

Blurred Lives

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***Draiken** has previously appeared in Analog in “Sleeping Dogs” (July/August 2015), and both **Draiken** and **Thorne** appeared in “The Soul Behind the Face” (October 2016).*

Reunited after years of separation, the two old enemies Draiken and Thorne somehow refrain from killing one another and instead take to traveling together.

They are strange companions, neither strangers nor friends, occasional sex partners but not lovers.

The places they need to reach on this quest more important to him than to her, are neither travel hubs nor capitols. Direct passage from here to there is often not quite possible. They must journey in segments, some difficult, some expensive, some downright illegal.

While enroute they spend much of their time in starship cargo holds, entombed in their bluegel crypts, fully unaware of the passage of time as their transports plow the twisted topology that interstellar travelers must use instead of straight lines.

By necessity they wake often, as they arrive at one interim port or another, to arrange the next legs of their journey. Some of these ports are once-green worlds now reduced to rancid industrial hells, while others are undeveloped backwaters that the give-and-take of civilized commerce have passed by. They stay a little while at one before moving on to another, at times treating these intervals as vacations, but more frequently taking them as maddening delays as they follow a circuitous route to one world in particular.

Their adventures are numerous, their close calls profound. Books could be written about their more minor exploits.

Once upon a time they worked for different sides in a war where the allegiances kept changing, where momentary power shifts either rendered them precarious allies or required them to once again regard one another as targets. Now that circumstances have temporarily positioned them as allies again, they continue to stumble, often clumsily, between one state and the next.

Draiken begins no day knowing for sure whether Thorne will be silent or voluble, cheerful or withdrawn to the point of hostility; whether she'll pull him into her bed or attempt to slit his throat. She does all these things, and yet somehow they survive: two intimate strangers, traveling together as man and wife, but living as feral dogs in a common cage.

More than once, during the peaceful interludes, she lies with her cheek against his chest. In one cover identity he has thick chest hair, which she explores with a fingertip, whispering that there are any number of congenial worlds that exist under bright and life-giving suns. There are places with blue water and warm breezes where the two of them could call themselves any name they choose and live in peace while waiting for the final darkness to take them. In such places, she says, they could pretend that the wars they'd known had never been fought, that the scars they've inflicted on one another have never been wounds spilling blood.

He reminds her that he's tried this once on a world as beautiful as any. It didn't work then. Even with nobody hunting him, he'd still lived with the furtiveness of any fugitive.

She points out that she hadn't been with him then. Maybe, she supposes, if she ever followed him to a place like that, they could find shared peace in the fiction that none of the trespasses between them ever took place.

Maybe, he allows back. It would be nice.

The premise is dropped without resolution.

On multiple occasions she tries to kill him. On two of those, he needs to do her injury in order to protect himself. On the third, she inflicts what would be a mortal wound, but recoils at what she's done and drags him to an ASource Medical kiosk for emergency surgery.

Once, during weeks they spend aboard a slow-moving luxury transport, he wakes paralyzed, the victim of a neural tap she's implanted on him during the night. She's stripped and spread-eagled him, leaving him to stare face-up at a ceiling defined by horizontal support beams. She stretches out alongside him, the curves of her current body glowing in the overhead light, as she presses the tip of a dagger against the softest part of his throat. "You would be dead," she assures him in a whisper as soft as the sound of leaves fluttering in breeze, "before it even began to occur to you that you were dying." She draws the sharp edge across his skin, teasing the thin line between the natural resistance of the meat and the superior slicing capacity of the blade, not cutting but exploring the very border of his flesh giving way. Although he knows as well as she does just how long it would take a deep slash in any particular place to kill him, had in fact had the information drilled into him long before carrying out his first field operation, she amuses herself, for a while, telling him how his death would play out were she to apply just a bit more pressure in any given place; less than twelve seconds here, a leisurely four minutes there, hours or days of helpless agony in this other place. She points out that, paralyzed as he is, he would not be able to address his wounds or cry for help, any more than he can talk her out of his murder now.

He can only wait and experience this as it happens, his mind finding occasional comfort in thoughts of that other, far gentler woman on Greeve. Aletha had offered him an alternative to resuming the madness of his old existence. She'd been willing to take him into her life, and to save him, as long as he returned the favor and also saved her. As he endures the insult of Thorne's blade, he can only wonder whatever happened to that far gentler soul, whether she'd ever found anyone worthier of her than he had turned out to be. Or had he been her last chance of peace, just as she'd been his?

If he's ever fated to know the answer, he does not find it today. Thorne teases his imminent death for hours, so long that he almost wishes she'll just go ahead and do it already. Then tears appear in her eyes. She damns her own madness and departs, but only after setting a timer for his paralyzing neural block to deactivate.

Years of deceit and bloodshed have left his traveling companion with a deep antipathy toward the company of other human beings. In between such extremes of love and hostility, she retreats to the portable isolation pod where he found her, which she'd until recently declared home, and which they are now obliged to carry around as luggage. It's a coffin for a woman who prefers to be dead, and when she closes herself up inside she's a universe of one, fed and bathed and exercised and in all other ways maintained in the perfect isolation she's come to

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need at regular intervals. She is not alone in her preference for such environments, but most inhabitants of such places pipe in music, or reading material, or neurec programs that make life in there indistinguishable from the lush fantasies they prefer. She uses none. Her pod is a white sensory-deprivation hell, useful only in that it insulates her from the universe that is so often more than she can abide. She stays in there for hours or days or weeks, allowing dark thoughts to roil and churn like a tempest-tossed ocean, until she finds the strength to calm the surface at least, and emerge, a persuasive but false cheer once again turning her back into someone who can be lived with, or at least survived, until her next explosion. More than once she tells him that by coming to her for help he'd rescued her from spending the rest of her life self-exiled in her little box. More than once she damns him for the same reason, saying he's deprived her of the closest thing to peace she's ever known. And sometimes she admits that she is not at home either in or out of that pod, any more than she is home as either enemy or lover; any more than she'd be a natural fit as anything but a corpse.

For four years, Mercantile, they work their way from one system to another, under a variety of names and faces, linked in this waltz of love and hate.

As they work their way from one painstakingly obtained scrap of intelligence to another.

As they work their way back to the puppet masters who made them both what they are.

* * *

By the time they reach a cylinder world named Liberty, constructed to take advantage of a perfectly congenial star that somehow survived its evolution without acquiring any planets of note, they have taken on the appearance of a young man and young woman.

Thorne designed their latest bodies and, though kind enough to provide him with peak fitness, had exercised substantial sarcasm when choosing their respective appearances. For herself she chose from the ancestral African palette, giving herself deep brown eyes and a complexion so dark that it seems to absorb available light, a sharp contrast with the complexion she gives him, one so milky-pale it crosses the borders of albinism. She gave herself a fierce gaze and him watery eyes. She looks regal, like a goddess; he, more like an oaf. He's noted the disparity in their attractiveness but hasn't rewarded her gesture with more than a wry shrug. It has never been like him to waste energy complaining about matters that petty.

Liberty is a civilized place, three-quarters green and off-limits to most residents, one-quarter a well-designed and highly comfortable city with parks, theatres, restaurants, recreational facilities, and a population that appears to have stabilized at pleasantly crowded without ever becoming an oppressive hubbub. There are public places designed for lounging about and enjoying the glow of the center-spindle suns, and they have been placed at the proper distances from one another, to ensure traffic flow and minimize city tensions. Everybody seems equally prosperous, and quite a few of them are beautiful. If there are any industries, they are not within the habitat; there are no foul effluents turning the interior into that phenomenon far too prevalent in human space, the industrial hell. And this should be a good thing, but the city feels more like a great open-air resort than the kind of place that naturally congeals around any gathering of humanity, and all the brightly dressed, superficially happy people have a tightness to them that seems more appropriate to societies teeming with prisons and gulags. Draiken has been to enough of those to sense that right away, but the trap door he already suspects hidden in this place must be well-guarded, for he catches no other sign of it.

He and Thorne check into a hotel sitting on a device designed to roll it to and fro in a manner that simulates a healthy ocean chop, from some world with seas; he does not know how much comfort she's able to take in such a place, but for the man who's spent decades of his life fishing under a tropical sun, it's as good as home. He spends hours on the balcony, overlooking a holographic ocean with storm clouds gathering on the horizon, breathing in a first-rate chemical reconstitution of salty brine; not Greeve's specific mixture of elements, but it was close. She spends the night locked in the head, though whether from seasickness or one of her black moods is not something he's able to figure out.

The next morning, they visit a little cottage beneath a curving sky, the checkerboard pastures of the habitat's agricultural quadrant forming a lattice far above his head. The wheel's been built

to rotate without a central hub, and so the altitude layer between the lands where the occupant of the cottage lives and that distant farmland is empty but for the specks of fun-seekers in winged suits doing acrobatics in the zone of low-g.

Thorne has led them to the man they've come to visit, Silver. He is not much older than they are, but for reasons of his own has decided to show his years. Unrejuvenated, he's thus lived past the point where his body might have been better off listening to entropy's demands that it just fail and die already. He sits hunched in a hoverchair, licking his withered lips while peering at his visitors through clouded eyes lined with blood-red rims. The eyes have surrendered to their inevitable decay, becoming biologically blind, but he still sees perfectly, through nano-cameras that manifest as red dots floating a millimeter above his unseeing pupils. He speaks perfectly too. His body has no voice other than a pathetic wheeze, but the simulated baritone of his vocal prosthetic rings with a presence more appropriate for the live stage.

Knowing their mission, Silver has refused to meet them except in the presence of an attending bodyguard, who he's introduced, with some humor, as Edifice. Between them, Draiken and Thorne would normally be confident about being able to take out any mercenary, but Edifice gives them pause: she's a towering monolith of a woman, well over seven feet tall, with arms that cross over the chest like pythons locked in a battle to the death. Her default expression establishes that it matters little to her whether she continues to stand by her charge's side, saying nothing, or lurches into action to break the bones of anyone foolish enough to threaten him.

Draiken has encountered and occasionally even beaten thugs her size, not without taking damage himself. He would, if necessary, attempt it again, but who knows what enhancements this behemoth has? It's wiser to refrain, so he does.

Silver explains his condition with a simple, "I've decided to try dying."

"Interesting," says Draiken. "Most people don't treat that as a lifestyle choice. Most of the people whose lives you've destroyed weren't offered other options."

Silver grins. "I am more fortunate. I die because it's something I've decided to experience."

Thorne's hatred for the old man is like a sea threatening to overflow the walls erected to contain it. "I would have been happy to arrange it for you at any time."

"A slit throat," the old man twinkles. "A projectile through the skull. Some bot armed with blades reducing this corpus to cubes of neatly stacked meat. Even explosive decompression or incineration. These are all things I could have had, a million times over, all by the single expedient of eschewing any attempt at surviving the fates my enemies would have chosen for me. That kind of death I have approached any number of times, and once or twice, depending on your precise definition, even experienced. I've been brought back from the brink any number of times, not always willingly. But the inexorable, marching decrepitude that once all men and women faced as a possible future? That I have never faced—and I confess that the more I evaded all other possibilities, the more fascinating I found it. Do you know what happens to time, when a man can feel his life-force flake away and peel off? Amazing things. Downright intoxicating things."

Draiken asks, "What about the pain?"

"Pain was offered as an option. I took on a single day's worth, just to see what it was like. The answer was of course ghastly. I said that I would choose to wither and die without it. No, my friend; I assure you I'm quite comfortable."

"That's too bad," says Thorne.

Her hostility makes perfect sense. She's explained to Draiken that Silver was, many years ago, her jailer and torturer. Once upon a time, alliances had shifted and she had found herself abandoned on ground where she'd counted on being protected; what had ensued for her was months of incarceration under Silver's control, enduring attempts to shift her loyalties by every means of psychological torment at his disposal. What she experienced was very similar to what Draiken had once endured in another facility, but he's always sensed, from the broken being she is, that she came much closer to personal destruction than he ever did.

What's most ironic is this: though they spent much of their careers working for what they'd imagined different sides, the politics of the era had been so fluid that they still have no idea whether their respective imprisonments represented the malice of two opposing blocs, or just

one.

Silver must have the answer. But though he's agreed to see them, after the bartering of much proof that they are the people they profess to be, this is not among the intelligence that he's agreed to share.

