’s managed to avoid its full brunt.

She says, “I want you gone, sir. That hasn’t changed. I concede that you’ve been helpful, and also that I still owe you for the life of someone I care about very much. My friends, Oscin and Skye here, have been boring me with their positive estimates of your character, and this was also a consideration.”

He nods at them. They nod back, but it is a reserved reaction now, showing little of the affection or warmth he’s come to expect. They also want him gone.

He doesn’t believe they were playing him all along. His professional life has been a long history of liars and seducers, people who pretended friendship one day while ready to betray him the next, but he has never permitted his experiences of that sort to prejudice him against those he might be able to trust. His best judgment is that their attraction to him was sincere, and their companionship of the last few days genuine. That’s why they also both look so sad. But they are as aware of the new factor that’s come into play as he is, and he has no useful means of countering it.

Cort concludes: “Overall, I believe that in the long run you’ll create more problems than you solve. I hope to never see you again.”

He takes no particular offense. If anything, he appreciates her candor.

“Alas,” she says, “I have no confidence of that, especially since you still represent a serious unanswered question.”

He nods: “And which one is that, Counselor?”

“Please don’t insult me by pretending that you haven’t also been thinking it. Namely: why me? It can’t just be that I was able to refer you to somebody who owed me a favor and was better equipped to provide you with the information you need. If that was all Silver had in mind, he would have provided you with Tasha’s contact information in the first place and left me out of it. Instead, he sent you after me, told you I’d be dangerous to approach, prepared you to expect heavy opposition. Why was that, do you think?”

He says, “It could be that he was just arranging for me to provide you with assistance at a difficult time.”

“Comical. That gives him credit for a degree of foresight that qualifies as superhuman. That assumes him capable of *knowing*, somehow, that there’d be forces arrayed against me at just the time you happened to arrive. Given the interstellar distances involved, how much time you must have spent in transit, how many connections you must have had to make, it makes no sense at all. And so I am forced to ask you again, sir: why me? If not what Tasha’s giving you, then what other intelligence, what other piece of knowledge accumulated over a busy lifetime, would he presume you needed?”

Draiken suspects that he’s in more danger, now, than at any point since his arrival on New London. “He never gave me a question to ask. I have no way of knowing what particular information he expected you to provide.”

“It’s a genuine poser, sir. And I would be content to let it be, if not for the awareness that you must have also given it considerable thought and would be even less inclined to let it go than myself. In the end, I believe that you’ve come up with the same answer I have.”

He sighs. “I believe so, too. Do I have to say it?”

“I will save you the trouble. It turns out that you’re my enemy after all, for the same reason the people behind Lawray were my enemies. For however long you intend on following your current course, my own personal—my admittedly *unfortunate*, but still only *personal*—connection to individuals in the Bettelhine power structure will always render me your most useful means of targeting them. Tasha may have provided you with another objective in the meantime,

but the instant your vendetta turns toward Xana, and I do mean the *instant*, you become a danger to me, and to these good people I love, one who will have no more reason to approach me politely than you did this time.” She sniffs. “Under the circumstances, it would be only common sense to kill you, or construct some pretext for imprisoning you indefinitely.”

“And yet you won’t.”

“No, sir, I won’t. This place Tasha’s sending you—either of these two things might happen anyway. Or you might prevail, only to be steered into some other distracting errand that has nothing to do with me. And then there’s the other consideration: that what you intend to do, shut these people down, is an absolute good. I won’t stand in the way of that. I’ll even wish you the best of luck.”

He emits a short, sharp laugh. “Should I thank you for that?”

“Since it’s more than I may be able to afford in the long run, I would.”

“Then thank you,” he says. “It’s been interesting.”

“Yes. It has. Goodbye, Mr. Draiken.”

She stands and heads for the door.

Tasha Coombs stays behind, no doubt to facilitate his own departure, but he finds more fascination in the way Porrinyards follow Cort, like faithful shadows. The similarity is to the way they echo one another. It is not precisely the same, because they are one person in two bodies, and she is a separate individual very different from them, but the connection is still palpable, still a bond that connects them and renders all three manifestations of the same will.