"Your problem, my friends, is that you seek the wrong thing. You want the specific people who once opened up your heads and attempted to tinker with what they found inside, when in fact many of them have died or moved on to the other things. For the most part, they are beyond your justice. In most cases, you cannot even have the specific organizations, when so much time has passed that the governments they represented have either fallen or been subsumed into others. Their heirs operate within an entirely separate set of borders now. You can damage them, I suppose; perhaps even stop one or two. But personal satisfaction, of a lasting kind, is not in your future and not worth seeking. It's also irrelevant."

"Fine," says Draiken, over Thorne's visible, if silent, objections. "What is relevant?"

"Well, let us put it this way: The history of Mankind has long been an exercise in powerful people exploiting the malleable nature of human perception to manipulate the teeming masses into acting against their own interests. It's always been possible to get individuals or entire populations to perceive the world in a manner that defies the direct evidence of their own senses, in a manner rewarding those who control the agenda: mind-control, for lack of a better phrase, though for much of the existence of our species it has always been accomplished through inexact tools like childhood indoctrination, religion, peer pressure, advertising, military training, and, as in your respective cases, the specific use of psychological torture.

"Sufficiently advanced use of such techniques is capable of molding people into entirely new beings, capable of cheerfully betraying what once they would have defended with every ounce of will.

"When it works, it's really quite marvelous to witness. I remember, for instance, a case where, for reasons that would be too complicated to go into, it became necessary to turn a dedicated mother of three, wife of a man who opposed our political agenda, against their young children. She entered our treatment center a sweet woman devoted to their happiness, indulgent of their whims, and fiercely protective of any perceived threat to their well-being. A few weeks of dedicated therapy later, a little adjustment to her perceptions and moral referents, and she left us dedicated to the proposition that they were hateful vermin and that every ounce of joy and self-respect in their little lives was a contagion to be eradicated with unrestrained mental cruelty, never to be inflicted where their father could witness it. He never learned of this sabotage. But his life, as he'd known it, had been subtly destroyed.

"Ah, what wreckage had manifested by the time they were grown!"

Draiken comes damned close to breaking the man's withered neck with a single blow. Only the knowledge that this is likely the reaction Silver wants stays Draiken's hand, and likely Thorne's. They need more from this man.

"Alas," Silver continues, "our power was not wholly reliable. It was limited by factors that included the talent certain subjects possessed for resistance. You two, for instance. You both left your respective periods of imprisonment, changed only to the degree you allowed yourselves to be.

"But now, ah, now. The state of the art, as pursued by multiple savants, has advanced to the point where it might as well be a star drive compared to our old first-generation internal-combustion engine."

Thorne's reply is low and dangerous. "Such as."

"Well, it takes differing forms, depending on the starting premises of the research. I'll name one. On Xana, homeworld of the Bettelhine Munitions Corporation, there's a woman currently calling herself Dina Pearlman who has developed a method of altering the pleasure centers in the human brain, to instill upon critical employees a fierce loyalty that utterly submerges any countering impulses like dignity, personal ambitions, aesthetic preferences, or what have you. The result, fiercely guarded by the Bettelhines, is a means of creating slaves who find delight in obeying orders, no matter how demeaning. This is, incidentally, where I found and, for lack of a better

word, purchased my dear Edifice; on that world she was once a celebrated athlete, competing for her own glory, but she made the mistake of acquiring debts that she could not pay, and now she honestly has no concerns in life other than my well-being, and no source of satisfaction other than my kind approval. If I told her to start chewing on her fingertips and work her way as far up her right arm as she could, before passing out from blood loss, I assure you in full confidence that she would. Is this not right, Edifice?"

"You've got it, boss," says Edifice.

"You would comply if I asked you to do that, would you not?"

"It's my place," Edifice replies.

Thorne shakes her head, sickened. "Charming."

"There are other approaches," Silver continues. Now he commences ticking off examples on his fingers. "We have learned through another source, highly classified, of a technique known to a minor and now quarantined race called the Caithiriin; another, only used among their own, to the Riirgaans. Rumors have come to my ears of even more advanced techniques among the AIsource, and of other, lesser projects being pursued, here and there.

"The genie is out of the bottle, my friends. The powers that work on perfecting the trick are too numerous for even a couple of determined old killers like yourselves to ever inconvenience. It's like being a pacifist and striving to end all war; a commendable cause, but one too large for the most well-meaning efforts of even the most accomplished pacifist. You would be wise to set yourself more achievable goals."

"Fine," says Draiken. "We can start with those *you* worked for. Someplace where they're still carrying on their work."

"As it happens," Silver replies, "you have found one. I may be dying by choice, but I still keep myself busy."

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It is the kind of line that should prompt cage bars to spring up and trap them, or armed assassins to break in from all sides to kill them, but they get neither: instead they receive a kindly stated, if malignant, invitation to a tour.

They accept and agree to return the next morning, at station hour 0800.

As they head back to their own lodgings, they engage in frenzied debate over how best to follow through. Part of the journey takes place on local public transportation and none of the riders with them see that they know each other, let alone that they're conversing. They speak in what is not quite telepathy, not quite subverbal communication via hyltex: rather, via a series of highly subtle microexpressions carrying compressed information that they each decode by means of an algorithm running on real-time neural implant. It is a painful and unnatural exchange that they endure only because they know they are in the stronghold of their enemy and must be under constant surveillance.

Translated, she asks him: "Do you know the difference between us?"

Translated, he replies: "I count several."

"The key difference, then. I left all this behind. I knew that human civilization was run by corrupt shits. I had no further need to serve them but also no faith in ever being able to find justice. I was happy to live out my years isolated in my pod. You've dragged me back to the world and to the wars, and out of perversity I followed you, but I find that I can do without closure."

"You can leave if you'd like. You've done more than enough, just getting me this far."

Her eyes flare with hurt and rage. "And you don't have to try this hard to be a bastard."

"I never misled you about how far I wanted to take this."

"You've also never had anything to pay me with except money—and that I only accepted before you revealed who you were. And yet, even after that, I followed you, hating you half the time, thinking you the last and best of my friends the other half; feeling tortured by your very presence in between. Do you realize what I'm telling you when I say that I'm only here because you are?"

"Please don't say you love me, Thorne. I know you too well."

"You know me well enough to understand that I've long considered myself incapable of the

emotion. But has it occurred to you, Draiken, how long it's been since I've also attempted it? That it may be a skill, like any other, that can be practiced and picked up, that even somebody like me can be forced to manifest, by behaving like it's present?"

He finds that he has no ready reply to that.

She continues: "Once, on a world called Freitaun, I was ordered to kill a man people considered a living saint. A philanthropist. He had spent his entire life working on behalf of others, making sure the hungry were fed, that the poor were lifted up, that the hopeless had something to believe in. Millions believed in this man, Draiken. I had time before the end, when he already knew that I was going to kill him, to ask him how he had wound up such a selfless bastard. You know what he told me—not angrily, but with the same kind of compassion he showed everybody else? He said, *'I made up my mind what I wanted to pretend to be. It only gradually became what I actually was. Most people who choose to radically change their lives are just putting on plays, with themselves, as both performer and audience. I could show you how to do that, if you'd like.'*"

He's darkly amused at this talk of Thorne, with all her cover identities as an operative, and all the false personalities she'd assumed at her subsequent career as professional imposter, ever needing to learn more about how to be someone she's not. "I assume you killed him anyway."

"Wrong. I let him go."

This actually stuns him. "I never would have imagined that."

"It was a pointless little act of rebellion. I told him that my superiors would just send someone else soon and offered him my protection on his way to a new identity. He refused, saying that he could not adjust to a new face that late in life. What I'd warned him proved true, and only ninety-three minutes later I was on my way to interrogation, while his body cooled."

"I never knew that was how you fell out of favor. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. Silver's right. This thing we fight, the powerful bending the weak to their wills, is both universal and as ancient as the species. It's ingrained in our natures. We're not going to make it go away, no matter what we do. But we do have a choice about who we can pretend to be, and by that who we can learn to be. I hate you, more or less, but I can see that this, now, represents our very last chance. I'm willing to try for another kind of life, with the only human being who understands me. You hate me, more or less, and I know that you also see that if you continue this, there remains only one way this can end. Why can't we change direction and help each other, before this kills us both?"

He considers her offer for long enough to see that it would mostly fill the rest of his life, leaving only a little bit that would remain empty until the day he died; and that he would always see the empty place and never be able to ignore it, no matter what bounty surrounded it. But the bounty would be more than he has now. It would certainly be better than being *all* emptiness, except for the burning purpose that keeps him going. It seems an easy choice, taking what is easy and a promise of happiness against what is difficult and likely to end in heartbreak. The only question, really, is just how much of a fool he's willing to be.

And then he utters the only reply he can, this close to his first major lead.

"We'll talk about it again after we're finished with Silver. If he gives us nothing of value, I'll . . . we'll give it serious consideration. I promise."

"That is," she says, "if he gives us the choice. He might not."

His smile is like those flashed by the many aquatic predators he faced on Greeve, all white teeth and mirthless hunger. "No. He might not."

She says nothing more.

But once they return to their hotel, she retires to her pod and does not speak to him again that night.

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The next morning, they fly as passengers on Silver's open skimmer, a four-seat vehicle that hums with what seems like contentment as it flies high above the curved inner landscape of Liberty. They have left the urban landscape of the port city far behind, and now soar over verdant green fields with no apparent human population: the part of the cylinder world owned by the

powers behind Silver.

The old man slouches in his hoverchair, facing them, poisonous charm oozing from his aged features. Edifice stands behind him, arms folded over her chest, as motionless as her name.

Silver says, "There is always a price, for those who choose to live in a civilized society. Some live in industrial hells, laboring all their days for the money they need to exist in a fog of their own wastes; others indenture themselves, in one way or another, selling off years of their lives in exchange for the promise of a comfortable retirement. Liberty offers its citizens a different deal. In exchange for having all their needs met, and a promise of permanent freedom from economic want, they agree to disposability. We can take any one of them, for our purposes, at any time."

Draiken says, "They must all deceive themselves into believing that it'll never come to that."

"Of course they do, and the great secret of our success is how deceptively easy human beings find accepting that one pernicious lie. We take no more than one in five thousand, a total that they're willing to believe is determined by lottery . . . but the fact is that our selection process is based on more scientific criteria, based on the demographics of the subjects we happen to need at any particular time. Some day we may need healthy and educated young women between 18-24; other days we may need uneducated men, 33-40; on still other days, children. On such occasions the local news will report a flurry of disappearances, just large enough to satisfy our quota. The consternation is limited to the loved ones, and preexisting control techniques are easily sufficient enough to repress that."

Thorne has the look of a woman whose greatest pleasure in life would be slitting this awful man's throat. "So you can take away a husband, for one, and persuade the loving wife who will never see him again to just shrug and get on with life."

"Perhaps not to just shrug. We don't want a society of emotionless robots. They'd be worthless as experimental fodder, for one thing. Reasonable grief has its place, and is in any event a useful data point. We track how it's processed."

Thorne grumbles to herself.

Silver takes note but continues. "But when part of the preexisting social contract is acceptance of the possibility, it's relatively easy to dissuade the occasional rebel determined to find a requisitioned family member. All you really have to do is make it clear to them that they can also be taken at will, if not for academic study, then for compassionate disposal. In most cases, they'll see that there's no point in protesting what amount to the whims of remote and unknowable gods."

She is furious. "What do you do with those who try to get over it but can't? The ones who can't stop with what you call reasonable grief?"

The old man's cheeks wrinkle with smile-lines. "Similarly: compassionate disposal."

Thorne rolls her eyes at Draiken. "Your pointless quest can end here, as far as I'm concerned. Killing this piece of garbage right now would be an absolute good, for the whole damned human race."

Edifice stirs like a mountain trembling from the whims of some long-dormant subterranean fault. "I warn you. You would both be dead within seconds of doing any harm to him."

"Worth the price," Thorne snarls.

"And far from certain," Silver assures his bodyguard. "These people are very good at what they do. Either one of them, alone, might even be able to survive a violent encounter with you."

"I doubt it," says Edifice.

"You shouldn't," says Silver. "Indeed, I order you to take them seriously, as threats."

And just like that, Edifice's expression shifts, perhaps not all the way to fear, but a little closer in the direction of wariness, a chilling demonstration of the old man's total control.

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Not long after that they approach what appears to be a jet-black wall circling part of the landscape up ahead. It looks solid, but as they draw closer, Draiken perceives that it is not a wall, but a projected field that prevents the passage of light and thus eliminates the possibility of distant surveillance from any point on Liberty's cylindrical landscape. Though the black wall clearly hides their destination, the skimmer does not fly straight there, but instead describes an eccentric serpentine line, probably reflecting the only route that avoids defensive systems geared to destroy

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anyone who approaches without prior knowledge of the only path in. The detours add nearly half an hour to their journey, but eventually they have satisfied whatever navigational requirements ensure their survival, and they enter the zone of darkness.

There, surrounded by a gray landscape devoid of vegetation, they find a spire about a hundred meters tall, topped by a saucer-shaped structure with black windows. Below is a field of colorless dirt upon which stands a dusty village of two dozen cottages, between which about half as many men and women wander on whatever errands they need to get through their days in such a place.

None of the people down there seem to be at all interested in one another, or in the skimmer that circles and alights atop the towering structure in their midst.

When the skimmer lands, Edifice gently lifts Silver from his hoverchair and disembarks with him, cradling the old man like a baby. Draiken and Thorne follow.

A stairwell opens in the smooth surface of the saucer, and they all descend into a dark room where a multitude of monitors follow the movements of the people below.

A secondary and more compact hoverchair, better suited for the space, awaits Silver there. Edifice lowers him into it with absolute gentleness, unquestioned devotion. There's enough additional seating to accommodate everybody, though all three able to stand continue to do so. Edifice identifies one unmarked door as leading to an elevator and another to the facility's bathroom, in case anybody needs it. But there are few other comforts, certainly no sense that anyone ever sleeps here overnight.

Were Draiken not already on high alert, the Spartan surroundings deprived of any human or homey touches would be enough to activate the sense that this is a dangerous place.

He says, "The people below. They're prisoners."

Silver says, "Test subjects, actually."

Draiken counters: "Victims."

"Whatever nomenclature you prefer. Victims is fine. They are now suitable for anything except an existence of being just that. But what have I done with them, eh? Perhaps you can guess?"

"Neither one of us is interested in guessing."

"Very well, I'll skip to the chase, as they say. These unfortunates you see below, in that little village I've dubbed Elba, achieve perfection in the singular task of being compliant prisoners. They are not hemmed in by walls or by guards. They are kept within their confines purely by what I've made them.

"For instance, among other things, they have all been rendered incapable of walking a straight line; they may attempt to flee on foot, and indeed many of them have tried just this, but any such venture will only describe a wide circle that will bring them back to where they are.

"I have also removed from them any impulse toward self-destruction. They are compelled to live, even when life contains nothing worth the effort. There are no hunger strikes, not in my prison!

"But perhaps most significant is the elimination of collaborative effort. You see, they cannot consciously sense one another, ever. They occupy the same community, and live within mere steps of companionship, but perceive themselves as alone. Even wandering as they are now, they avoid one another by subconscious reflex, thus preventing comical blind collisions. But they cannot take conscious notice of such detours. As far as they are each concerned, they are all in solitary confinement.

"This, of course, ultimately removes the final element that makes escape even into their own resources possible: hope."

The monitors show the blind, trapped citizens of Elba: men and women of varying ages, shuffling hopelessly in what had seemed to be random trajectories, but which now stand revealed as a complex dance where the purpose is to always search for one another, and always fail. A few grope the seemingly empty air before them, grasping for any other body, but whenever they seem about to touch, one or the other jerks away without being aware of it, and they continue on untouched. There is one, a young woman too young to have fallen into the hands of a creature like Silver, who stands at the center of it all, endlessly screaming; she looks half-mad, but

appallingly she also looks half-sane, as she begs the heavens for release.

Thorne almost spits. "You are a bastard."

"True. Literally so, in my case. The world where I was born was a truly despicable patriarchy. My mother was . . . but, of course, my life story is extraneous. Suffice it to say that, while not precisely a sadist, I have never been one to reject any given course of action out of revulsion for its cruelty."

"What can you possibly get out of this?" she asks. "You've already proven your power over them. What else is left for you to learn?"

For the first time Silver seems genuinely surprised. "To the contrary. They are here to provide additional data. To that end, I change their paradigms from time to time. Sometimes I allow them to sense one another, in groups of two or three, acting as matchmaker for grand love affairs, or instigator of eternal vendettas. Sometimes I pit them against one another, in what amount to wars. Then I restore their sense of sensory isolation. It is all invaluable for one whose assigned task is to calibrate precisely what measures of control work best."

Draiken finds a single word in that speech and seizes on it, like a prospector who has spotted the single valuable stone in a mound of excavated ground. "Your *assigned* task."

"Yes."

"You will tell us exactly who gave you this obscene assignment and where we can find them."

"I have already assured you that there are more than you could destroy, before the tide of the inevitable renders your efforts moot."

"We will worry about that. The names."

Silver chuckles. "The most I will give you, if we come to terms, is *one* name: a party who will provide the next puzzle piece if after we're done you decide you still wish to pursue this mad errand of yours."

"That *one* name, then."

"The individual is extraordinarily dangerous. You might not survive a direct encounter."

"We'll worry about that. The name."

Another chuckle. "I am, as I keep pointing out, dying soon, and possessed of no pressing reasons to withhold it. But I am also still a scientist of sorts, driven by vestigial academic interest in his lifetime pursuits, and so we at last arrive at the point in this negotiation where I provide my terms. My final act, as it were. You shall receive the information you desire only at the time of my choosing, and that time happens to be after you, Mr. Draiken, willingly join the unfortunates imprisoned below. There you will be provided a single means of escape, and if you find it, will be provided with what you want."

Draiken glances at Thorne. "What about her?"

"I have gathered that this is your quest, not hers. My wager is therefore only with you. She may stay here with us and observe your progress."

Draiken glances at Thorne and finds in her grim face neither assurance nor warning. Over their association, she's saved his life almost precisely as many times as she's tried to kill him. Clearly, her presence as objective referee is no firm guarantee of safety.

He says, "I want more than answers, if I agree to your damned wager. I want Elba shut down, and these people restored to their selves."

Thorne amplifies: "Because we will kill you very painfully if you don't."

Edifice stirs, just enough to suggest the certainty of immediate violent retaliation. It is like watching a powerful quake ripple across an ancient rock formation without quite dislodging any of its component stones, in that it has withstood despite any number of similar past disturbances and will no doubt continue to do so.

Silver says, "I'm not surprised by the sentiment. But even assuming you two get past Edifice, any violence done to me will leave those below still burdened by all the limitations I have placed on them; their future mental health is not a result you can achieve by empty threats. You will only damn them to an eternity of the same. So, just to keep matters interesting, let us add their freedom to the stakes. Return to me, and I will have them all freed of their mental shackles."

"And if I don't manage to escape?" Draiken counters.

“Then you will live out your days among them, dwelling on what your failure has meant for everyone concerned.”

Draiken still resists. He’s being invited to take an insanely stupid risk based only on the word of a known deceiver. He’s taken chances in his life, but few as foolhardy—or as important—as this one.

Silver laughs. It is the laughter of a very old man, closer to death than he is to life; and it is filled with the gravel that has accumulated in his throat and his chest. No doubt, in a second or two, he will finish chuckling and explain why he is acting so superior. He will say something like, *because you have no choice*, or, *because you have already surrendered to me, and don’t know it*. And then he stops chuckling and says none of the above. “This is a transaction, sir. I have what you want, and you have what I want. If we cannot come to an agreement, then it is no inconvenience to me if you leave this world and search for your answers elsewhere. Otherwise, I will not be forced. But decide if you’re amenable already. I weary of providing you with assurances.”

Draiken is very familiar with the sensation he has now. It’s been a perennial throughout his adult life, and before that a regular visitor to the child he was. He’s trapped.

Silver’s right. People can be imprisoned without walls. They can be imprisoned by fear, or duty, or that which he finds imprisoning him right now: necessity, and the very man he is. If he did what Thorne would have him do, turn his back on this infuriating challenge and abandon the horrors below as the responsibility of someone else, that act alone would destroy him: maybe not today, or even soon, but in the manner of any other slow-acting poison, taking more of his life every day until nothing but a shell is left.

Draiken turns to Thorne, knowing how badly he’s been out-manuevered.

She sees his determination and responds in a manner beyond any other species of scorn she’s ever flung his way. “Don’t be stupid.”

“It’s not in my nature. But you do know I have to try, don’t you?”

“There aren’t that many down there. A few. A distraction from your purpose.”

“Human beings,” he says.

“Once you would have considered them collateral damage.”

“True. But now I see them as people. I’ll have to trust you to watch my back.”

“You know you can’t guarantee that.”

And this is true too. The parts of her that are occasionally lover and friend are as nothing compared to the parts that are broken, that lash out in unpredictable ways, that still see him as an enemy to be destroyed without mercy.

He says, “Then I suppose we’ll just have to see.”

* * *

He does not wake in a bed, or on some dusty earth.

He returns to awareness in a standing position, in the center of a dusty plain marked only by the existence of a single cottage.

The cottage appears to be one of those he saw from above. It is unlovely from the outside, bearing the look of a house scoured by sand that has been carried by wind. The air around him tastes gritty with dirt. He cannot see the central spire or the other cottages at all. To his senses, this is the only structure anywhere in sight.

For an eye-blink he shudders from worry over whether he’s been transported much farther than Silver proposed, possibly to some other world entirely. And then he thinks, perversely, that the poisonous old monster, Silver, is just the type to play fair, on some level. This is the same facility he saw from above. He just sees it through altered perceptions, blinkered into believing himself alone.

Draiken knows in advance that what he does next is a total waste of time, but feels that he must go through the motions in order to acclimate himself to what will be his habitat into the foreseeable future. He shouts, “Hello!” He randomly swings his arms, hoping to make physical contact with one of the other inmates inhabiting Silver’s prison. He jogs around the cottage, completing a circle, and at no point sees any other indication of human habitation, not even the scuffmarks other wandering human beings would have to make in the dirt.

All he notes is the presence of waist-high iron rings, protruding from the center of each of the structure's outer walls. None of the rings appear to have any obvious purpose. He pulls them, and nothing happens. He attempts to turn them and finds them firm. They do not appear to be ornamental. But they are so alien to the otherwise featureless design of the cottage that they do appear to have some kind of purpose, and so he offers his unseen captor an appreciative half-nod and files them away for subsequent investigation.

Then he faces the brown sky, aware that he might be facing the pylon directly or just staring off into empty space, but also confident that Silver must be monitoring him, in any event.

He tells his unseen captor something he once told others like him, in another prison.

"You can control what I eat, where I sleep, how much physical pain I go through on any given day. You can manipulate what I understand of the world. But your power still ends before it gets even close to me. Whatever you try, this mind is still mine."

The breeze dusts his lips with foul-smelling grit.

Against his will, he coughs.

Very well, then. They will manipulate his actions by rendering his environment harsh. This will steer him in the only direction he can go, the cottage.

He finds it unlocked, the front door a simple panel that slides into the surrounding wall. The interior is one room, containing a steel-frame bed and squat table with a single chair. All the furniture is not just bolted to the floor but molded of it, part of the same material. There is a little cubicle in one corner that, when investigated, turns out to contain a toilet and a sink. There are three spigots. One provides water, tinny but drinkable. Another dispenses an oily substance that after some experimentation can be identified as soap. A third produces an unpleasant green paste that he sniffs and reluctantly tastes: it is like eating wadded paper, but it is food, likely all he can expect for however long he remains a prisoner of this place. Out of curiosity he leaves that third tap on and confirms that the flow stops after less than a minute. Enough for a single meal, certainly enough to keep him healthy and ambulatory, not enough to permit the over-eating that results from boredom in places where there is no other way to mark time. He supposes that it will dole out the proper caloric requirements at regular intervals, and no more.

So: he will not die of hunger or thirst, not that he ever expected this to be part of the program for him. Nor will he suffer that other occupational hazard of the solitary prisoner, soft obesity. The consumables may be drugged in some way, as they were in at least one of the past prisons he endured under the control of people like Silver. There may be psychoactive substances designed to render him weak, compliant, addled, every rotten place on the mental spectrum all the way up to insanity. But the experience he has had with being held prisoner by people seeking to tinker with his mind has reconciled him to the knowledge that he will not be able to refuse what they offer indefinitely. Self-starvation is surrendering to weakness from another cause. And even a compromised will offers more options than a resolute one in a body on the brink of death.