Hers, theirs, or some combination? It’s impossible to tell; but there is no doubt that nothing will ever break it apart, not as long as they live. The epiphany evokes a strong sense of loss, in him—not because he’s lost whatever relationship he might have had with Oscin and Skye, but because this strange and unlikeable woman Cort has this rarest of all blessings, and in his life, he has only known temporary shadows.

As she turns at the doorway, the Porrinyards turn with her. She looks dagger-sharp. They look wistful.

She says, “From this moment on, for as long as I live, if I ever catch sight of you, if I ever turn a corner and find you waiting on the other side, indeed if I ever find out that you’re on the same world as me, if any of that happens without advance communication from you that there’s a purpose to our meeting, which will give me the opportunity to take precautions, then I will assume you’re an active threat and end you.”

He nods. “That’s only reasonable.”

“I think you’ll find that I’m a remarkably reasonable woman.”

“I’m sorry,” the Porrinyards say, clearly meaning it. “I would have liked more time with you, John.”

Then they’re gone.

\* \* \*

What follows is not the first time Draiken’s been expelled from a world. But having experienced that fate a number of times, he’s learned that once headed for a specific place, there are two ways that deportation can proceed. One may be allowed to stick around and await the very first conveyance headed for that final destination, or one may be required to leave as soon as possible, even if that means booking passage to some other place, maybe even some place that will be difficult to leave, the hope being that he will have some opportunity to backtrack later on.

No favors are being done for him on this particular day, unless he can count being permitted to leave as a favor. Tasha Coombs and a small army of armed security take him directly to New London Departures and arrange for him to be placed aboard the first available transport, which is already holding space for him. It is a passenger freighter on a nonstop course for a system known as Harloo, which he has never heard of before and will take fourteen months just to reach. He has absolutely no idea how he will arrange passage from there to the destination he wants, which is in a straight line almost a year in the opposite direction. Whatever happens, he will be frustrated and out of commission for some time.

Tasha Coombs waits with him, in the corpus storage area where he is shortly to be placed in bluegel suspension for the trip. Despite the presence of armed security, there to make sure he departs as scheduled, to the destination arranged for him, it is all in all the most pleasant of all waits. She is in fact openly encouraging about his plans for his old tormentors, and vocally regretful that their brief association has to end the way it has. She says, "I do expect to see you again, Mr. Draiken. Maybe in a few years, maybe after you've found what you're looking for. Maybe when my own situation has changed, maybe after Andrea's situation has changed. Until then, I hope you can appreciate that we're showing you as much consideration as we can afford."

He says, "I do. And someday, I hope you'll find me just as courteous. Perhaps even more so."

He means it as a veiled threat, the gesture of a man currently impotent who needs to assert himself in some way, but she greets it with a smile.

"Either way, it'll be an interesting journey."

The bluegel tech arrives to announce that Draiken's crypt is ready. Draiken stands and, escorted by Tasha and several members of the security detail, allows himself to be led to the container in question, which lies at the end of a long row of others scheduled for loading aboard the same transport. Because he is the man he is, accustomed to mapping his surroundings and gathering potentially useful information even when there is no obvious way to use it, he notes the names affixed to each already-sealed crypt and finds none of them helpful even in potential, at least not until he gets to the last one, a longer model than all the others, no doubt employed because the same is also true of the individual already in stasis inside.

By the time he reads that name, he already knows who is being sent with him, and who will be unloaded along with him, on Harloo.

*Delia Stang.*

That's something to look forward to.

The two deportees will be having quite the interesting conversation, in about fourteen months.

[Author's Note (taken with a deep breath): the man currently using the name John Draiken previously appeared in the *Analog* novellas "Sleeping Dogs," "The Soul Behind the Face," and "Blurred Lives." Andrea Cort previously appeared in multiple *Analog* novellas, starting with "Unseen Demons" (July/August 2002), and most recently with "The Coward's Option" (March 2016), and in a trilogy of novels that includes the Philip K. Dick Award-winning *Emissaries from the Dead*, which introduced Oscin and Skye Porrinyard. Tasha Coombs first appeared in the Andrea Cort story, "Tasha's Fail Safe" (March 2015). This meeting between the characters takes place shortly after Andrea and the Porrinyards return from the mission described in the second Andrea Cort novel, *The Third Claw of God*.]