Done with the toilet, he returns to the main room, locates a shelf with several changes of featureless clothing in his size, and looks them over without interest. There is also a coil of rope, about fifty meters worth. This he examines. It is lightweight, and it is flexible, and it comes with a card reading, *just so you know you've tried everything*.

Then he notices that something has been added to the table: a flat gray material imbedded in its surface, that he recognizes as a screen of some kind.

There are words printed there.

THIS IS SILVER SPEAKING. SPEAK OUT LOUD IF YOU UNDERSTAND.

He is not happy to find his first action as resident here obeisance to a direct order. "Yes."

YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHETHER I'VE TAKEN YOU TO SOME NEW LOCATION. I HAVE NOT. THE OTHER COTTAGES, THE CENTRAL SPIRE, AND YOUR FELLOW SUBJECTS ARE ALL WITHIN SIGHT OF YOUR FRONT DOOR. WITHIN SIGHT, THAT IS, TO ONE WHO HAS NOT BEEN RENDERED INCAPABLE OF SEEING THEM. YOU ARE NOT. YOU WILL REMAIN INCAPABLE OF SEEING THEM FOR AS LONG AS YOU STAY HERE.

"Then I will not stay here."

I FIND IT SOMEWHAT ADORABLE THAT YOU BELIEVE I WOULD BE KINDER TO YOU THAN I AM WITH YOUR UNSEEN NEIGHBORS AND STILL LEAVE YOU CAPABLE OF WALKING IN STRAIGHT LINES. ANY TREK INTO THE UNDIFFERENTIATED

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DISTANCE WILL ONLY TIRE YOU OUT TO NO PURPOSE, BEFORE ULTIMATE CONFIRMATION THAT YOU HAVE TRAVELED IN A CIRCLE LEADING, INEXORABLY, TO YOUR STARTING POINT. WITH EACH USELESS ATTEMPT YOU MAKE I WILL WIDEN THAT CIRCLE UNTIL, DRIVEN TO EXHAUSTION AND DYING OF THIRST, YOU FIND YOURSELF RELIEVED TO SEE THIS YOUR HOME AGAIN. I ASSURE YOU THAT YOU DO NOT WANT TO FEEL THE HELPLESSNESS AND SELF-LOATHING THAT ACCOMPANIES SUCH AN EPIPHANY, NOR TO WASTE WHAT STRENGTH YOU HAVE ON REPEATED CONFIRMATIONS.

“I’ve no use for your assurances or for the despair you would have from me.”

I DO NOT WANT DESPAIR FROM YOU, MR. DRAIKEN. I SIMPLY SEEK UNDERSTANDING. THERE IS A WAY TO ESCAPE FROM THIS PRISON. IT IS SIMPLY NOT HIDDEN BEHIND MERE GEOGRAPHY. WHERE IT IS HIDDEN, INSTEAD, IS THE POINT OF THIS EXERCISE. FIND IT, AS I DEEPLY HOPE YOU WILL, AND I WILL BE HAPPY TO PROVIDE WHAT YOU WANT.

“How do I know that you’re not lying about a way out?”

I MAY NOT BE A TRUSTWORTHY MAN BUT IN THIS I PLAY THE GAME THAT SERVES US BOTH. THIS IS A SPECIFIC CHALLENGE WITH A SPECIFIC REWARD, AND AS YOUR BIOLOGICAL NEEDS HAVE BEEN PROVIDED, AND YOU WILL HAVE NOTHING ELSE TO OCCUPY YOUR TIME, YOU MIGHT AS WELL GET TO IT.

“Are you aware that once I’ve gotten what I want out of you, I may very well kill you?”

For long seconds Draiken believes that the old man intends no reply; then fresh words appear on the screen. THIS IS POSSIBLE. AND NOT UNDESIRABLE. DEATH IS, AS YOU KNOW, ONE OF MY SWEETEST AMBITIONS. More long seconds pass without addition, before fresh words appear: BUT JUST SO YOU’RE REMINDED WHAT DISADVANTAGES YOU’LL NEED TO OVERCOME BEFORE THAT BECOMES A CONSIDERATION, BE AWARE THAT EDIFICE SHARES THAT ROOM WITH YOU.

* * *

He is not surprised to confirm that he still appears to be alone. His view remains that of a cotage empty and unoccupied, but for himself. He is a man trained to hear the soft breath of an enemy lurking in enclosed spaces like this one, and he owes his life to the thoroughness with which he has learned that skill . . . but every sense in his body assures him that he is alone.

It is of course possible that Edifice is not here at all, that assertions of her presence are just another layer of psychological manipulation designed to keep him off-guard and paranoid. That would be typical of the mind-games he’d known from Silver’s ilk, during the years they’d worked on him. The first rule of dealing with them had always been that he could never know whether to believe anything they said to him, starting with what they claimed to want from him and continuing with just what they would consider cooperation or compliance. All he has right now are the instincts that the damned man has left him—and those instincts include the certainty that in the bald summary of rules, Silver has played fair. Edifice is near, a tireless machine with no wants or needs of her own, ready to strike at any moment.

So, first: an experiment.

Draiken throws a punch at empty space, spins, strikes in another, then ducks low and sweeps his leg at ankle-height. He does not expect to encounter an unseen companion, but it is worth trying; worth trying to anticipate where that companion would be, if she had the advantage of invisibility and the assignment to stay close. His moves remain unimpeded. Then he spins and tries again, aiming his next blow at an altitude reflecting the altitude of Edifice’s face.

Several minutes of this comical pursuit, and he has not made contact once.

But then, maybe he has. The imposed inability to sense somebody would likely include the inability to sense any secondary evidence of her existence. In the same way that fighting an invisible and inaudible woman in ankle-deep snow, he would normally be able to determine her location from the footprints she formed in the slush, he would normally be able to isolate Edifice in a room this size by listening for her breath, identifying scents other than his own, even determining the places of stagnant air from the movements she would have had to make to evade him.

Such skills have saved his life during any number of hand-to-hand battles fought in darkness. But he can see from the thin layer of dust on the floor that only his own moves are chronicled there; hers, if they exist, have been hidden from him. He has no doubt that she’s here with him, maybe in front of him, maybe right behind him. For all he knows she’s struck him several times. But any indicators of her presence are hidden.

He offers the empty air his grimmest smile. “I’ve had more obtrusive bunkmates.”

If she replies, he cannot hear it.

He leaves the cottage and stands in the dusty air, facing a landscape that to his perception, contains nothing. He knows that if this is Elba that there are a couple of dozen unseen test subjects wandering this space with him but as unaware of him as he is of them. It may be that escape lies in finding some way to contact them, and it falls upon him to find the obvious methods first. So he dips the tip of his shoe in the dust and attempts to scrawl a message in the dust, a *hello* to those who share his predicament. He manages that word, and then in a heartbeat the dust rearranges itself, on its own, becoming uniform. This does not surprise him all that much. Not only would it be disappointing to have the solution come that easily, but he's already noted the total lack of footprints for as far as his eyes can see.

The next simple experiment is a foregone conclusion, if for no other reason than because he's been assured that it would be. But in any course of study you confirm the elementals before moving on to the unknown.

Returning to his cottage, he retrieves the coil of rope, brings it back outside, and lays it upon the ground, establishing that his earlier estimate of its length was the correct one. Yes, about fifty meters. This would be well greater than the distance he'd earlier noted between Elba's buildings, and certainly greater than the approximate distance between its aimlessly wandering human beings. A simple knot secures one end to the iron ring on the front wall of his cottage. He takes the other end and walks as far as he has to before the rope draws taut.

He walks a semicircle defined how far the rope will stretch and encounters no obstacles.

He runs the distance, again bounded by the rope, and again encounters no obstacles.

He lowers his end of the rope to nearly ground-level, by necessity sacrificing a little of his semicircle's radius in order to do so. No opposition.

A few further repetitions of this experiment and he drops his end of the rope, thinking. Very well. Based on what he'd seen from the air, he should have been stopped by one of the other structures or by the unseen form of some neighbor. If a neighbor, the sweep of the rope would have either clotheslined him and knocked him over, or, failing that, been deformed as that neighbor acted as a fixed point the line could not pass. But he's not sensed either result.

An hour or so repeating the experiment three additional times, with the rope tied to the iron rings on the other three walls of his cottage, achieves the same lack of result.

This has been time-consuming, but it establishes a few things.

He cannot confirm the existence of the village's other structures, or inhabitants, by indirect methods. Either he is being lied to, and has indeed been brought to some other location where a single cottage sits alone on a plain unoccupied by any other feature, or the alterations that have been made in his perceptions prevent him from perceiving any evidence counter to his prison's central illusion. Maybe he's been sweeping all his fellow test subjects off their feet, repeatedly.

Maybe, without realizing it themselves, they've been ducking or hopping over or staying out of the way of his line, and thus preserving their own imprisoning illusions. For that matter, maybe he's never drawn the rope taut and only imagines that he's traveled his various semicircles at a distance that would have made his experiments useful. He has no choice other than acknowledging the near-total disconnect between what he thinks he's doing, and what he is doing.

His senses will not tear down the lie that drives this place. They're utterly within Silver's power, rendering him a blinded and neutered thing powerless to explore Elba's boundaries.

He can imagine such a demonstration breaking his fellow prisoners utterly. It's been years since he's had to reflect on the way ordinary people live and think, but he knows that they tend to rely on that which they've always known and never been required to test. It's why so many have historically broken so quickly under sensory deprivation, solitary confinement, or simple blunt torture. Once deprived of what they believe, they break apart like sand.

This does not make them lesser beings than himself. He has considerable awe for those able to live ordinary lives. But they are unprepared for the kind of mind games he was trained to resist. What would have defeated them is for him just the general outline of the problem.

He grunts, returns to his cottage—if it is indeed still his cottage, and not some identical one he's unwittingly wandered to in the time since leaving the one he first explored—puts the useless coil of rope back on the shelf, and embarks upon the next stage of his investigation.

It is now, he believes, a little later in the same day.

There is no way of telling that for sure. On cylinder worlds, the day/night cycle is of course a wholly artificial construct, programmed to match the desired environment, and while the urban region of Liberty hews reasonably close to Mankind's preferred twenty-four hours, the end of the cylinder that houses Silver's community of lab rats appears to have opted out in some manner, perhaps one related to the field of darkness that hides the general region from outside observers. Inside, the diffuse light reads like midafternoon, and never appears to march any distance toward the falling of any night. Elba's inmates are denied any sense of the passage of time, as well as any interaction with their fellow human beings and any confidence in the reliability of their own senses; as formidable a means of breaking them down to nothing as Draiken can imagine.

He spends a few hours confirming that he's unable to just walk out. It's not that he doubts Silver's boasts, but that he knows his training. During his time in one arid habitat just as devoid of surface features, he was tested and told that his stride favored his right leg. In the absence of a visible reference point, he would always tend to walk in circles. With difficulty, he'd cultivated a precision of stride that, if he ever got lost in that wilderness, would protect him from such a fate. To be sure, that technique had been designed for a planetary surface and not a cylinder world where the horizons curve upward, but he hopes that focusing upon these skills might enable him to fight whatever programming Silver has implanted, to keep him heading back to his origin point.

It helps that he still happens to possess the advantage of being able to discern the upward curve the landscape appears to take, in the directions that translate as spinward and anti-spinward. So he sets himself a course perpendicular to those, and marches into the dusty nothingness.

The curves of the cylinder make him seem to be at the lowest point of a wide valley, but the ground by itself is just dust, stirred by winds that seem to blow perpendicular to the spin, and not, as would more frequently happen, with it. He measures each step to ensure uniformity of stride, and course-corrects at every opportunity. It is work that requires the greatest possible level of concentration, and as a result should not be stultifying; but as the trek becomes more robotic his mind inevitably drifts, and he finds himself thinking of that world named Greeve where he could have maintained a peaceful retirement. He realizes not for the first time that he had loved it more than a little, could have loved it more and accepted what it should have meant to be at peace and know that there were no people from his past still looking for him.

The primary contradiction of his character has always been that the job he once held had always demanded that he become nobody, a man with no connections and no past, using whatever name was currently convenient, and believing in whatever his superiors required him to believe . . . and yet, that he has always been ruled by ego, a firm belief in his own powers of will and rectitude that has sent him on a journey he could have avoided and made him foolhardy enough to put his fate in the hands of a man who brags about being able to twist the human spirit at will.

Another man would greet these epiphanies with despair. Draiken merely takes them as elements of a cruel but accurate self-appraisal and presses on, one step after the next, until a speck appears in the far distance and begins to grow.

He is not surprised or especially chagrined to discover that it's the cottage.

Silver has described the conditions of his imprisonment accurately. Even with a precise and trained stride, he will always walk in a circle here, without ever being aware that he's done so.

Though tempted to storm off and make another attempt, he knows from long experience that the key to any successful prison break is not pouring good effort after bad.

So he slides the door aside and enters the cabin and, after a disorienting blip of continuity, finds himself sitting on the bed, recipient of a blinding headache. He does not remember crossing to the bed; he does not remember sitting down. But his teeth ache.

He wipes his lips with the back of his hand and is not surprised to find a smear of blood.

He has been struck in the mouth by someone who knows how to deliver a blow.

Edifice? He knows she's with him; indeed, though he cannot see her or sense her, she's likely been with him all along, smirking at his antics. But the blow puzzles him. Striking what amounts to a blind enemy is a pointless gesture that he somehow cannot imagine coming on impulse from Silver's bodyguard, a woman now more of an automaton than a human being.

It must be part of the program to disorient him, to render him uncertain of safety even in his own skin.

He stands, only to suffer another moment of discontinuity.

He's back on the bed, head ringing from the impact of another blow.

He doesn't know what to do. He's been subjected to a brutal beating or two, in his time, sometimes while lashed to chairs or tied to poles, but in such cases the best he could do was concentrate on his own inner resources and wait for the ordeal to be over.

Now he is physically free, and there is still nothing he can do, not fight back or walk away.

"This will not break me," he announces.

He does not expect a reply, nor receive one. Not even another blow to the face.

He waits. The absence of another immediate assault is no guarantee that there won't be another, once he lets his guard down. He cannot remain vigilant forever nor will his spirit survive long if he is reduced to fearing a fresh blow with every breath, but for now he can let his unseen assailant know that he is not defeated. So he sits with his back against the wall, regarding the four walls of his prison with defiance. He does not let her know what he is thinking or feeling. He becomes a closed book, serene in aspect, furious with inner concentration.

There is no way to tell time, but he remains in that position for hours.

* * *

At some point, without any obvious transition, he surrenders to sleep, and from there, to dreaming.

For the most part, he is not a man who remembers his dreams. He is, however, a man who suffers from them.

Many have been the mornings when he's woken trembling and shiny with sweat, as the last wisps of *something* beyond terrible dissipated inside his skull. Many have been the times when he retained just enough of an impression, for just long enough, to know where he's been, and what he's been reliving. He pities his sleeping self for not being able to escape such memories. But waking memories of what he suffered in sleep are always gone in minutes, a small mercy for a man who has never wanted to relive the worst.

On this occasion, he returns to a period of several weeks he once spent locked inside a room with no walls—or rather, one with walls that he could never reach, that were built to recede whenever he made any attempt to approach them. He could run, he could leap, he could dart about like a madman, but he always remained in their precise center, victim of their refusal to have anything to do with him.

It was not a square or rectangular room, either, not precisely. The walls were a mural of constantly shifting geometrical patterns designed to violate everything the rational human mind knows about the way perspective works: greater manifestations of popular illusions like the fork that simultaneously possesses three tines and four; the staircase that somehow meets itself in a perfect circle yet keeps ascending; the pillar that is at once supporting a bridge and a blink later a distance from it. None of the images could be reconciled, but if he looked away there was nothing to see but more madness of the same kind. It was enough, after a while, to make him want to go blind.

There was a door that he has never been able to reach, and sometimes an interrogator entered and offered him alternatives to continued incarceration here.

The dream gives him one of those times, and it's a torturer so familiar that he almost feels affection for him: the same fat man he'd encountered years later on Greeve, the one he had then come to call Janus.

The future Janus says: *Someday you will come to think of me as a friend.*

The past Draiken, holding on to his sanity by the thinnest of margins, can either continue to hold on or formulate complete sentences. He contents himself with a grimaced, *No*.

We won't be equals, Janus says conversationally. *By then you will consider yourself insignificant, and myself an elevated creature, who you are required to please in order to enjoy the most fleeting rewards. You will be thankful for every fleeting moment of consideration I show you.*

Even the dreaming Draiken knows that it will not happen that way. He does escape, and years later will know a day when Janus has to answer to him. But in the memory he is still trapped in the uncertainty of the version of himself driven half-mad by this room. No.

The sad thing, Janus says, is that even if you do cooperate, it will never be over. You might consider yourself free and beyond our reach, and someday find that we have always known what bolt-hole you crawled to, what refuge you thought you had found. You might discover that there is no escape for you, short of death.

I can find you.

Janus smirks. *And what of the people behind me?*

I'll find them.

And when they lead you to the people who provide their orders?

I'll find them, too.

And when you discover that there are others who pull even their strings?

I will not stop.

Janus beams, and the captive Draiken is left thinking of him as a gnome on a toadstool, supremely self-satisfied with his own base nature. *And someday, he says, when you navigate all the layers of this labyrinth back to the starting point, and find yourself as responsible for the evil you see as any other, what will you do then? Will your righteousness force you to press the killing blade to your own throat?*

He is silent for a long time. *I served you. It would be just.*

You cannot reach me or the others. You do, however, possess the power over your own continued existence. If you're truly honest about your intentions, then turn your ambitions to killing yourself, and eliminate all those unnecessary and futile steps in between. Answer our questions, and we'll offer you all the assistance you need.

Never, he says.

Janus regards him with infuriating pity.

Alas, sir. Never is a theoretical concept. And even your will is finite.

* * *

He wakes from a blow to the face.

This one he feels. On the prior occasions, his mind filtered out not just the assault as it happened, but also any pain he should have felt afterward, allowing him no means to track what had been done to him except for the sudden jerking displacement that left him on the floor or on the bed or wherever the unseen fists had driven him. This is different. This is an actual tactile sensation, an open-handed slap to the cheek. He cries out and sits bolt upright and grabs for the figure assaulting him, his combat calculator of a mind already mapping a dozen ways to pursue what he expects to be a battle to the death—but even as he seizes his assailant by the wrist, more intelligence has flooded in, and he knows that his predicament might be even worse.

"Thorne?"

She has changed, or been changed, since the last time he saw her. She had worn her hair long; it's now been shaven close to the skull. She had worn flattering clothes; they've been replaced with a shapeless coverall, like his. She had been defiant and angry and resentful; now she is resentful and something else that he never would have called her before: defeated.

"You had to do it," she snarls. "You had to put yourself in his cage. Now we're both there. *I hope you're bloody satisfied.*"

He feels the bottom fall out of his world. "Thorne, I . . ."

"Don't you dare tell me you're sorry, you *idiot*. They have *both* of us now."

He shifts position, in the process retreating across the bed until his back is pressed hard against the wall. It's an avoidance tell, the act of a trapped man, a gesture that if he saw in another he would have no trouble responding to in some manner that rebound to his advantage, but shock

continues to throw him off. “What happened?”

“What hap—” Incredulity will not permit her to finish. She hauls off and strikes him again.

It is not the kind of deadly blow Thorne is capable of. It is wild, unfocused, the kind of punch that any amateur can throw without training, or that a professional can throw when she retains enough sanity to control herself. It lands hard and stings like hell.

He takes no retribution. “How long has it been?”

“Four weeks. You *asshole*.”

It’s almost impossible to tell time in this limbo of a place, but that’s greater than his most generous estimate, by a factor of seven. He’s only slept four times, to his knowledge. “Are you sure? I’ve been measuring—”

“I don’t care what bloody over-confident method you’ve been using to tell time. It’s irrelevant, don’t you see that? Every time you got even close to figuring out anything, Silver rebooted you back to the beginning. He thought it was funny, damn him. I watched him do it a half dozen times, and each time he cackled, saying he could keep this going until you died of old age, like him. He didn’t stop until I pointed out that he’d still be dead a long time before you were, and then he said that you’d forfeited the wager and permanently belonged to him now. *Like you should have known he was going to do, when you so stupidly agreed to this shit.*”

He is neither shocked nor surprised. “Did they overpower you?”

“You are such a fool.”

“Did they?”

“No, they didn’t overpower me. They caught up with me, you *idiot*.”

“You ran?”

“You still persist in overestimating my capacity for loyalty. Of *course*, I ran. I had no reason to stay when I saw how badly you were lost to him. So I left! I told him he could have you, and I left! I booked passage off-station and was well on my way to being free of this place when his people came for me. Said he wasn’t finished with me, and now we’re both stuck.”

He massages his jaw. “It wasn’t Edifice knocking me around, on this last go-round. It was you, trying to get my attention.”

“Of course it was.”

He watched her pace for a minute or so, as always impressed and just a little bit frightened by the restless and feral creature before him, a woman who has not only never known peace but seems constitutionally incapable of comprehending the state. It reminds him of a beast he once saw, displayed by a menagerie in a cage so tiny that it could barely move. Its every movement was an assault on its prison, exploring its contours, searching for some fleeting weakness it could exploit so it could finally vent its hunger for killing. “There’s still a way out of here.”

“Is there no limit to your inanity?”

“Maybe so, but I’m more certain of it than ever. Silver’s not *just* a sadist. This is a scientific endeavor for him. He learns nothing by just tossing me into the equivalent of a prison cell and discarding the key. He gains nothing if this is not an honest test.”

She stares at him, aghast, her head shaking slightly as she absorbs his refusal to despair. “He’s a liar, Draiken. He and everybody he works for. They’re all liars.”

“When it suits them to lie. I’m not certain that this is one of those times.”

“Look around you! We’re surrounded by other cottages like this one; this is the only one you can see. We’re surrounded by other people; you can only see me. The spire at the center of Elba is just a short walk from here; you’ll never find it in a million years. He said that he’d play fair; he hasn’t. What are all those things, but lies? What’s your refusal to recognize that you’ve screwed us both except surrender to what he wants you to believe?”

He sees her point, but says only, “I haven’t surrendered. And I still think the wager isn’t over.” She throws up her hands in frustration. “I really should kill you. I’d be alone forever, but I really should kill you. It’s no less than you deserve.”

And then, as if the only choice left to her was the one between murdering him and storming out, she slides his door to its open position and storms out.

Her exit stuns him. He had expected more resentment, more defiance, even an assault on him,

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since it wouldn't even be the first time. Instead, she had let him spout what she had to see as nonsense, and had finally, irrevocably, had enough.

He follows her out the door and finds nothing but the landscape of dirt and emptiness, stretching out in all directions.

* * *

For a timeless time, he searches for her.

As promised, she and whatever home she's been provided are both invisible to him. He can map the landscape as meticulously as his altered perceptions permit, he can devote his every waking moment to that project, but she remains invisible to him for however long she desires to be.

He finds himself missing her. Why would he not miss her? To a man otherwise trapped in solitary confinement, even the most base companion is still an improvement. And while it's true Thorne has been a base companion indeed, at times compelled to punish him just for breathing, her absence forces him to concede something he's been on the edge of accepting throughout their travels together: that she's likely the closest thing to a soul mate he'll ever have. The poor woman understands him. She knows what it's been like for him, to spend almost all of his adult life having to subsume himself in order to pretend to be other people, to regard the faces of all others as either potential enemies or potential collateral damage, to bury his true self so deeply that on those occasions when he had to reach down into the crypt and pull up what remained, he found only decayed remains, covered with dust. She knows how lonely it is to have both contempt and envy for the clueless masses who live ordinary lives and never trouble themselves with the many hidden wars being fought in their name. She understands that to spend too much time navigating trap doors and deadfalls is to never trust an interval of quiet, or a place of seeming safety, ever again. For her, as with him, any hard right at the end of any passageway is not just another turn on the way to a destination, but a blind spot where enemies may be concealed, preparing a strangle-cord to wrap tight around the soft meat of her throat. She will never escape that, just as he will never escape that, not even if they both live for another thousand years, and that's why her understanding of him is total, just as his understanding of her occasional need to retreat within her isolation pod is total.

Unable to find her, he further confesses to himself that in some ways, she's been getting better. Her humor is still black as pitch, her moods just as mercurial, her revulsion for even any momentary expression of idealism a pain in the ass, but in the last few years he's occasionally found her still capable of being surprised by moments of pure, unguarded joy.

Some time ago (about two years past as he reckons time, but of course precise measurements are almost impossible to anyone who's been traveling for as long as they've been, in and out of bluegel crypts), they'd found themselves with fourteen days to kill on a green world that offered no earlier transports out. Rather than put their bodies in storage or endure the boredom of the port, they'd gone out into the bush and found a place to camp on a rocky ledge overlooking an amber waterfall. They'd killed the time with hiking and swimming and sunbathing and sex, with only intermittent fury.

When the interval drew to a close she'd stretched out naked under a sky marked by only wisps of cloud, so lazy that only her lower legs remained in thrall to her usual nervous energy, crossed at the ankles as they flexed upward, then down to the blanket, then upward again.

She rested her chin on the pillow she'd made of her forearms, closed her eyes, and murmured, *Was the place you hid, Greeve, as pleasant as this?*

He'd said, Yes.

Was there this little to worry about there?

Most of the time. Yes.

You must have been an asshole to even consider leaving.

He'd come as close to an unguarded smile as he ever did.

Most days I'm inclined to agree with you.

Those long, lazy kicks of her lower legs continued, then slowed, then finally stopped, to the point where for some time he came to the false conclusion that she'd fallen asleep. The shadows

of overhead leaves cast an animated tattoo on the curve of her bare back, the moisture of her last dip in the water glistening in the coin-sized circle of uninterrupted sunlight striking the base of her spine.

The world they were on had no birds, not as human beings understand the term, but it did have creatures in the approximate avian niche who flew and serenaded each other in song, and for some time they provided the only sound as he sat next to her, enjoying the nearness of this deadly weapon of war temporarily simplified to content woman. The transformation, fleeting as it was, fascinated him. He wondered: was this what she would have been all her life if the powers they sought had never recruited her? Was this what he would have been himself?

Then she said, *Take me there.*

He didn't reply that it would feel a little like betrayal of the woman he'd walked away from, on that world. Instead he said, *Maybe someday.*

The fleeting peace went away, and the storm clouds returned, her brows knitting in an irritation he did not quite understand. *Now.*

We have to find them, Thorne. We have to stop them.

She shook her head a little, not much because her chin still rested on her arms, but enough to establish that the moment was over, maybe forever.

We can't stop them. We're lucky enough just to have a choice over how to live the rest of our lives.

And if I'm willing to spend the rest of my life fighting them? he asks. *What then?*

Her next words, as it turned out the last she would deign to speak for many hours, arrived at the heartless clinical remove commonly attributed to the occasional human doctors who still existed, on the worlds that still employed human beings as doctors: the ones who would be abruptly not quite as human, when they sat before their patients and delivered the most hopeless of prognoses.

Then you'll be the end of us.

* * *

Since he doesn't seem able to find her, there is no further discussion between them until she finds him.

At the moment she arrives in his doorway, he has been working out for what he supposes to be hours, taking comfort in the only means of telling time that remains available to him, the wear and tear activity has on his flesh and bone. It is an imperfect timepiece. He has been trained to machine-like precision, but even machines operate with varying efficiency on different days, and his will break down over time from causes that include neglect, lack of motivation, injury, and age. The pain that now comes after three hours of exertion will soon come after two, some day after one, and throughout it the empty hours and days will continue to pass heedless of his failing ability to measure them.

He knows only that it has been some time since he last saw her.

"Hello, Thorne."

"Hello, Draiken."

Her hair has grown a few centimeters. She's lost weight; there are hollows on her cheeks and dark circles under her eyes that weren't there when he saw her last. Her coverall shows the beginnings of wear at the knees and elbows. She stands at his threshold looking defeated, a quality alien to her that she has never worn in his presence before, not even on that day in the sun.

He is uncomfortably aware of how sweaty he is, the unwashed smell he must give off after strenuous exercise. Because he does not want her to flee as she did the last time, he doesn't approach, but instead retreats, taking a seat on the edge of his cot.

She leans against the edge of the doorway, one hand cupping the elbow of the other, the index finger of the held arm tugging on her lower lip.

He says, "I looked for you."

That index finger releases her lip and scratches her chin. "I know you did."

"You watched me?"

"I watched you. For a long time."

"I never saw you."

"That seems to have the same answer as everything else here. Silver. He's given me an advantage over you, an invisibility that kicks in whenever I don't want to be found. You don't know how many times I've stood within arm's length of you, whenever I found you outside, and torn myself into knots over whether to snap your stupid neck."

"Why haven't you?"

"Because I'm not going to destroy the only thing I have to occupy my time."

"Ah." This is a motivation he understands. Trained to crave action, he is being eaten up by a place where he needs do nothing to maintain a now-meaningless existence. "That's the advantage he's given you. I wonder what advantage he's given me."

"That's simple," she says. "Aside from my own cottage, yours is the only other goddamned place I have to go."

He considers this. It's a rather stark manifestation of the fight-or-flight dilemma. She can flee him whenever she wants, and for however long she wants. But she can only go so far, and once she's gone, she has no options other than remaining where she hides, or coming back. "Where's your cottage?"

"Not quite opposite yours. A little bit to the left. I can see it from your door, but if you give me any reason to go back to hiding there, I promise that you'll never be able to find me."

"Another advantage you have."

"The bastard doesn't want you breaking in out of sexual frustration."

He rubs the back of his head. "I can't say that we've ever treated each other well, but rape's never been part of our dynamic."

"No," she says, her heat rising, "but haven't you figured it out yet? Our dynamic can be anything he wants it to be. He can make of you anything he wants, any time he wants. He could make you into the kind of man who takes a woman by force. He could make of me the kind of woman who would never even think of fighting back. He could, I don't know, reduce you to infancy and make me the damn nanny who had to hand-feed you. I'm not safe from you any more than you're safe from me."

He holds up his palms, a signal to stop. "And if he wanted any of that he wouldn't have set up this current dynamic, which gives you the power to lock me out."

"He can change that at any time."

"Yes. He can. But there's no purpose in arguing about, or expending any worry over, what he may do. Right now, we're living under these specific conditions, and we need to focus on them over any hypotheticals. Right now, you're here of your own volition and equipped with a place to retreat if you ever deem it necessary. If that ever changes, we'll have something else to discuss."

She nods, and for the first time leaves the doorway, approaching as far as the table. She still keeps it between him and her, a protective shield, there to give her something to maneuver around if he erupts into violence. "He's throwing us together, isn't he?"

"In a clever way. He could leave you with no other place to go and render us mutual prisoners of this one cottage, but he knows what we are and doesn't want us so trapped together that we act like two rabid animals forced into the same cage. No, he wants us together of our own volition. So he's arranged a pressure release valve, and given you full discretion over its use: a means of making us feel safer with one another."

She offers a wan and bitter smile. "I've never felt fully safe with you."

"And I've never felt even remotely safe with you. But these are managed conditions, conditions that we've become accustomed to. Don't you see? He's given us a starker version of what we're familiar with, even down to the isolation pod you retreated to whenever the pressures got to be too much."

She winces and comes around the table, not joining him where he sits, but still giving up some of the distance that existed between them. "My isolation pod was far more comfortable than my cottage."

"Yes. In large part because you were able to leave and do something when you wanted to."

"I still can. This is supposed to end with you and I hopping into bed. Playing house."

“Under the circumstances, I wouldn’t be surprised if he offered wine and mood music.”

The storm clouds return. “Little chance of that, I think. As long as we’re stuck here, I don’t think we’ll hear music of any kind, ever again.”

He’s astonished to hear her voice break a little, even if she hides it, even if he is one of the few listeners capable of hearing it. It tells him something. She’s a wild animal in a cage too small for her, living every heartbeat with the terrible knowledge of the bars that separate her from her jailers. But however she survived past captivities at the hands of Silver and his ilk, her past resilience is now failing her. If they don’t find a way out, she’ll break or die.

He can only repeat: “I think he lied to you, when he said the wager was over. It’s still ongoing, and despite everything I still believe that he’s playing fair. To me, that puts us back in the position of testing his conditions and not taking even a single one of them for granted.”

Her doleful headshake begins as denial but ends up as resignation. “What do you have in mind?”

He stands. “You can start by taking me home to your place.”

* * *

It turns out to be much more difficult than just allowing himself to be led.

Ten paces from his own front door he thinks he’s following her, but her grip on his wrist turns painful and she has to shout, “*No! Not that way!*” After exhausting struggle she succeeds in dragging him back on course, but another step later he suffers a moment of discontinuity and finds himself marching back to his own cottage, while she pounds on his back trying to get him to turn around.

They attempt this three times before judging it hopeless.

At her suggestion, he lowers himself to his hands and knees and allows her to tie one of the ropes around his neck, so he can be dragged like a recalcitrant dog on the end of its leash. But not long into their outing, there’s another moment of discontinuity and he comes to be curled on his side, choking, his throat on fire from the near-strangulation he must have been willing to endure in order to head in any direction other than hers.

“God damn it,” she says, kneading the back of his neck.

He’s rendered sufficiently off-balance by this show of solicitousness that it almost comes as a surprise when her fingertips move to a spot they both know, and press down hard.

Blackness comes.

Later, he will put together his fragmentary impressions and understand that he almost came to a couple of times while she dragged him by the wrists, but each time gave her enough groggy warning that was able to put him back under and go back to hauling him about like dead weight.

His next comprehending sight is of a bland ceiling so much like the one he has grown used to waking to, that he thinks he’s returned to his own cottage. But a certain primal sense of location kicks in, and he’s able to pick out small differences, places where the texture of one surface or another is not quite the same as those he’s gotten used to, and which mark a space almost but not quite identical to the one he’s come to learn by heart.

He rolls his eyes and finds Thorne watching him cross-legged from her bed.

He coughs. “Nice place you have here.”

“Yes,” she says, with acidic sympathy. “It must be a real novelty for you.”

The skin of his neck burns, raising the question of just how close she must have come to fully strangling him by his leash, before hitting on the happy alternative of merely rendering him unconscious. The burning sensation in his throat warns him that he could likely drink a couple of gallons without ever feeling soothed. He needs healing more than he needs lubrication. But since he can’t speed healing he lurches to his feet and heads for the cubicle in the corner, which provides him with as much water as he can force down.

He returns, still a little wobbly on his feet, and lowers himself onto her chair, because at the moment he doesn’t have enough energy to do anything but sit.

She says, “Maybe now you can tell me what that accomplished.”

“It tells us something we didn’t know before.”

“What? That by extreme effort that exhausts me and almost kills you I can drag you twenty

meters to a structure identical to the one you just left? How does that help?"

Her negativity still frustrates him. "It proves that we can . . . circumvent his rules."

"What it *proves*," she says, disdain dripping from every syllable, "is that the rules allow only insignificant achievements. Between the two of us, between my knowledge and your knowledge, your cottage and my cottage, we've exhausted the known map. We're left with a single line containing a Point A and a Point B, a means of amusing ourselves by dragging you back and forth between them, and nothing else."

He staggers to the door, and upon opening it looks out. He can see his own cottage from this vantage point. It looks tiny and sad and in no way an improvement over the seemingly empty plain that surrounds it. The thought of his home and hers being all they have to look forward to for the rest of their lives is somehow even bleaker than before.

Thorne is correct. The improvement in their circumstances is both negligible and illusory.

Still, he's unable to stop thinking aloud. "I wonder what would happen if I went back there. Is your place now permanently visible to me? Or would it wink out of existence, if I got even halfway back to mine? Maybe we can take that rope and string a permanent guide wire between them, to lead me back and forth before we figure out . . ."

She says, "If you speak even one more word, I'll kick you out the door and do everything I can to make sure you never see me again."

He comes perilously close to asking her what her problem is, but sees the devastated look in her eyes and knows she's not bluffing.

Rather, she's almost weeping.

So he just returns to the chair.

After a long oppressive silence driven by her resentment and his willingness to wait her out, she says, "I am not an element in your goddamned puzzle, not a goddamned vexing detail in something that's only happening to you. I'm the other goddamned person you dragged into this hell, when I begged you to leave well enough alone. I'm your *victim*."

The word resonates in the space between them.

He winces. "Thorne . . ."

"I didn't give you permission to talk yet."

He shuts up and waits.

After a long time spent trying to modulate the words welled up inside her, she says, "I know I deserve this. Maybe we both deserve this. We've both done things we've never paid for. Maybe it was too goddamned late for either one of us to find any peace. But of the two of us, I was the one who'd stopped trying to make sure that all the old accounts got paid. I was the one who wanted to leave our wars behind."

She is silent for so long that he realizes he's been invited to respond. "You also lived inside an isolation pod, cut off from the rest of humanity. That wasn't exactly healthy."

"Please. Is anybody here claiming that it was healthy? Did I ever claim that, even once? I only said that it was my choice."

He has no answer for that.

After a few seconds, she continues. "I locked myself up most of the time because I'd found that for me there was little tactical difference between living in a crowd or in a cell. When I was out, I was incapable of seeing people except as hostiles or as non-combatants. I couldn't go anywhere out among the sheep without plotting some means of throwing the civilians into a panic, as cover for an escape. Just walking around, without any particular mission, I'd draw dotted lines from one random figure to another, figuring how best to cut the throat of the one standing at point A, in order to create confusion so I could make it to the person I'd push off a balcony at point B: all to cover me while I made it to point C, and beyond. I couldn't turn it off. I didn't retreat to sensory isolation because I was afraid. I locked myself up, for years at a time, because I needed the goddamned rest."

He says, "You continued to work as professional imposter. You didn't have to do that. You could have gone somewhere outside the reach of anybody who could have found you. Some place without people, where you could have lived alone."

“That’s right,” she says, and here a fresh strain of bitterness enters her demeanor, a trapped and burning thing that must be a source of constant pain for her. “But the chief problem with finding some unpopulated desert and secreting yourself in some isolated hole in the ground is that, if trouble comes anyway, as it will, the only way out of that stupid hole is the same ladder you used to get in. Even then, if you manage to get past the opposition stationed at the entrance, you then become a lone fugitive in the middle of all that surrounding emptiness, the only person a second team needs to track down, before you have options again.

“I couldn’t exist in some isolated place with only a limited number of escape routes. I needed a place with multiple ways out, and crowds. That meant civilization and that meant paying premium rates. Plus, I needed to continue updating contacts, continue putting away money in accounts I could access, continue to maintain the skills that would save me, the minute I found myself sitting across a table from someone like you. And that was just the *practical* reason.”

He anticipates her next sentence. “You had another.”

And he is not surprised to find that he knows what it was; he just needs to hear her say it.

“It surprised the life out of me, Draiken. But even somebody incapable of trusting people, who feels shitty in their presence, who fears them trying to hurt her and knows that if she doesn’t constantly watch herself she’s likely to hurt them, even somebody who feels poisoned by every stupid word they say, can still *need* them. It can be enough to just know they’re nearby, sometimes. Leaving that pod every once in a while, going to where the people were, was the only thing that kept me even remotely sane, and now your refusal to put your old wars aside has taken that away from me, permanently.”

He is silent for a long time, and then he says, “I never thought of you as a social creature before.”

“Apparently I am. More than you. You only need to keep tugging at loose ends.”

Another long silence. Then he says, “I don’t always recognize it in myself, Thorne, but I honestly do tend to need a little bit more from humanity than that.”

“You don’t show it well, Draiken. For all our talk about how broken I am, we’ve barely touched on all the ways you are, all the things that keep you rejecting a normal life. You don’t seem to recognize it, not at all, but your damage is no less than mine. It just formed different fault lines.”

He doesn’t argue the point. “Is it safe for me to attempt to join you?”

“You better.”

He rises, crosses to the bed, and sits down beside her. She doesn’t look at him, but she’s trembling so hard that he can feel it on the thin mattress. How odd, he thinks. In their travels they have been together on any number of beds. They’ve had angry sex, and they’ve had relief sex; they’ve even had affectionate sex, and from time to time, he has to admit to himself, they’ve even had the sex of a man and a woman who should not live apart. But something critical has just changed in their relationship, something with the potential to alter everything they’ve even been to one another, into something finer and more lasting. He finds himself wishing that he’d obeyed any one of her prior urgings and put aside his need for closure.

He thinks something he’s thought before.

Devotion to lost causes is the enemy of happiness.

She rests her head on his shoulder and starts to weep.

This too is something he’s seen from her before. Fury doesn’t eliminate tears. It just makes them burn in a different way. He has seen her weeping while trying to cut his throat. But this, too, seems different, like she’s given herself permission to fall to pieces and is now only waiting to see where those shards land.

This is the closest he’s ever come to seeing what she would have been like, what her life would have been like, had she never been recruited by her past masters. Had she spent her years as one of the common sheep whose naiveté she had such contempt for, and envied, she might have known dissatisfaction and the suspicion that she’d been meant for more, but she never would have been this lost, this broken.

Her voice is almost inaudible behind the sudden trip-hammer pounding of his heart. “I was serious when I said that I could love you, if it came to that.”

"I know."

She presses: "Do you think you could love me?"

He says, "I might already."

"You don't know?"

"I've always been an overly analytical man. I measure things, even the things that should never be quantified. Whenever I feel something that might be love, my immediate response is to dissect it, peeling the onion's layers until there's nothing left to examine."

"Then stop dissecting it," she said. "Do you think you could love me?"

"Yes," he admits. "I think I could."

"You never said even that much. All those other times I asked."

"You were an enemy, once. I never thought it was an appropriate thing to say, except to manipulate you in ways you did not deserve to be manipulated."

She regards him with something like wonder. "Of the two of us, you might be the one incapable of the emotion."

"I don't know. Maybe."

She lowered her eyes. "Maybe it won't be so bad, now. Not if we try."

"Maybe," he said. "But that's the trap, isn't it?"

She realizes what he's doing almost as he starts doing it, and struggles, once again a mortal enemy fighting for her life.

But he stops when she's unconscious, and makes sure she lands gently.

Afterward, he stands and spends all of thirty seconds appraising her silent form.

With all the tension gone from her facial muscles, she looks like all sleeping people do, an innocent vessel free of crime or corruption. She's as beautiful as she arranged to be, her features those of a woman who expected to wear this specific combination of attributes for the rest of her life, but the beauty is not one iota more false because of that; more forlorn and more desperate perhaps, given what he knows, but certainly not a lie.

Nor has he lied. He knows that now. He may be a man who has always been able to walk away from love, but that has never made him less vulnerable to its promises.

He's genuinely devastated.

Part of him wants to stay with her.

But the maxim he coined a minute or so ago is also true in its obverse.

Happiness is also the enemy of lost causes.

And so he turns his back and leaves her behind, forever.

The landscape he finds outside is much different than the one he saw only a few minutes ago. He now sees Elba in its entirety, from the central spire in its aloof disconnect to all the suffering taking place below, to the array of little cottages all lined up like the prison cells they really are, identical and insulting to human dignity, each the home of a private and isolated misery. A number of their residents wander the empty spaces between them, their pale faces stricken, their eyes searching the dusty air for deliverance in the form of another human being. A couple of them, an old man and a wan-faced young woman, must be new, because they're still constantly crying for help.

The young woman in particular is enough to break his heart. "*Oh, God! Anybody! Somebody answer me! Please!*"

Draiken aches for some way to seize her or any of the other prisoners, and cry some form of affirmation in a voice that can be heard: *I see you. I hear you. I'm one of you. I won't let you rot here.*

He knows this to be futile. She won't hear him.

A familiar shape, larger than the others, emerges from the mob and approaches. It is Edifice. He had almost forgotten how large she is; an immensity he does not feel physically up to fighting. He knows he will fight her, however, even to the point of his own death, if it comes to that. . . and as she draws near, he shifts his balance, prepared to make her lose a drop a blood for every drop she rips from his veins.

But instead, she stops just outside of attack distance. "Just you?"

“For now, at least. She’s out cold, in there. It was a near thing.”

Edifice nods. “I’m not surprised. I was betting on her.”

“She was formidable enough to make that a reasonable supposition. Are we done?”

“Almost. He’s waiting for you. Come with me.”

They amble toward the central spire, his prior wariness of Edifice dissipating like a light spring rain. Far from enemies, they’re almost companions now, brethren in the family of human beings marked by Silver’s machinations. It might not last long, given the untrustworthy nature of the ground on which they walk; for all he knows, he might be only minutes away from having to battle her to the death. But it won’t happen immediately, and while they know a truce, he does not consider himself foolish for imagining a certain empathy in her bearing.

He feels comfortable enough to ask her for a confidence. “What’s it like for you?”

“What?”

“The Bettelhine process. The one that made you his loyal servant.”

“That.” She shrugs. “I don’t want to disappoint you, but I have no basis for comparison.”

“You’re his slave.”

“From the perspective of someone on the outside, certainly. From mine, everything I do feels natural. I take personal satisfaction in doing what he says. I go to bed content for having served him and wake looking forward to serving him some more. I glory in his occasional praise. It all feels like my own idea. On an intellectual level, I know I should resent it, but I’m honestly not capable of being bothered.”

He says, “What if I asked you to remember the free woman you once were, and what she would have thought if she could see you now?”

“She can see me now,” Edifice says. “I’m the same person, with different points of reference. Even if she would have killed herself to avoid ending up this way, which is likely, she also lived outside this and could not know that to me it feels no different. To the me that exists now, my condition is only a guarantee of daily happiness. Let me ask you something a lot of people who’ve had the Bettelhine treatment ask, of those like you who think it’s so horrible: why do people like you and Thorne find it so much better to be free but miserable?”

There are any number of things he could say to that, all of which would emerge in soaring rhetoric, and all of which would likely taste like ashes.

So he remains silent as Edifice summons the spire elevator, as she joins him inside, and as they ascend to the saucer-shaped control room where he saw Silver last.

Above, he finds the chamber unchanged, down to the reptilian presence of Silver himself, who sits at a table before a mouth-watering meal that seems beyond the old man’s fading powers of consumption. He has grown thinner and paler and frailer in the time it’s taken for the wager to play out. His neck has weakened, and his head now has a noticeable list to one side. But the man’s smile is still powerful, still predatory, even as it also displays something that is downright obscene on his corrupt features: personal warmth.

“Congratulations, sir. Splendidly done. Have a drink.”

Draiken crosses the room and, overcome with a weariness deeper than anything suffered by limbs, sits opposite him.

The food is tempting after the tasteless people chow Draiken was provided down below, but he does not touch it, because he does not trust it.

“I’ve won.”

“So you have,” Silver replies. “I will make no attempt to argue that, or to deprive you of your fair reward.”

“You will free all the people below, Thorne included.”

“Of course,” the old man says, as if this is the most evident thing in the world. “There is no reason to keep them, in any event. I’ve arranged to stay alive long enough to see this play out, but by inclination, I will be dead in days and will no longer have any use for experimental subjects. My backers can always obtain replacements.”

“You were not lying about wanting to die?”

“No, sir, I was not. I’m tired, Draiken—not ashamed, precisely, but weary of a life spent

committing deeds that would shame a better man. The weight comes to be heavier, after a time, than even an old bastard like me can tolerate. I want to be gone. But I have been unable to resist hanging on for one last, grand experiment: the one you and I have just completed.”

“So, your victims . . .”

“The only real decision left to make, in the end, was whether to dispose of them in the usual manner, or provide them the more humane fate you agitated for. With that settled, and within the time I have made sure that I’m medically guaranteed, I now give you my word that I will embark upon their emancipation as soon as you and I complete what I suppose we may call the post-mortems.” The lolling head straightens itself, and his clouded eyes bore an uncanny, malignant focus into his. “Tell me, sir: when did you *know*?”

“Almost immediately,” Draiken says. “Not long after I woke up and saw her. I knew you hadn’t taken her by force, and when she told me otherwise I knew she was lying.”

“Interesting. Elaborate.”

“You’re a terrible person, but you never had any real reason to trick me. This is, after all, a world owned by your backers, a world whose residents, and visitors, you can claim at will. Had you ever wanted to force me into becoming your test subject, you could have just had me arrested. You could have had me gassed in my lodgings, or summoned any number of minions like Edifice to overpower me. You did none of these things. You offered a wager, and took me only when I accepted. That made you something that my past jailers have never been: reliable.”

“Go on.”

“So all that time I was in Elba alone, proving to my satisfaction that the way out was not a physical location, I knew that another shoe had to drop. Once Thorne showed up, I immediately placed among my working theories the near-certainty that she was working with you.”

“I see. And when,” Silver asks, “did you get the rest of it?”

“Not long afterward. Everything she said was designed to advance the cause of me surrendering to our circumstances, and accepting that the best I could hope for was giving up and a lifetime of having her as companion.

“She put it, and I think honestly understood it, as wanting to love me. She wasn’t lying about that. She wanted to love me and she wanted me to love her back. I . . . think that sometime in our travels, somehow without me quite noticing, she managed that much. I’ll have some bad moments for a while. But as long as we’ve been together, making our way to you, she’s always urged me to put my mission aside . . . and so I finally realized that this was also the hidden point of your wager, the agenda that the two of you have always shared from the beginning: getting me to accept the premise that surrender wouldn’t be too bad.”

“She was sincere about that,” Silver confides. “Even if that meant life as a prisoner below.”

“That,” Draiken admits, “was the single part that came closest to fooling me. The night before I agreed to your experiment, she begged me to give in, disappear with her, and give up the rest of her lives to living in peace. It sounded just like an entreaty natural to anyone who was sick of fighting, and for much of the time I was stuck down there, I quite naturally spent hours wishing that I’d been less stupid and taken her up on it, as any man would prefer. Certainly, your prison was nowhere near as comfortable as my exile on Greeve.

“But that was my definition of comfort, wasn’t it? Not hers. Hers was always the option of re-treating inside a cell. Freedom, luxury, natural wonders, fun things to do, all those things that we could have had on the kind of world she repeatedly proposed as alternative, they were secondary: things she was willing to have for my sake, but was willing to sacrifice as long as she still had me and the one other thing she really wanted. Given those requirements, why wouldn’t she accept the conditions of a prison, as long as she could get me to accept those conditions with her?”

Silver chuckles, an affectionate and compassionate laugh that makes Draiken want to pummel him. “Indeed. Why wouldn’t she?”

“All I want to know is how long ago she made the arrangements.”

Silver’s grin grows wider and more reptilian. “Oh, years, my dear man. Simply years.”

“Really.”

“Of course. The painstakingly gathered intelligence that ultimately brought you here was redundant, my boy. She’s always known how to find me. A long time ago, she found a moment of privacy, apart from you, and contacted the man who had once imprisoned and interrogated her, to present a scenario where the two of you would both surrender to my custody. She wasn’t even a valuable asset anymore. Like you, she had been out of the business so long that she no longer possessed any intelligence worth extracting. But her offer was an intriguing one on an academic level, and so the two of us were able to come to terms, always with the understanding that in the interim she was determined to employ every means of persuasion at her disposal to alter your suicidal trajectory and satisfy you with a life not wasted interfering with the agenda of powers beyond your reach.”

Draiken’s chest burns. “She almost managed it a few times.”

“Of course she did. It was not just love; it was self-preservation. The way she saw it, her own trajectory was linked to yours. She wanted something better than what awaited at the end of your shared road. But steering you away turned out to be beyond her power.”

“Not by much,” Draiken admits, with a regret that almost rips the heart out of him. “Do you want to know something? At the very end, even knowing what I knew, I almost gave her what she thought she wanted. Because as it happens, I *do* crave everything she craves: a little peace, someone to love, some happiness at the end of my days. I could have had those with her. I just couldn’t have the other thing I need: the satisfaction of shutting you down, and of shutting everybody like you down. So I turned my back on her.”

Silver explodes in a coughing fit, which lasts for so long that Draiken fears he will perish right now instead of days from now and thus doom everybody below, including Thorne, to imprisonment under the conditions he has made for them.

But after about a minute he regains control, shakes his head wearily, and says, “You still fail to get it, sir.”

“Indeed? What do I miss?”

“You haven’t sacrificed a damn thing. As I’ve already pointed out, I’m dying by choice and ready to put all my toys back into their little boxes, before the time finally comes to shut off the lights. This closure you seek, if you really want it, you can sate it by confirming my end, and your success in acquiring freedom for the unfortunates below. Beyond that, you can also now see all that’s always been at stake between you and Thorne, freeing you to claim your reward anywhere you want, and not just here. With all secrets revealed, healing becomes possible.

“The two of you can still retreat wherever you wish, even to that tropical paradise you spoke of, and exist to the end of your days knowing that you’ve taken matters of conscience as far as is humanly practical. Do that, and whether you believe it or not, I’d even meet my own end feeling happy for you.”

The next moment extends well past its useful life span, eons to Draiken, the emotions churning inside him like poison. Then the churning goes away, and he feels a terrible determined calm, driven by a chill that he knows will never leave him.

He says, “I could never trust her again.”

Silver counters, “You could never trust her before.”

“True. But even if I found it in myself to forgive what she’s done, I’d still know that you were out there: not you personally, but the others still behind you, the others like you. I’ll concede her the right to surrender to apathy if she wants. But I won’t. Not as long as I draw breath. So you will pay off the wager, and you will tell me where I need to go next.”

Silver’s immediate response to that is a long slow nod, the gesture of any old and dying man who faces the end of his left bereft of any remaining illusions.

“Alas,” he says. “She always did have the most infuriating things to say about your pride.”

* * *

It is now seventeen station days later.

Draiken sips coffee on a balcony café at the Liberty spaceport, overlooking the view of the cargo bots loading one vessel or another. The coffee is delicious, some of the best he’s had in years, and a surprising comfort on this world where he’s known so much grief.

The view is less satisfying. He's aware that some travelers enjoy watching the activity behind the scenes, even if it's behind-the-scenes activity cleared for public display, like what sprawls below. For his part, he's always been cursed by his training to regard the doings of a port not as a dull to moderate entertainment but as a potential source of intelligence, and even as the various parcels and crates are loaded, he cannot help taking mental notes of their marked destinations.

It has been a busy two and half weeks. He's stayed around long enough to watch as Silver's various prisoners were restored, if not exactly to their prior selves, then at least to beings capable of perceiving the humanity around them. It has not been a pleasant spectacle, either. Some were prisoners for years, and all are damaged, a state he can only empathize with; a few are in states that approach outright psychosis and will not be free in any real sense for years, if ever. But a few, like the young woman he encountered after leaving Thorne, have already taken advantage of the financial settlements afforded them in Silver's will and booked flights off-world. She'd been permitted to know that he was her rescuer and had embraced him, weeping, for longer than he was comfortable with, before accepting his advice to waste no time getting as far from Liberty as possible. He dares to hope that she'll be all right.

He suspects that maybe one in ten of the others will ever achieve a state anywhere approaching all right, but at least their journeys are begun. He can no longer help them, only those who come after them, and at least he's also had the satisfaction of being outside the chamber where Silver's corpse was fired to a flaky grey ash.

None of this affords him any particular sense of satisfaction.

He has discovered that on this road he's on, satisfaction will likely always be withheld from him.

He is still sipping his coffee when his companion since his escape, fresh from a visit to the restroom, slides back into the seat opposite him.

"Welcome back," Draiken says.

"I'm surprised to see you still here," Edifice reports. She wears a crystalline amulet containing some of the odious Silver's ashes; a keepsake she will likely carry with her, compulsively protecting, to the end of her years. "I would have thought you'd ditch me while I was gone, taking advantage of my brief absence to arrange some other itinerary."

"What's the point of that? I'm still going where I'm going. Nobody has to intercept me, not when they know where I'm headed."

"I'm not sure of that. You're a devious man. You could have a subtler approach in mind."

"No. Just a direct one. I think it's likely the most powerful advantage I have, over those inclined to design labyrinths.—No," he says, shaking his head, "I'll be reporting to bluegel suspension in no more than an hour. I have no need for any more complicated plans."

"I do," she says, with palpable regret.

"Mmmm?"

"Silver imprisoned a lot of people, but he was not responsible for the restrictions on my own free will. The Bettelhines were. They merely transferred ownership to him. The technology is completely different, so he couldn't do anything to free me. I'm still what I am, and as it happens, now that he's gone I have no more orders left to carry out for him, or for anybody else. I could go with you as an ally."

This is unexpected. He gives her a curious look. "What would you do if I said no?"

"Nothing," she says, as matter-of-factly as she says everything else. "That's the main problem with being what they've made me: I have no ambitions and can form no plans beyond those approved by others. Silver died without specifically putting me in the command of anyone else, so I'm compelled to find someone else to provide orders. Since seeing to your safe departure is my last existing order, and there are no potential others, I'm compelled to declare you the most acceptable heir."

"Me?"

"Say the word," Edifice urges him, "and I'd take satisfaction in serving you, in any capacity, without any reservation. There'd be no possibility of me betraying you the way Thorne did, and with my physical gifts I'd be useful protection against any opposition you're likely to encounter."

You shouldn't consider it taking advantage of me. It's my nature, and it would make me happy."

"I see," he says, taking a sip as a delaying tactic. "Happiness is a good thing. But what if I don't want a slave?"

"The only other alternative for me, I'm afraid, is emptiness."

Draiken nods and turns away, giving some thought to what has turned out to be an unexpectedly knotty problem.

Below, he finds what he has been sitting here, for hours, waiting to see. A crane lowers a crate into the cargo hold of a freighter bound for places far from his own immediate itinerary. He has paid for special handling to ensure that the crate, just large enough for the isolation pod it contains, is treated with special care throughout the trip. It's currently unoccupied, but still vital to someone he owes a debt, and the last thing he wants is for it to be damaged while he remains responsible for it.

The woman that pod belongs to, who in truth belongs to it, already lies sleeping in a bluegel crypt on a passenger freight bound for the same destination. It will take both packages a couple of years to arrive where they're headed, not Greeve but a world very much like it. Years that the woman in the crypt will spend insensate and unaware. Only when she wakes will she discover what Draiken has done with her. He hates himself a little, for not having the stomach for one last conversation before their parting, but fears her powers of persuasion, still a tug at the base of the spine. He just knows that he cannot afford the risk.

He's also grateful that he will not be around, to see the storms when she is revived. She will rage. She will consider what he has done a betrayal no worse than her own. She will be lost. And though he's provided some words of explanation, she will not forgive him, any more than he will ever, ultimately, forgive himself. He did love her. That's the damned astonishing thing. He's now certain of it.

She'd been right. He could have been happy with her, storms and all.

He can only hope that the poor woman finds a way to peace, even if he can be no part of it.

Across the table, Edifice still watches him expectantly, her expression reminding him of nothing as much as that of a dog, awaiting its human master's next order.

"Please," she says, urgently. "I need this. I can't live without it. You know that."

"I believe you."

It would be so easy to say yes, especially now that he faces the next part of his long journey alone. He's come to like Edifice, despite himself; he would never take sexual advantage of her compliance, but he could sure as hell use her company.

And so he says, "Very well. If I'm the next in command, I suppose that I can take that responsibility. What's involved?"

"Just you saying so."

"Then fine, I take command of you. Do I have your full obedience?"

"Yes," she says.

"Your *absolute, unquestioning* obedience."

"To the death." She betrays no wariness at all. Far from it. Her eyes shine with eagerness. She's alive in a way she wasn't even a few seconds ago, a machine activated and humming with energy as it warms to the purpose that gives its existence meaning. "What are your orders?"

"Just these," he says. "Walk away, live your life, pursue everything that was once by itself enough to make you happy, everything that you would do if the choice was up to you, and never, ever doubt that it's also what I command and what I would want."

If Edifice is at all surprised by these orders, or grateful that they are these instead of any other, she doesn't show it. Instead, she rises, nods in what amounts to a final salute, and turns on her heels to march, with all deliberate briskness, back toward the city streets.

Draiken suspects that he will never learn her fate, any more than he will learn Thorne's, and that the second thoughts will be just another weight that he will learn to carry in the days ahead.

In the meantime, he now has what Silver has left him: a destination and a contact.

The destination is a place he hasn't been for many years: a cylinder world named New London, headquarters of the Diplomatic Corps of the Hom.Sap Confederacy.

ANALOG

The contact is a woman who Silver has described as extraordinarily dangerous and whose presence he had said Draiken might not survive.

Her name is Counselor Andrea Cort.